

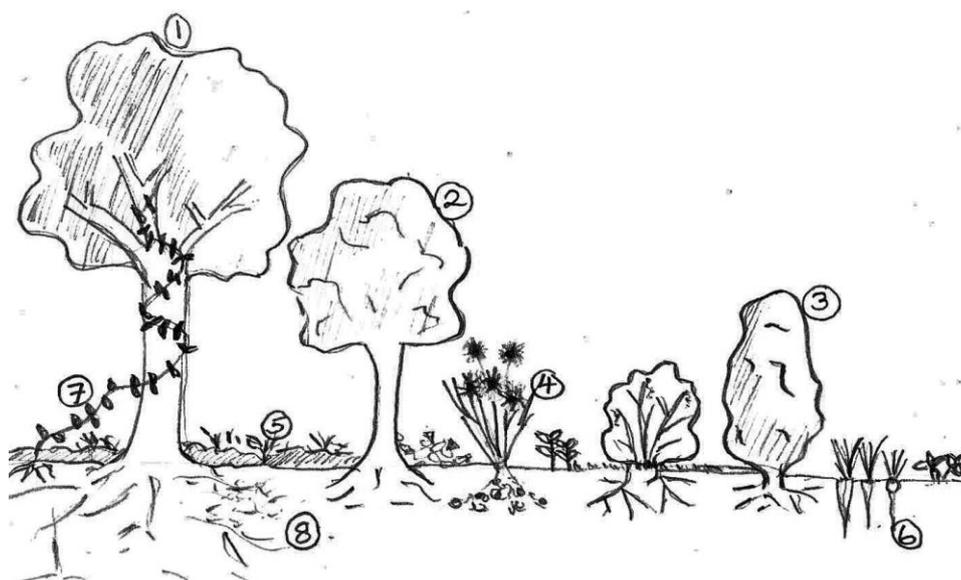
Create an Edible Forest Garden



What is a forest garden?

Forest gardening is a sustainable and low maintenance way of gardening that includes trees, bushes, and perennial plants – ideal for time pressed schools.

It is modelled on the layers found within deciduous woodland but unlike the woodland all plants in a forest garden are edible or useful in some way. You don't need to have large amounts of space; it can be replicated in the smallest of school grounds or even containers!



1. Canopy – mature fruit trees
2. Low tree layer – dwarf fruit and nut trees
3. Shrub – fruit bushes
4. Herbaceous – herbs & perennial veg
5. Groundcover – spreading edibles
6. Underground 'Rhizosphere' – roots, tubers & fungi
7. Vertical – Climbers & vines
8. Wildlife

Why Create an edible forest garden?

- **Seasonality** – it provides fresh fruit, vegetables, nuts, herbs, and salad crops
- **Environment** – it encourages wildlife and increase biodiversity, reduces food miles, encourages composting, and reduces food waste
- **Soil Health** - A no dig approach maintains soil structure and health
- **Time Saving** – It reduces time spent on cultivation e.g., weeding, watering, hoeing, sowing, and digging
- **Productivity** - It is more productive as it uses vertical space
- **Reduces pests** - due to the diversity of plants. Mature plants can withstand being attacked by slugs, snails, and aphids more easily.
- **Learning** – it provides opportunities for learning around nature, health, and climate change. Linking with other programmes such as Forest Schools and Eco Schools it provides learning around traditional tree and craft skills as well as team-work and individual development.
- **Health and wellbeing** – physical and mental opportunities or through access to fresh food.
- **Enterprise and community engagement** – opportunities for projects through sales of crops, added value produce, volunteering, workshops and events.

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Planning & creating your forest garden

How do you want to use it?

You may want to incorporate it into your forest and eco school activities and use it for learning and use non-edible yields such as poles and canes for firewood and charcoal. You may want to have a pond, or to grow flowers and herbs to attract wildlife. You may want to use it for social purposes such as school events e.g., harvest suppers, summer picnics or for engaging the wider community. Consider what edibles you want to grow and how you will use them, e.g., in cooking lessons, for events or to sell as part of an enterprise project.

