

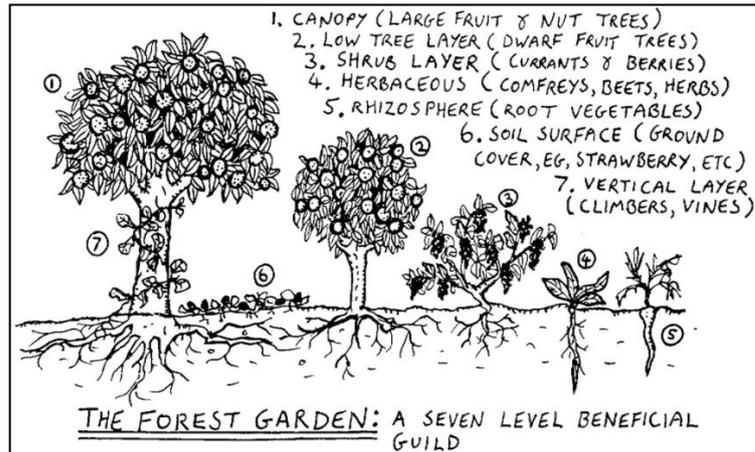
Tiny Food Forest

enhancing the biodiversity and productivity of my garden

I am undertaking an online course in Ecological Design offered by Gaia Education. I am trying to apply some of the ideas I am learning about on the course and one of the modules introduced the idea of food forests as a way of increasing biodiversity. On the course I learnt that Robert Hart transformed his existing small orchard into an edible polyculture landscape by intercropping and structuring what he called his “edible forest” into 7 layers (Figure 1).

Figure 1 7 layers of an edible forest

- ‘Canopy layer’ consisting of mature fruit trees.
- ‘Low-tree layer’ of smaller nut and fruit trees on dwarfing root stocks.
- ‘Shrub layer’ of fruit bushes such as currants and berries.
- ‘Herbaceous layer’ of perennial vegetables and herbs.
- ‘Rhizosphere’ or ‘underground’ dimension of plants grown for their roots and tubers.
- ‘Ground cover layer’ of edible plants that spread horizontally.
- ‘Vertical layer’ of vines and climbers.



Prompted by this imaginative idea I searched for and found several inspiring videos on YouTube featuring the pioneering work of several people who have set up their own temperate climate food forests including: Martin Crawford https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_m_0UPOzul , James Prigioni <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLTGjiYHHbl> and Maddy and Tim Harland <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGdxU78wdEM&list=PLvzv9rsNAK9I3xV4jxJrundK-W3ul8Fyz>

All these people have created thriving, productive, forest gardens based on permaculture principles, full of useful, medicinal and edible trees and plants which also act as biodiverse wildlife habitats. Enthused by their stories, and what I had learnt on the course. I looked around the garden three possible locations before deciding to place it next to our existing apple tree which we fondly believe



to be a descendent from the original orchard that was in this spot over 60 years ago.

This part of the garden faces south and opens to a lawn. Last year, I discovered that if I did not cut the grass the lawn gave way to a beautiful wild flower meadow (right – the pergola can be seen in the background). I also discovered that in a bygone era wild flower meadows were cultivated alongside orchards in order to attract pollinators so I believe I am helping nature restore an older ecosystem. The space is backed by a pergola on which roses are growing but it could be used by other climbing plants.



I imagined the structure and initial composition of my food forest would be:

A – Canopy comprising an existing apple tree 4 to 5m and wild cherry trees 8-10m high

B- 4 x fruit trees (1.5m tall) – I chose cherry, peach, pear and plum

C 4 - 6 shrubs – I chose raspberry, gooseberry and red currants

D Climbers – possibly tomatoes, grape vines, sweet pea, passion fruit

E Ground cover – definitely strawberries when they become available together with lemon balm, mint and nasturtiums which are grown for their peppery leaves and flowers, and make a rampant and colourful ground cover.

F Rhizome – not sure at this stage – possibly chives and garlic but many possibilities

Implementing my design

I wanted to make a start knowing that it may take perhaps three years for the food forest to become fully productive. Its mid-February and a good time to plant fruit trees. I had done a reconnaissance at my local garden centre and found it had a good stock of fruit trees but they are quite expensive and the project has to be viewed as a long term investment. Ultimately it is a means of increasing the biodiversity of my garden environment which future owners will be able to appreciate.



The roses have been neglected for many years and run amok over the pergola and apple and wild cherry trees. I started by cutting and pulling off as much of the rose growth, most of it dead, as I could. This let in more light to the back for the fruit forest and also gave the apple tree back its freedom. I also cut branches off the apple and the wild cherry trees so they would

cast less shadow on the fruit trees. In the 3m x 6m area I marked out how I wanted to set out and space the fruit trees and shrubs. I followed the planting instructions by digging the holes for the trees and put a mix of compost and manure into them, watering them after they were planted. My hope is that the tiny food forest will eventually produce an abundance of fruit but I'm well aware that much of it may be eaten by the resident animal and insect life but that is okay.

The photo below shows my initial planting in February 2022. It doesn't look much like a forest but probably most forests start off not looking like a forest. I am looking forwards to watching it grow and develop over the coming months and I will keep developing this narrative and photo story.

Planted 20/02/22

