

Food forest project puts down new roots

12 November 2019



Figure 1 Joyce Hostyn and Dan Robinson dump a wheelbarrow full of wood chips during a special food forest planting project at the Lakeside Community Garden this past Saturday. (Meghan Balogh/The Whig-Standard/) JPG, KI

On a blustery Saturday morning, 20 volunteers with spades, wheelbarrows and gardening tools at hand set out to plant a unique project in Kingston's west end.

Under the direction of local Master Gardener Joyce Hostyn, a newly planted food forest will begin to produce for community members next year.

The food forest planting took place at the Lakeside Community Garden at the corner of Front and Days roads.

"If you think about walking in a forest, what is a forest like?" Joyce Hostyn described. "It's got layers of plants: tall trees, understory trees, it's got shrubs, and it's got a ground cover layer. A food forest is really the same thing: it's modelled along the way a natural forest works but we're planting edibles."

On Saturday, volunteers from the community garden, as well as from Queen's University and the wider Kingston community, planted pear, plum, cherry and apple trees, blackcurrant, haskap, goji, arena and gooseberry bushes, grape vines, and nut trees.

In mimicry of nature, the food forest will not only be a perennial space to gather food, but it will also be mostly self-sustaining.

Fruit and nut trees provide an over-canopy and shrubs and bushes the understory that feed and care for not only people, but the plants around them.

"We want it to care for itself. The nitrogen-fixing shrubs will feed the fruit trees, the perennials will keep it healthy, the berries will give us food and attract more pollinators. It's a self-supporting ecosystem," Hostyn said.

While the food forest will be beautiful as it becomes established, it also offers the benefits of food security and biodiversity and a sustainable way to produce food that is a direct answer to monoculture farming.

"Traditional agriculture is monoculture rowed crops. A food forest is permanent agriculture. Once you plant them, they are in the ground, they will sink carbon, they will help mitigate climate change. They all support each other, so you're not adding chemicals or anything else that upsets the ecosystem."

In her travels around the world, Hostyn has observed the food forest principle in action — not as a new innovation but as a traditional way of growing that has been largely usurped or forgotten in modern North American agriculture.

"In tropical areas, agricultural has been this way forever," she said.

With North American crops, Hostyn said, agriculture takes a risk with its lack of biodiversity.

"Traditional agriculture has gone down to so few crops, and if something hits one of those crops, we're in trouble. We're really going to have some food issues. Whereas, if you have a biodiverse, multiple polyculture, if apples don't work one year well then the pears probably will, or the understory. Not everything will fail at once. Every year, you'll have stuff to eat. (This is) polyculture versus monoculture."

With permanent polycultures like a food forest, there is no tilling of the earth in which the plants are growing. That has an added environmental benefit with carbon sequestration.

“By doing permanent crops, you don’t till, so the carbon stays in the ground,” she said.

The food forest at Lakeside Community Garden was the first to be planted, and the Oak Street Community Garden is set to plant its own food forest on Nov. 16.

Both projects are steps towards a city that offers its citizens public access to local, accessible, municipally supported food projects. Hostyn has been looking at ways to establish perennial food gardens and plantings in public spaces, something that is closer to reality thanks to the City of Kingston’s Community Orchard and Edible Forest Policy.

“The city policy made it possible to plant community orchards in any public park,” Hostyn explained. “It doesn’t have to be a community garden, but it’s difficult because you have to become a community garden, have liability insurance and a board of directors. So if you’re already a community garden, it’s much easier.”

The food grown in the forest will be divided between members of the food forest (a \$10 annual fee), members of the Lakeside Community Garden, the public and Loving Spoonful.

Dan Robinson has been helping Hostyn with the the food forest project. When he discovered the food forest format, his interest in gardening intersected with his desire to make a difference environmentally.

“I wanted to do something to benefit climate change,” Robinson said. “Everyone says the best thing you can do is vote, but I don’t think that’s enough. I want to do more. I figured, having something where you’re just planting trees and things that are absorbing carbon is a great way to do it.”

A group of students with Queen’s University Engineers Without Borders food systems portfolio are on board. Benjamin Saatia said it was good to get off-campus and get involved with some community projects, and that working alongside community volunteers planting a food forest fits in with the Engineers Without Borders mandate.

“I met Joyce in the summer. She’s doing a lot of interesting work, improving the food system of Kingston,” he said.

Source: <https://www.thewhig.com/news/local-news/food-forest-project-puts-down-new-roots>