

Foraging at Home

Part 2 of 4

(Planning a Food Forest)

By Donna Nesbit, Grayson County Master Gardener

The third and fourth steps to creating the food forest is the planning. For many, this is exciting as the different areas can be visualized as they are planned. Step 3 will be the planning of all the structures of the land. This includes water access including swales, pathways, fencing, and structures. Step 4 is planning which plants to use and where.

Before even looking for plants, water, access, and structures should be planned. Water access is what should be planned first. Water tanks, irrigation lines, etc. need to be located so they are most efficient. Water is the main need of plants in the forest. To contain as much water as possible swales can be created. They are placed in such a way as to hold water until it is absorbed. These swales on contour are like wide shallow valleys with closed ends. They should be placed where they will fill up passively from rain or irrigation. When swales are created, berms are placed on the downhill side. These berms make perfect growing locations. The swales can be filled with mulch or gravel and be used as pathways between the plantings.

Next roads and pathways need to be mapped out. These can be used to give access to different plants in the forest or to separate plants and areas from each other. As said above, the swales can be used as pathways, but in addition, pathways through and around plants on the berms will be needed. In addition, areas for mechanized vehicles might be needed in or near the food forest. These pathways may need to be more permanent materials like cement, rocks, or gravel.

Fencing follows access. Fences can be wood, metal, rock, or shrubbery. It separates the forest into growing zones. It also can protect the plants from damage or encroachment from animals or people. A rock wall might be used on the back side of the berm to help with containment. Also, trellises for vines can be used as dividers between different areas of the forest. The larger the forest, the more fencing might be required.

Structures are the last thing planned. Of course, sometimes structures are already in the area and must be worked around. However, sheds, benches, etc. can be added to the area as needed. Some structures such as trellises may only be temporary. If the goal is to have vines growing up trees, the trees must mature before this is possible; in which case, trellises can act as a stand-in until the trees mature.

Once all of these permanent systems are planned, creating a master plant list begins which is step four. Each forest is comprised of seven layers. The canopy of the forest contains the top two layers. These layers are the large fruit and nut trees in layer 1, and the smaller fruit trees

such as dwarves or espaliers in layer 2. The next two layers make up the understory. The understory plants are the shrubs and the herbaceous layer. The shrubs (layer 3) are usually berries or currants, but they may also contain some small nut trees. The top three layers are perennial plants that return every year. The herbaceous layer 4 is the culinary and medicinal herbs, companion plants, pollinator and bird forage plants. These plants can be annual, biannual, short-lived perennial, and non-shrubby perennials. The fifth layer is ground cover. Ground cover is living mulch. It consists of plants that form thickets or mats that cover the ground. They can be used in swales instead of mulch or gravel. Layer 6 is the rhizosphere or root zone. It contains plants that are root crops such as potatoes or beets. Some of the plants may also be beneficial for erosion control. The last layer of the forest connects all of the other layers. It consists of vines and climbers. The vines and climbers can grow vertically up trellises, walls, or trees, or they can grow horizontally to cover unsightly areas or as ground cover. This layer can include grapes, climbing beans, berries, roses, and many other plants.

The master list must include plants for all seven layers of the forest. In addition, it should indicate the needs of each plant, and its use in the garden. Some plants may have culinary uses, while others may be used as companions to help ward off unwanted pests, while still others may have medicinal uses, and some may act as weed control. Also, plants may be included because their beautiful blooms or berries will attract insects and birds that help pollinate the plants as well as keep pests away.

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.