Have a look at the space you have and map it. What plants do you already have that you could incorporate? Are they edible, do they support wildlife or both? Work out where north and south are and put it on your map. Where do you want paths to go? In 'no dig' areas avoiding stepping on the soil and causing compaction is important, so give careful thought to access for maintenance and harvesting. Are there any limitations e.g., is it prone to flooding or frosts? Do you know the soil type and its pH? Is it a windy spot? What are the positives e.g., is it sunny? Where space is limited a forest garden can be created around a single tree.

Draw up a timeline

Rather than trying to create a forest garden in one go plan it in stages, it will take a few years to get it fully established.

Choosing your plants

Start a list with what you have and start adding what you think you would like to grow and the conditions they grow best in. You may well have to cut it down depending on space and resources to start off with. Don't be too ambitious you can always add plants in the future.

Some plants will be easy to get hold of, others may be more specialist. The [Agroforestry Research Trust](#) and [Otter Farm](#) have a good selection and some more unusual ones.

The [Woodland Trust](#) have different packs of free trees you can apply for e.g., hedge, wild harvest, wildlife etc. Orchard and hedgerow packs can also be applied for from the [Tree Council](#). Alternatively see if you have any forest gardens/permaculture groups or community gardens or orchard groups near you that may be willing to donate or swap plants/seeds.

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What are the different layers in a forest garden?

1 & 2 Canopy Plants and Low tree layer

Fruit and nut trees (known as 'top fruit') are the most important part of the design. Consider how tall will they grow and how far will the canopy spread when they are mature. What will be their light, fertility, and water needs? For example, apples, pears, plums, sweet chestnut, quince, cherries, crab apple, mulberry, walnut.

3 - Shrub layer

Create a planting plan, they can be planted at the same time as your canopy and low tree layers.

For example, black, red, and white currants, gooseberries, boysenberries. You may want to add some more unusual shrubs that fix nitrogen like sea buckthorn. You may also want to try the Himalayan raspberry, Amelanchier, hawthorn, cornelian cherry, *Elaeagnus* sp., goji berry, Japanese wineberry, hazelnuts.

4 & 5 Herbaceous and Groundcover

This layer will provide leafy salads and veg crops. Its function is to create a living mulch of spreading plants e.g. wild strawberries, wild garlic and prevent invasive plants such as nettles, brambles and grasses taking over. They maintain moisture and prevent compaction.

The number of herbaceous/ground cover plants you have will determine how much time you will need to spend maintaining it, you can always add more as time goes on and you find a balance.

Some plants help to build fertility through fixing nitrogen e.g. clovers, trefoils while others e.g. comfrey, sorrel accumulate minerals and nutrients in their leaves. Some aromatic plants

e.g. feverfew, lemon balm, mint and tansy can promote health due to antifungal properties of the essential oils they exude.

Other more familiar herbaceous plants are herbs, and the sun loving ones are fennel, borage, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, thyme, sage, winter savoury, tarragon, lemon balm. Plant strawberries on the south sunny side of your forest garden so they ripen. Edible flowers such as violas, pot marigolds (calendulas) and roses need sun too.

Rhubarb is deep rooting and will do well in partial shade. Other partial shade herbs are mints, chives, parsley, chervil, sweet Cicely, angelica, and bergamot. The bigger the leaf the more shade tolerant vegetables are.

6 - Underground 'Rhizosphere'

Most of the plants are grown for their roots and tubers or yield fruiting bodies and move nutrients between plants e.g., fungi. Plants in a root layer need to be shallow rooted e.g. garlic, onions, radish or easy to dig like Jerusalem artichoke. You could try Skirret, which is something like a cross between a carrot and parsnip in flavour. Dandelions roots can make a coffee and the leaves are great in salads. Carrots don't tend to work very well although you can try the golf-ball shaped ones like 'Paris market' and Chantenay types.

