

Crestview Forest Garden

707 Crestview Drive, Farmington, New Mexico
Beverly Todd bevtodd79@gmail.com 6/2017

When we moved into our home in 2001 my goal was to plant as wide a variety as possible of fruit bearing and medicinal plants and trees. Inspired by the concept of the Permaculture Forest Garden (or food forest), I was thinking in terms of guilds, so I planted fruit trees in wide basins in a scattered pattern, surrounding them with companion plants - herbs, flowers and fruit bushes. These were watered by hand with a hose using (expensive) city water.

My early plantings were not very successful and the trees struggled with full exposure and sandy, quick drying soil. I continued to plant trees, bushes and herbs of all kinds, constantly filling in any empty spaces.

While some species died, others did very well and started to spread. I replanted with species that I was learning did well, though I gave many species multiple tries in different microclimates. Some did well, others not. Every year I added new species and filled in all the available spaces, overplanting in many cases.

My approach gradually changed from thinking in guilds to thinking in layers. Rather than a single fruit tree surrounded by companion plants, I just filled all the spaces (layers) with as many species as would take root.

My focus has been on building soil – keep the ground covered by plants or mulch, retain and add as much compostable material as possible like autumn leaves and all prunings, adding rabbit and chicken droppings.

Another goal was to let the garden be as “wild” as possible, mostly taking care of itself. I plant and water, do minimal pruning and weeding, scatter seeds, spread rabbit turds all around, allow most weeds to grow, allow most plant debris to remain on the ground or move it to a compost pile and harvest as needed. Nobody gets fussed over. I do not use any pesticides, herbicides or artificial fertilizers.

A possible misconception when seeing this forest garden is to think that all permaculture has to be this random and untidy. That is not true – you can follow permaculture principles and use permaculture methods with straight rows and tidy pathways. Another misconception might be that you must plant the unconventional food plants that I am growing. That is also untrue, though there is often a trade-off to be made (in the way of chemical inputs, structural protections, pest and disease control, etc) when trying to force production of standard varieties of unblemished fruits and vegetables in areas where they may not be well adapted.

Through the years I added chickens for eggs and fertilizer, rabbits for fertilizer and cuteness, redworm bins for fertilizer, honeybees for pollination and honey, fish in the greenhouse for fun and a box turtle in the greenhouse for pure personality and a daily reminder to slow down.

Another goal is to be as self sufficient as possible in feeding the chickens and rabbits (and myself) by cutting alfalfa and grasses through the summer to feed the rabbits in winter, to feed the rabbits fresh foods from the forest all summer, and to gather greens and dropped fruits for the chickens. I would also like to grow the grains to feed the chickens, but haven't achieved that yet.

I saw a difference when the ditch water became available seven years into the project. I started

watering with sprinklers and was able to provide more water. The plants really took off then. My current watering practice is to make the rounds with the sprinklers every 7 to 10 days, letting the water soak deeply everywhere. When it rains I delay the next round of watering. I pay close attention to new plantings and make sure they get more frequent water until they are established.

In the beginning the limiting factors for the plants were limited expensive water and too much exposure to sun and wind. The sandy soil soaked in the water and dried out quickly. The wind blew away any mulch on the ground. All of the plants were in full sun all day.

Now the excessive shade seems to be a limiting factor. I allowed too many siberian elms to grow in the beginning because they were so hardy and willing to grow and the fruit trees were struggling from so much exposure.

Things I would do differently:

Instead of letting the siberian elms grow, I would plant locust, mulberry and hackberry as nurse trees.

Plant fewer grafted trees and more seedling trees, scatter more seeds.

Be more patient and allow more space between trees.

Reconsider vines in the trees.

Plan the overall structure better, including swales and pathways.

Consider a drip irrigation system.

Integrate the house into the system using gray water and cisterns to collect rainwater from the roof.

What I like best about the forest garden:

The diversity and daily discovery of new things.

The wildlife – native bees, honeybees, bumblebees, wasps, earthworms, snails, spiders, beetles, dragonflies, lacewings, ladybugs, praying mantis, lizards, garter snakes, robins, doves, hawks, skunks, squirrels, racoons.

The shade in summer, the framework of the leafless trees in winter.

Watching the way it all changes and grows through each season and year to year.

Being able to ask a tree question or an insect question or a soil question and then go out into the forest garden and find the answer.

Knowing the trees like I know people – memories of planting them, how they grew, when they bore fruit, worries I had for them, joys and disappointments.

Being able to eat a variety of fruits when they are ripe, leaves that are young and tender, flowers as they open, roots straight out of the ground.

All of the aromas and flavors I can experience just walking among the trees.

Much of what I grow that is edible (such as dock, serviceberries, sunroot) is not readily recognized as food to our conventional “grocery store eyes.” Neither does it taste as expected. It takes time and commitment to make some of these foods a regular part of the diet. But they are richer in nutrients and are exposed to far fewer chemicals and pollutants than food from the grocery store. Many of these sorts of foods are gaining recognition, one by one, as “super foods” and have potential for market.

This forest garden is a good model of what can be done in our area in 16 years with an ample amount of water. (I think it could be achieved with less water using drip irrigation.) It is not a good model for what can be done in our local area with primarily native plants using limited water. (That would be my next project.)

What is next for this forest garden:

Keep on planting, though focusing on using more seedling trees (fewer grafted trees) and scattering more flower and herb seeds (rather than transplanting).

Reduction of the siberian elm overstory to let more light in for the fruit trees. This will involve some experimentation – I want to maintain much of the standing dead wood for bird habitat, nesting for native bees and to suspend hives for wild honeybee colonies. I will attempt to kill trees by girdling and using elm oyster mushrooms. Other elms will be kept pruned to let in light and others coppiced for firewood.

More enjoyment and less work over time.

Add ducks. Steward a rare rabbit breed. Focus on growing seeds for a local seed library.

Timeline: 2001 summer – began planting
 2005 autumn– greenhouse built
 2008 spring – ditch water piped in