

Tasting the Vision

Vanessa Spedding senses the potential of natural living in a Shropshire forest garden of Eden



Karuna Site Design

The Karuna site includes a large number of different forest gardens. Most of them are arranged within a 3.2 hectare (8 acre) field called Sanctuary that is itself a part of a larger system of orchards, agroforestry areas, tree and shrub nurseries and horticultural vegetable growing, covering 7.3 hectares (18 acres) in total and at an altitude of 850 feet.

Janta and Merav design their forest gardens to integrate holistically with each other and with the other elements within the site. They use a permaculture approach to optimise the opportunities presented by orientation, slope, and existing natural diversity while allowing intuition to guide their decisions. They term their approach 'Insight Design' because of its emphasis on creative expression, which allows their personal reflections on the nature and energy of the landscape to influence their interaction with it.



Above: Chris Evans explaining one of Karuna's forest gardens.

Developed over the last five years, the forest in the photograph above is set on gently sloping, south-facing land with the benefit of a developing micro-climate resulting from its position between two new, mixed woodlands. It has been mulched annually for three years using card, triticale straw and miscanthus. The design is as follows.



Canopy layer: Pear trees, apples on various rootstocks, wild pear, crab apple, filbert, almond, cherry, walnut, juniper, mulberry.

Shrub layer: Jostaberry, edible bamboo, gooseberry, currants, blueberry, raspberry.

Climbers: Grape vine, Honeysuckle.

Herb and ground cover: Tansy, globe artichoke, evening primrose, fennel, comfrey, perennial cabbage, sedum, polish sorrel, various mints, coltsfoot, lavender, various sages, rhubarb, strawberries.





Occasionally an idea crops up that's so obvious and so elegant that it makes you wonder why people hadn't thought of it earlier. Usually, when it's that good, someone has actually thought of it already.

Such is the case with forest gardening; fast gaining popularity in the mainstream it's now regularly mentioned in the media, yet can be traced back to practices that date back millennia. As a method of growing a diverse variety of food and materials it can't be beaten, which is not surprising given that it's based on natural systems which were millions of years in the making: forests.

LEARNING FROM FORESTS

Forests are highly diverse, self-sustaining ecosystems that meet all their own needs from within (given a reasonable supply of air, sunlight and rain) by decomposing waste, cycling nutrients, renewing the soil, holding water and building fertility. Because of the diversity of species they support they are resilient to shocks and environmental change. In some parts of the world like southern India, Africa and the Amazon, people have been using the inherent wisdom of forests to produce their food for thousands of years, sometimes by modifying existing forest to boost the number of food producing plants, sometimes by creating new, woodland-style 'forest gardens', as they have come to be known.

It's no surprise that forest gardening has been embraced as a model of good practice by the permaculture movement, given that it so clearly embodies an 'applied common sense' design methodology. Not only does forest gardening offer a low-maintenance method for growing plants for food, medicines, fibres, fuel and other materials, it also boosts soil fertility and enhances biodiversity, resulting in beautiful, healthy and useful natural environments.

I was lucky enough to go on a weekend-long forest gardening course this summer at one of the UK's more established sites: the Karuna permaculture project near Church Stretton in Shropshire.

Left: Inspecting the layers in the Karuna forest garden.

A LIVING FOREST GARDEN

Long-time permaculture teacher and forest gardening expert Chris Evans of Designed Visions ran the course, assisted by Jess Clynewood, one of the team behind the Coed Hills forest garden in south Wales. Between the two of them they delivered an experience that was eye-opening, fascinating and highly instructive. Theory sessions on the seven levels of a woodland, guild planting, design methodology and species selection were interspersed with practical classes on mulching, planting and fruit tree grafting. But what really made the experience come alive was the fact that we were surrounded by a living forest garden – 3.2 hectares (8 acres) of it to be precise – evolving in real time all around us in a stunning elevated setting overlooking the dramatic south Shropshire landscape.

Pioneering spirits Janta and Merav Wheelhouse are the inspiration, the engine and the determination behind Karuna. Determined to transform a patch of dreary rough grazing into a haven of wildlife, beauty, fertility, variety and of course food and fuel, they bought the land and started work in 2005, since when they have planted some 8,500 trees as well as countless other plants and shrubs. The majority of these are native forestry trees for shelter, wildlife and soil retention; many more form part of a forest garden system that includes fruit and nut trees, nitrogen fixers (such as alder and broom), coppice trees, bushes for food, wildlife and the soil (such as sea buckthorn, currant and jostaberry), herbs in profusion for food and pest control (such as mint and Welsh onion), mulch crops (like comfrey and tansy) and of course ground cover plants, including the familiar strawberry, among myriad others.

The planting is done according to a constantly evolving schedule so there is always a range of plots with different themes at different stages of development, each deliberately planned yet with the wonderful appearance of chaotic abundance. Delve into the thicket and there is a visual, textural and aromatic assault on the senses with the intriguing knowledge that any number of the leaves, berries or flowers are edible or useful in some way. It's not often the hunter-gatherer in us gets quite such an intense fix.



EATING THE LANDSCAPE

But no pudding is proven until it's eaten, to mangle a well-worn saying. Another big upside of the course was the food provided by our hosts, which gave us the opportunity to eat our landscape as well as to learn about it. I am a compulsive consumer of salads and vegetables but the meals here took me into another realm. There were leaves I didn't recognise, mountains of them, sprinkled with petals and seeds in a combination that delivered tastes from a different dimension. Not being industrially produced, prematurely harvested, sprayed, refrigerated or packaged, but simply picked from the plants and presented meant that every harmonic of every flavour was available for the delectation, hinting at a much richer and more sustaining nutrient balance than can be had from any shop-bought produce.

LESSONS FROM THE FOREST GARDEN

The lessons to be gained from forest gardening are deep and wide; it's not just about growing and eating but also about nurturing, learning,

Below: A fine example of a forest garden with ground cover, shrubs, climbers and canopy plants.

committing, connecting and belonging. At Karuna, Janta and Merav provide a portal into another world of possibilities, and their passion is clear.

"Karuna is about many things," said Janta. "On one hand it's a recycling project: we've recycled a bit of land that was given over to monoculture for many years and we are restoring it to a more natural, diverse state. On the other hand we are showing alternative ways to provide food security and fuel; we are raising awareness; and, through the permaculture courses we run here, we are helping to bring people closer to nature."

And there is a deeper side. Asked about his vision for Karuna, Janta's response was "Karuna is the vision. It's all about change, but positive change. Karuna is an evolving expression of my vision for a better world."

Merav's thoughts reveal an unaffected alignment with these values. "I like Karuna to be a place of inspiration and beauty, a model for living sustainably and simply," she said.

Both acknowledge that living simply is not proving to be so easy: there is still some local resistance to their low-impact, low-consumption, land-based way of life. But the growing interest in their project, the role model they provide for others,

and their warmth and generosity of spirit mean that they will surely prevail, and the world will be a richer place for it 

Vanessa Spedding is a writer and permaculture apprentice; she blogs at: <http://itsvivid.wordpress.com>

FURTHER INFORMATION

Karuna
www.karuna.org.uk
and if you'd like to visit, Karuna is open to the public via the LAND project, for details see:
www.permaculture.org.uk/land

Designed Visions
www.designedvisions.com

Coed Hills Project
<http://coedforestgarden.co.uk/blog>

How To Make a Forest Garden by Patrick Whitefield, price £16.95, and *Creating A Forest Garden* by Martin Crawford, price £30.00, are both available from 01730 823 311
www.green-shopping.co.uk

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