

Starting a Food Forest

A Beginner's Guide



Welcome !

I'm so glad you're here, dreaming of transforming your yard into a lush, edible forest garden. Shifting from a traditional lawn to a space that provides food, supports biodiversity, and offers endless moments of peace and wonder is a beautiful journey. And the best part? Creating a food forest doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming. Unlike traditional annual gardens, food forests are designed to thrive with minimal upkeep as the years go by. Your plants will continue to produce, the ecosystem will flourish, and nature will work alongside you to create an abundant, regenerative paradise. Let's get started on this amazing adventure together.

~ Bailey Green, Owner

B Green Co LLC



What is a Food Forest?

A food forest is a diverse, layered planting of edible and medicinal perennials designed to mimic a natural ecosystem. By combining various plants—such as fruit and nut trees, berry bushes, herbs, ground covers, vines and fungi —this system creates a self-sustaining environment that promotes biodiversity, conserves water, and enriches the soil, all while providing an abundance of food with minimal upkeep over time.

The Layers of the Food Forest

- Canopy Trees
- Understory Trees
- Shrubs
- Herbaceous Plants
- Ground Cover
- Roots
- Vines
- Fungi

What are the Benefits of a Food Forest?

- Abundant harvests of fresh, local, homegrown produce
- Enhanced biodiversity and ecosystem resilience
- Effective weed suppression once established
- Natural pest control and management
- High-density planting for greater yields
- Improved soil health as a growth foundation
- Easier maintenance than short-lived annuals
- Stronger connection to the food system and Earth
- Carbon captured in soil through living roots
- Erosion control to protect land integrity
- Creation of microclimates for diverse life
- Wildlife habitats for pollinators and birds
- Educational opportunities for all ages
- Water conservation to preserve resources
- AND SO MUCH MORE!

Steps to Start Your Food Forest

STEP 1: Pick Your Planting Site

The first step in starting your food forest is finding the perfect space to plant. Whether it's your backyard, a vacant lot, or even a shared community garden space, evaluate the area for:

- **Sunlight:** How many hours of sunlight does the area receive? Most fruit trees and shrubs need 6-8 hours of sun per day.
- **Size:** Measure the available space to determine how many plants you can fit while maintaining proper spacing for growth.
 - **Example:** Larger fruit trees like apple or peach need about 15-25 feet of space between them, while smaller shrubs like blueberries or currants can be planted 3-5 feet apart.
- **Soil Conditions:** Conduct a simple soil test to check for nutrients, pH levels, and drainage. If your soil needs improvement, don't worry—sheet mulching or adding compost will help regenerate its health.
- **Microclimates:** Observe variations in the space, like shaded spots, windy areas, or spaces that naturally retain water. These microclimates can help guide your plant choices.
- **Water Availability:** Will you have access to water or will this food forest rely solely on natural precipitation? This may be an important consideration when selecting your site.

By choosing a well-suited site, you'll set yourself up for a successful, thriving food forest!

STEP 2: Pick Your Plants

Now that you know your site's size and conditions, it's time to select plants that will thrive and support a healthy, balanced ecosystem. A food forest typically includes seven layers, so aim for a variety of **trees, shrubs, vines, herbs, ground covers, roots, and fungi.**

- Choose species suited to your local **USDA growing zone** and conditions.
- **Layer Planning:** Prioritize plants for each layer of the food forest to maximize diversity and productivity.
 - **Example:**
 - Canopy Layer: Apples, plums, pears
 - Shrub Layer: Blueberries, hazelnuts, currants
 - Herbaceous Layer: Mint, lemon balm, oregano
 - Ground Cover Layer: Clover, creeping thyme
 - Root Crops: Walking onions, horseradish
- Explore the **Plant Inspiration List** to help identify which plants grow well in your area, how to layer them, and how they support each other.

Where to Source

- Support local nurseries to ensure healthy, regionally adapted plants.
- For cost-effective options, order bare-root plants online, start from seeds, or look into plant swaps or donations.

STEP 3: Site Preparation

Preparing your site is a crucial step in creating fertile ground for your food forest. Using **sheet mulching** or **solarization** techniques will suppress unwanted grass and weeds while enriching the soil:

- **Sheet Mulching:** Smother grass with cardboard/newspaper and cover with a thick layer of compost and mulch. Allow the site to decompose and prepare itself for planting over 4–8 weeks.
- **Solarization:** Cover the site with clear plastic during sunny months to naturally kill grass and weed seeds. This is a great option if you do not have access to compost.
- **Tilling:** There is an option to till just the once for planting, but it is not my preferred method. If you are in a hurry to plant, this might be an ideal option. I would recommend adding compost and any other amendments at this time so they are tilled into the top few inches. You can till down to 6” but the more organic matter you can preserve the better. If you use this method, you will want to have a cover crop mix or your food forest seed bombs and your mulch ready to go for immediate remediation. This is discussed more in the next step.

STEP 4: Plant Your Food Forest

- For trees and shrubs, clear away the mulch, dig a hole twice the size of the roots, and plant with compost. Water deeply after planting. The best time to plant perennial trees would be in the fall or early spring.
- For seeds aka “Seed Bombing”, prepare the soil by loosening with a pitchfork, spade or shovel. Scatter them in clusters, and cover with light mulch like straw (not wood chips) until they’ve germinated and grown sturdy. Once they mature, add heavier mulch like wood chips around them. Many perennial seeds require cold stratification so the ideal time to start a food forest from seed would be in the late fall to give seeds the necessary 30-90 days of cold they need to germinate. The second best time would be in the early spring.

STEP 5: Add Mulch & Protect

Surround plants with a 2-4 inch layer of mulch to mimic a forest floor, retain moisture, and suppress weeds. Use natural mulches like wood chips, straw, or leaves. Keep mulch 2 inches away from tree trunks to prevent rot.

STEP 6: Water Regularly (or Don’t)

During the first year, water new plants deeply and consistently. Mulching will help retain moisture, but perennials still need attention in their early stages to establish roots. In later years, your food forest should thrive primarily on rainfall. You can choose the “only the strong survive” mentality from the get go especially if you are starting with seed bombs in the fall.

STEP 7: Enjoy, Observe, & Learn

Food forests take time to mature, but they reward patience! Visit your space regularly to observe growth, make adjustments, and revel in your abundance. With time, your food forest will become increasingly self-sustaining and low-maintenance. Just picture all the plants, seeds, and produce you will get to share with your friends, family, and neighbors!

Gratitude and Congratulations!

Congratulations on taking the first steps toward creating your own food forest! I hope this guide has inspired you to embark on this journey of abundance, sustainability, and connection with nature. If you have any questions, need additional guidance, or simply want to share your progress, I’d absolutely love to hear from you! You can reach out anytime by email wildbgreenco@gmail.com. Together, let’s grow a healthier, more resilient world—one food forest at a time. Happy planting!