

Foraging at Home

Part 1 of 4:

(Beginning a Food Forest)

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When the term foraging is mentioned, most people think of going out into the “wild” and gathering food. However, foraging can be done in a person’s own yard. Also, not only native plants to the area but also introduced species can be foraged. To forage just means to gather. Of course, many people have traditional gardens in which they grow the food they gather to eat, but these gardens take a lot of space and care. A method used in many parts of the world is to grow a Food Forest. In this way, food is grown similarly to the way it grows in nature with trees, shrubs, vines, and other plants intermingling. When food is grown in this way, the different plants aid each other in their growth habits, and more food can be grown in less space. Since plants mature at different times, they can be foraged (gathered) when needed, each in its own season.

Forests are home to 50-90% of the world’s diversity even though they cover only about 6% of the world’s land masses. Forests are 3-dimensional living ecosystems. They create a high density therefore high yield food system. Forests are biodiverse throughout the year. One of the benefits of a food forest is it creates natural mulch and compost as well as fertilizer. For the most part, forests have natural pest control with resilient biodiversity through companion planting. It is easy to do soil repair through a chop and drop philosophy. Most commercial crops are grown in fields, where trees are felled to make room for a monocultural planting, or orchards, which are total or partial monoculture. A food forest mimics a forest edge using diverse edible plants.

To create a food forest a minimum of 100 square feet is needed. This is as little as a 10 x 10-foot area. The food forest can be started in an existing location incorporating existing trees or plants, or a new location can be chosen where each plant is carefully chosen to increase the production of the land. In an existing plan, some of the plants may not be edible, but they can still be of use in the garden. In a new plan, some of the plants may take years before they become productive. Whether the plan starts with an existing area of a garden or a new location, the first steps in creating the food forest are to create a goal and observe the existing layout.

Planting systems fall into four categories. The Savanna system is planting crops in “alley” layouts or in pastures for silo storage. This system is best suited to commercial fruit, nut, or herb production. It requires space between the rows that are not productive in a crop sense. The Orchard system is a woodland with regularly spaced trees. This is a hybrid system that can be used in a commercial or home production. The space between the trees can be left unplanted or another food crop can be planted under them. A mid to late-succession woodland is the goal of most food foragers. It is the most varied, interesting, complex, and productive pattern. It is used

mostly for home food production. The final system is the Closed canopy. It is a mature system which is the end point of the succession. Once this system is achieved, some of the “crops” will need to be replaced as the system starts to break down.

Setting a goal for the food forest is the first step. Does it need to be productive within the first year or two? Will it mainly be herbaceous plants for vegetables or will it need to have fruits included? Will the forest need to be neatly maintained, or can it “grow wild?” These and many other considerations will need to be determined before beginning the design process.

Once a goal is set for the food forest, the area chosen needs to be observed and analyzed. Are existing plants placed in helpful sites, or will they be battling for space with other plants. Is the land flat or hilly? Do some areas puddle water while others remain dry? What are the permeant structures situated on the site? What type of soil is at the site? What is the orientation of the garden and the plants in it? What type of preparation will be needed? Now that these items have been observed, some analysis is needed. Many food forests are built on swales to help with soil and water distribution. To determine if swales might be needed consider the slope (3-15%), the soil (deep, fertile, well-drained), the hydrology (even water distribution), management (annuals, less mechanized), condition (old-growth forest), and resources (little time, energy, currency, tools, or skills). If these conditions are met, swales are probably not needed. If many or all of the conditions are not met, swales should probably be used. The swales should be placed to hold water until it is absorbed into the land. The plantings will be done north to south with the taller plants on the north and moving down in size toward the south. This is to allow sun to reach all of the plants at least part of the day. This goal setting, observation, and analysis could take up to a year. During that time, the chosen area can be observed in all seasons and conditions to determine the best use of time once the planning and planting begins.

Grayson County Master Gardeners Association is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization sponsored by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Reach us by email at mastergardeners@co.grayson.tx.us, by phone 903-813-4204, our web page txmg.org/grayson, or our Facebook group.