

## Building food forest for the family

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A food forest is just what it sounds like – an edible garden, comprising different species, growing together with minimal intervention, just like a jungle.

BENGALURU: Who is the best gardener you know? For me, it is mother nature. She seems to produce and maintain these amazing bio-diverse self-sustaining habitats around the world – our forests ! No one ever fertilises a forest, no one ever removes weeds – heck, no one even waters a forest – but it all just seems to work, and these forests provide home and food for a vast majority of our planet's species. What if we could build our own small self-sustaining forests by applying principles that mother nature seems to follow, and what if we could nudge these forests to grow food for us?

One of the key principles we learn from observing forests is that we need bio-diversity to build self-sustainable systems, which are resilient and need



minimal external intervention. So, we need to plant a lot of different types of plants.

When you start setting up your food forest, you need to choose plants similarly and make sure space is utilised vertically as well horizontally by having different categories of plants which have different heights on maturity, planted densely together. This allows maximum capture of solar energy and formation of intricate relationships between plants which will help make the tiny ecosystem completely self-sufficient. For example, while the tall trees can draw their nutrients from deep in the soil, their fallen leaves will form a mulch layer for the herbs and vegetables with shallow roots, and gradually decompose to provide nutrients to those plants.

Of course, since you are looking at building a forest which will provide food – you need to choose a lot of fruit plants, perennial vegetables, edible herbs and medicinal plants in your mix of plants. To summarise, when you are planning to create a food forest, you need to draw up a list of plants you want in your food forest, they should be diverse, they should have different heights, and they should ideally be species which are known to thrive well locally.

Prepare the land with enough organic matter while setting up the food forest, instead of waiting for nature to take its course (which would take a long time). For this, you need to do soil amendments based on what the soil lacks, cover it with straw mulch and ensure you water your saplings quite regularly for the first 1-2 years, till they become strong enough to not need watering anymore. Once your forest is established fully, you can just depend on seasonal rain to do the work – but till then you may need to water it. The second shortcut you need to take is to plant trees which can rapidly create biomass that gets constantly added back to the soil –this means, you need to include some fast growing trees like Sesbania, which do not produce food for humans, but whose branches can be pruned by “chopping and dropping” to the ground every few months. Planting some such trees and following the chop and drop process, will accelerate the addition of bio-mass to the process, and aid in forest formation faster.

Your forests don't just have trees and plants – they have a thriving insect life, which aids the ecosystem. So don't use any chemicals – even if you see some insect damage, be patient and wait for some time for the whole ecosystem to get setup – avoid the temptation of doing a quick spray to get rid of them. While you can build food forest in your garden, even in a small 200 sq ft space, another variation of food forests, are community food forests, which neighbourhoods or apartment complexes can build, in larger patches of land.

The author is CEO, Farmizen, a platform connecting organic and natural farmers to consumers with same-day delivery.

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