

Food Forests

A selection of facts and resources supported by research

2024

Overview

Food forests are areas planted with many different edible plants of different heights and sizes. They are often arranged in patterns like natural forests with layers ranging from groundcover to tall trees. In addition to the annual plants typically grown in fruit and vegetable gardens that must be planted each year, food forests include perennial plants which do not have to be replanted year after year but will continue to grow for many years.

Multiple Benefits and Leaders

- According to one database, there are currently over **85 food forests throughout the United States**. Food forests often have less barriers to entry than community gardens, and are considered a way to address climate change, environmental degradation, and social and racial inequity (Spiller & Kashwan, 2023).
- Food forests can provide **healthy food to eat as well as places to gather** in the shade (Spiller & Kashwan, 2023).
- Food forests can be run by community members or city governments, such as one in Tucson, Arizona (Graham, 2024).
- **Grants from the U.S. Forest Service can help to fund food forests**, such as a 7.1 acre site in Atlanta, Georgia that provided fresh food in an area that previously had very limited access (*About the Urban Food Forest at Browns Mill*, n.d.).

Particular Plants

- **Location will affect which types of trees will grow best in your food forest.** Some examples of larger trees that you might be able to grow are oaks, chestnuts, pecan, and mulberry. Smaller trees include apple, pear, peach, plum, hazelnut, and pawpaw (Bukowski & Munsell, 2018).
- Other **trees that have edible components** are beech, birch, linden, maple, poplar, sassafras, elm, and willow (Trail, n.d.).
- There are many types of other **plants that will grow well with trees** in a food forest. For example, a mulberry could pair well with some smaller flowering plants such as yarrow, purple coneflower, and chamomile (*What to Plant – Project Food Forest*, n.d.).

Housing and Food Forests

- **New construction and development approaches to affordable housing projects can include fruit and vegetable plantings** within the immediate vicinity of where people are living (*Via Verde | Jonathan Rose*, n.d.).

Starting and Upkeep

- Each food forest will be unique, but there are some **general factors to consider**. When choosing a site, consider whether it will be sunny or shady, and whether it will have water access. It can also be good to test the soil. Plants have different preferences for sun, water, and soil conditions. Local nurseries or places that sell plants can often provide additional information about plant selection. Other preparation will likely include clearing some ground, buying new plants, and planting. (*Plant Your Own Food Forest – Wisconsin Food Forests*, n.d.).
- **Upkeep of the food forest will vary by site**, but some common tasks may include weeding, mulching, pruning, clearing debris, plant propagation, and harvesting (*Resource Library – Boston Food Forest Coalition*, n.d.).

Case Studies

Bliss Meadows: Baltimore, MD

- This site is a grassroots led transformation of land in a predominantly African American neighborhood of Baltimore into community gardens, food, and forest spaces (Basecamp, n.d.).

Boston Food Forest: Boston, MA

- This Food Forest is a locally run neighborhood coalition with an equity focus. In a video posted on their websites, residents reflect on the importance of having a beautiful place to gather together and take care of for many years (Boston Food Forest Coalition, 2021)

Philadelphia Orchard Project: Philadelphia, PA

- A citywide effort to increase small places for planting fruit trees in order to address food insecurity (*Philadelphia Orchard Project*, n.d.).

Resources

Websites

- **Boston Food Forest Coalition:** <https://www.mass.gov/doc/how-to-start-a-food-forest/download>
- **Resource Library:** <https://www.bostonfoodforest.org/resource-library>
- **AgLanta Resources:** <https://www.aglanta.org/aglanta-resources-index>
- **Urban Farming Kit:** <https://www.aglanta.org/aglanta-urban-farming-kit>
- **Sample Budget:**
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5810d4f2d482e9e1f1211dfa/t/59ef41f2f43b55e82204f124/1508852213801/AgLanta_GrowsALot_UrbanGarden_SampleBudget.pdf
- **Sample Timeline for Community Engagement:**
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5810d4f2d482e9e1f1211dfa/t/5a6a25708165f52cf60bf018/1516905840905/Community+Engagement+Activites+to+Date+Jan+2018.pdf>
- **Grow Family YouTube:** <https://www.youtube.com/@GrowFamilyNetwork/videos>

How To

- **The Community Food Forest Handbook:** <https://www.serenbe.com/press-awards/the-community-food-forest-handbook-how-to-plan-organize-and-nurture-edible-gathering-places>
- **USFS People’s Garden:** <https://www.usda.gov/peoples-garden/gardening-advice/trees-food-forests>
- **Urban Farm Business Plan:** https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2015-10/documents/1.urban_farm_business_plan_handbook_091511_508.pdf

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