



Plant once, harvest forever. That's the simple goal of a food forest. You choose a mix of trees, shrubs, and other perennials that produce edible crops, get them established, and then reap the rewards for years to come. Food forests are beneficial for the ecosystem, too. Wildlife of all kinds gets food and shelter, and the soil is not disturbed by tilling or digging every season, preventing erosion and stormwater run-off.

You don't need a lot of space to create a productive, sustainable food forest. You can start with a few plants and then expand as you have room. The ideal mix of plants fills in all of the layers of the landscape, from above your head to below your feet, and produces an edible harvest from spring to fall. Native species are the best choices, wherever possible, because they are well-adapted to the conditions in your region and support the local food chain. To help you get started, here are the categories of plants and a few ideas to consider in each.

Canopy Trees

At the top of food forests are large nut trees, such as pecan, walnuts, and hickories, which eventually reach 50 feet tall or more. **They typically start producing nuts four to five years after planting.**

Understory Trees

Native fruit trees, including crabapple, chokecherry, American persimmon, and beach plum, will bear fruit in the partial shade of the larger trees. Filberts and hazelnuts also fit into the understory layer.

Shrubs

Blueberries, blackberries, and cranberries are native shrubs that thrive in the middle layer of a food forest. Less familiar serviceberry (*aka juneberry*) and elderberries also bear fresh fruit that makes tasty jams, sauces, and baked goods.

Vines

Fox grapes climb trees and each year produce clusters of fruit that are used to make jelly and juice. Hardy kiwi, a relative of the fuzzy fruit found in supermarkets, is not a native, but it isn't invasive and it bears grape-sized, smooth-skinned tangy fruit from its climbing vines. Until you have mature trees for the vines to climb, you can set up trellises to guide them upward.

Perennial Vegetables

Crops that come back every year without replanting fit into just about any garden, even if you don't have room for the upper layers of a food forest. If you have a sunny spot in your garden that you leave undisturbed, you might find a place for one or more of these perennial vegetables.

Asparagus

Start with "crowns" (*a cluster of roots*) and plant them in the spring in a trench that gets filled in as new shoots grow. Wait for the first two seasons to harvest—just let the spears grow and open up their ferny leaves. You can begin cutting off the largest spears in the third season.

Egyptian Walking Onions

Plant bulblets (*miniature onions*) in fall and in spring long flower stalks emerge with clusters of bulblets, called "topsets," at the end. When the topsets become heavy, they tip to the ground and take root, starting new onions. You can harvest the oniony greens anytime. In late summer to early fall, you can dig up and eat the onion bulbs.

Be sure to leave a few behind for the next season's crop.





Fennel

While not strictly a perennial, fennel comes back every year if you let it flower and produce seeds, which come up the following season. You can harvest the fragrant seeds as the flowers dry down in late summer to autumn—some are sure to fall and reseed in the process. **Fennel's feathery foliage can be an attractive backdrop in an ornamental bed.**

Horseradish

In fall or early spring, set root pieces about 4 inches below the soil surface. Periodically trim off the top growth as it comes up to produce bigger and spicier roots. **To harvest**, dig roots in early spring or after the first frosts of fall, when they are at their peak of flavor. Leave some root pieces in the ground for future crops.

Lovage

The leaves, stems, roots, and seeds of this fast-growing plant are all edible and taste a lot like celery. Transplant seedlings to your garden after the last frost in spring. **The plants often reach 6 or more feet tall.** You can harvest some of the fresh leaves almost as soon as they begin appearing.

Rhubarb

The tart, pinkish-green stalks come up every spring and are used in pies, compotes, and jams. Mature rhubarb can reach 2 to 3 feet tall and wide, so choose a site where it won't be crowded. **Plant crowns in early spring.** Don't harvest any stalks during the first growing season and cut only a few of the thickest in the second year. Starting with the third year, the harvest period **runs 8 to 10 weeks long.** Always leave at least 2 stalks per plant to ensure continued production.

Sorrel

The first green ready for harvest in spring, sorrel has lemony flavored leaves that can be eaten raw or cook. **Sow seeds in early spring** and you can pluck off a few leaves to eat as the plant begins to grow and then anytime until the first frost in fall. Its creeping horizontal roots generate new shoots, eventually forming a dense patch.

Groundcovers

At the base of food forests are perennial plants that grow horizontally and blanket the soil. Creeping thyme spreads steadily but not aggressively. Alpine strawberries send out runners that produce new plants each year. **If you have wet soil**, consider watercress, a nutritious green that thrives in damp conditions.

PLANTING TIP

When laying out a food forest, position the tallest plants at the northern and eastern side of the bed and put progressively shorter plants in as you move toward the southern and western side. This will reduce the hours of shade cast by the canopy on the low-growing plants during the growing season.

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