



Simon Miles
The Forest Garden

Local community food for a more sustainable future

Plants have been my life's career, initially studying ornamental gardening, then medicinal species and their benefits, and now edible plant systems for a more sustainable future.

Operating from my Forest Garden [site](#) near my hometown of Falmouth, I have been researching and developing low input, carbon neutral food production to add resilience to local food supply. My work includes determining the best crops to plant within our Marine Temperate 7 climate, teaching others who are looking to set up their own Forest Garden, through either a course, consultation session or a tour of my garden, and providing the useful species from my nursery to help get folks started.

And set in the context of Cornwall Council's aspirations to be carbon neutral by 2030, this work could not be more urgent. Time is of the essence and, as the old song goes - "The Times They Are A-Changin".

The UK Government is currently re-evaluating the way in which subsidies to landowners and farmers are managed, taking a new "Public money for public goods" approach to policy; the aim of which is to encourage more sustainable farming practices that deliver environmental and other benefits. "Public money for public goods" has several specific aims, including public access, education and biodiversity. There are, as I see it, more than one set of people's needs that could be met here. First, there is a need for farmers and landowners to consider creating a more biodiverse habitat, and Forest Gardening could certainly help with that. Then there is education and

the need to reconnect people with nature, as well as where their food comes from, through practical learning in the countryside. There are the numerous public groups, such as local community action groups up and down the country, that could provide a conduit to facilitate such education, and many of their members would undoubtedly like to forest garden, if only they knew what it was, how to do it, and could access land to *start growing*. Which brings us to public access.

[Forest Gardening](#) involves planting mainly perennial (living for several years) edible species in layers, creating an open canopy growing system allowing sun light for plants where required. Imagine an orchard with trees above and shrubs, herbaceous, ground cover and tubers below, with climbing plants within the trees, usually informally planted although this is not essential. The practice can be carried out in a plot of land as small as 2m x 2m, but at that scale it is just not possible to include all of the seven layers of the Forest Garden principle into the design. So, a community approach with access to local land would work best.



Japanese Wineberry

The proposed “Public money for public good” policy incentive, as I understand it, is that whoever will be *working the land* will *get the financial support* and I think the reasoning underpinning this thinking is clear. However, this approach may well put farmers and landowners off wanting to cooperate with community groups and release land for Community Forest Gardening.

To mitigate such circumstances, it would be useful if Government could look again at this rule where community-based forest gardening is concerned, so that farmers and landowners may instead be encouraged to make land available for this purpose. Government policymakers are best placed through their professional experience to devise appropriate mechanisms and incentives to achieve such an outcome. However, one can envisage that landowners and



Autumn Olive

farmers should receive a share of the financial incentive from the subsidy and produce sales, or alternatively benefit from an element of tax relief for making the land available, rather than feel they are making a contribution without them being a direct beneficiary of the ‘public access’.

There are several areas within Forest Gardening that lead me to believe that a community approach would be particularly beneficial to the needs of sustainable food production, sustainable land management, and more resilient communities. Some of these are listed in the Table below.

Community approach benefits	
Area	Benefit
Food Supply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainable food production. - Medium to long term food production system. - Eat local produce grown with the seasons, rather than importing out of season food. - Permanency - you can be harvesting from the same plant for many years. - Allows us to eat a more diverse spectrum of nutritious plant species than that of your regular supermarket diet. - Growing for taste and variety rather than just bulk and shelf life. - Opportunity to produce interesting food from other Temperate 7 climates around the world. - Able to preserve food naturally without use of processed sugar as a preservative.
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delivers Localism and creates more resilient community. - Lends itself to a collaborative community food production model on a micro or macro scale, as the growing principles can be implemented on a plot from 2m square to many 10s of acres of land.
Low-Carbon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Captures and sequesters carbon. - Minimum artificial fossil fuel-based inputs e.g. limited/no artificial fertiliser use and minimum mechanisation. - Low food miles through local production and distribution.
Soil Health and Habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Builds soils and creates habits for wildlife. - Good for biodiversity. - It is primarily a no dig/ no till system. - Containing companion planting for plant generated nutrient production accessible to other plants. - Steers nature rather than beating it into submission.
Climate resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crop diversity. - Good for capturing heavy rainfall in the winter and allowing its slow release thereafter (important in the warmer wetter winters and hotter drier summers of UK climate projections).
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning to think green and sustainable, along with its practical application.

	- Reconnecting individuals and communities with where our food comes from, engendering respect for nutritional quality and the effort involved in producing it.
Physical and Mental Health	By default, some species produce foods that offer self-medication, either on consumption or just by walking amongst them when they are growing. For example, if you increase your variety of dietary fibre and thereby increase your gut flora, the result is that your immune system is boosted too. Plus, it's a good place to be for those who have had mental health issues and depression, as it can help enable their recovery to be good enough for them to get back in to productive activity.

Forest Gardening, with its multi-species approach to growing perennial plants in different layers can allow a small area of land to be subject to multiple harvests and its uses will include food, [medicinal](#), and nitrogen fixing applications. For further detail on some of the many benefits that a Forest Garden can deliver, I refer you to the [Agroforestry Research Trust](#) (and, more specifically, their research [outputs](#)).

Having studied and practiced this growing system in detail, I am convinced that every community across Cornwall (and indeed the UK) should have a Community Forest Garden. It can be a place of great learning, as well as human health and well-being, and bring people together with a common interest in ensuring food resilience for themselves and their neighbourhoods.



Asian or Nashie pear

If every community had a Community Forest Garden, we could then start reducing food miles through localism and improving local food resilience, with people developing sustainable food sources right on their front doorstep. I believe that nationally, if taken seriously and given appropriate policy support by government, Community Forest Gardening could supply between 1% to 3% of the country's food needs.

It would seem to me to be the perfect time for Cornwall to lead the way by bringing interested people together to pioneer Community Forest Gardens across the county and, through the "Public money for public goods" policy,

encourage land to be made available to meet these public access, biodiversity and educational needs.

There is no time to waste!



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