7 – Vertical Layer

This is where you can use trees for the climbers as a structure e.g., vines (kiwis, grapes, hops, passionflower, honeysuckle). Climbing annuals can include cucumber, squash, and melon. Climbing fruit e.g. blackberries, loganberries. Edible flowers such as nasturtiums love to scramble up trees and shrubs.

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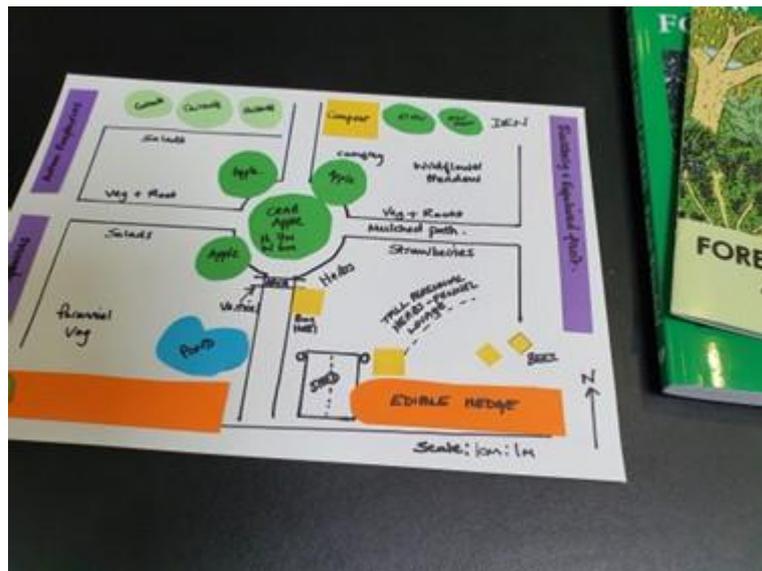
8 – Wildlife

This is another layer that can be considered. Many will arrive of their own accord with this biodiversity friendly way of growing edible

crops. You could add your own honeybees but certainly put in nesting boxes for solitary bees e.g. red mason bee and build insect hotels and even a wildlife pond.

Designing your forest garden

Using the map, you have drawn identify paths, boundaries, social areas, ponds or boggy areas and planting spaces. From your plant list work out height and spread and make any notes e.g., do they need sunlight, shade or do they need trees from other pollination groups¹? Cut out shapes to represent the plants and colour code to represent the different layers. Cut out shapes to scale to represent compost areas, bug hotels, beehives etc.



Maintaining your forest garden

Put in pathways for easy and safe access for all. Keep up with mulching using your own compost (if you have some) to control weeds in between plants and fertilise the soil. In the first year while plants are establishing make sure someone is watering them in dry weather. Earthworms will naturally draw down the organic matter you add to the plot. There will be some pruning to do to keep things under control and maybe some editing of more vigorous plants as it establishes but harvest and enjoy. Grow some green manures e.g., comfrey to increase fertility and as a free source of plant feed (just let some leaves rot down in a bucket of water). One final word of advice is to keep it manageable, start small and go from there.

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It is not just about the plants!

Forest gardens should be fun – think about adding trails and interpretation, dens, storytelling areas and seating, ponds, and water features.

Further information

The [Agroforestry Research Trust](#) – a charity that educates about agroforestry including forest gardens and has a good selection of forest garden plants for sale

[Otter Farm](#) nursery have a good range of plants for sale online

Fruit and Hedgerow Plants

The [Woodland Trust](#) have different packs of free trees you can apply for.

Orchard and hedgerow packs can also be applied for from the [Tree Council](#).

Books

[SpiralSeed](#) – useful information about forest gardening and permaculture

[Creating a Forest Garden](#) by Martin Crawford

How to make a Forest Garden by Patrick Whitefield