

History of the forest garden

A relatively recent introduction to Britain, 'forest gardening' was a term coined by Robert Hart in the 1930s when he experimented with his own garden in Shropshire. Robert managed to create a productive garden that supplied much of his food (whilst also highlighting pitfalls to avoid for future forest gardeners, including a lack of planning and cramming too many plants into a small space).

Found for centuries in tropical regions, gardens synonymous with a 'forest garden' just didn't catch on in temperate regions like Britain, probably due to challenges such as light levels. However, with careful thought and planning, a layered forest garden is very achievable and can be highly successful in Britain.

It is still a relatively uncovered subject in the main but one that is expected to increase in popularity and attract more experimental gardeners in coming years, particularly those seeking greater self-sufficiency and a healthier, more economically sustainable lifestyle.

Further Reading:

- Creating a Forest Garden: Working with nature to grow edible crops (2010) by Martin Crawford

Advantages of a Forest Garden

In a snapshot...

- You're working with the land, not against it
- It's low maintenance, but highly efficient
- It yields diversity through a wide range of products
- Its plants yield high nutritional value
- It's resilient to climate/weather extremes
- It's biologically sustainable
- It's aesthetically beautiful
- It's environmentally beneficial

Further Information

We are slowly growing our own selection of forest garden plants at Trevena Cross, including a variety of unusual fruit bushes like different honeyberry types. Developing his own forest garden, nursery & garden centre owner Graham is keen to share a wide variety of 'forest garden' options with others keen to experiment in such a fascinating area.

Take time to read up on forest gardening and take advice from those that have already delved into it and begun creating their own. Done correctly, it can be extremely rewarding and satisfying.... and instil a whole new way of thinking about food.

Top Considerations...

Ensure:

- Light can travel through to all levels
- There is enough diversity: 50-100 diff. species
- The soil is left in the main, undisturbed
- Species requiring more light/heat are positioned sensibly e.g. at the edges of the garden

Further Reading:

- Forest Gardening (1996) by Robert Hart
- Edible Forest Gardens (2005) by Jacke/Toensmeier
- www.agroforestry.co.uk

For more information get in touch with us, and we'll do our best to help and advise you.



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Forest Gardening

the edible garden

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What is forest gardening?

A step towards self-sufficiency, forest gardening builds on the notion of 'grow your own' and the well established veg or fruit patch, to evolve a largely self-managed 'edible garden'.

Designed to mimic the structure and function of a natural forest, once established it should be a low maintenance, sustainable space that is productive and yields a variety of edible and/or useful crops (e.g. medicinal).

Anything from fruits and nuts to herbs and spices, to medicinal plants and useful fibres can be planted in a forest garden.

Plants tend to be perennial, so long term in nature, and many are multipurpose, having a main function as well

as secondary functions within the ecosystem.

The garden may also contain trees, shrubs, herbs, annuals climbers – a very wide range of plants arranged in such a way to maximise healthy balance, sustainability and positive, self-managed relationships. Careful design is required to achieve the desirable self-sustaining garden, where:

- Self-fertilisation is managed by nitrogen-fixers and plants good at raising nutrients from the subsoil
- The soil's peak condition is maintained by continuous plant cover
- Garden health is boosted by plants that attract predators of pests and plants that reduce disease problems

High diversity almost always increases the health of an ecosystem and is therefore important in a forest garden.

How to plant your forest garden

Plants are positioned in up to seven layers, from the highest canopy down to root zone layer, in a way that they'll work in harmony and help sustain one another. Levels of light must reach all levels, right down to the ground, in order for productivity to be maintained across the entire forest garden. Since a garden is a three dimensional structure, the different plants used can be subdivided into different vertical layers of growth. These layers may remain separate or overlap and mingle in places. Some or all of the following layers are common features in a forest garden:

Medium/large canopy trees (in larger forest gardens)

Usually timber or nitrogen fixing trees e.g. Italian Alder

Small trees & large shrubs (4-9m/13-30ft)

The upper-most layer in smaller forest gardens, most fruiting species fall into this category, as do medicinal, coppiced or smaller nitrogen fixing trees

Shrubs up to 3m/10ft high

Bush fruit species and smaller nut and seed producers fall into this layer, as well as more nitrogen fixers e.g. Redcurrant (Ribes) and Blueberries (Vaccinium)

Herbaceous perennials & evergreen plants

These can range from just a few centimetres up to 3m/10ft. There are numerous perennial crops (edible/medicinal etc) that can be used here like Globe artichoke, Cardoon and Sea Kale

Ground cover plants & creepers

Shade tolerant, sometimes spreading perennials/shrubs that in other circumstances could be considered weeds. Protecting the soil and its structure is often the primary purpose of this layer

Climbers – perennial or shrub

These span the layers, potentially reaching high into the canopy e.g. Hop (*Humulus lupulus*) and Grapes (*Vitis*), when supported. A pruning strategy to keep them low in height is usually adopted

The underground layer

Root crops and Fungi grow mainly underground. Fungi are a vitally important part of the forest garden – and can sometimes have edible mushrooms too

