

# Suburban Forest Ecology of the Future

*Permacultures, or forest gardens, are perennial gardens designed to mimic natural forests, but filled with plants that are useful to humans for food, fuel, or medicine. They may not look as conventionally "beautiful" to our curb-appeal-trained eyes as traditional flower gardens, but they're cost-effective, easy to maintain, and, as Dave Jacke argues here in his seminal book Edible Forest Gardens, if everyone with a yard put a forest garden in, it could go a long way to healing our damaged ecosystem.*  
—Madeleine George, playwright

Imagine that you live in a typical suburb in the late twenty-first century. You and your neighbors all across town have turned your back, front, or side yards into forest gardens of various sorts. Fruits and nuts swell on



Fruit hanging on a Paw Paw Tree.

trees everywhere. Berry bushes lean over fences. You can walk down the sidewalk and nibble along the way. Various green, red, blue, brown, and multicolored foods grow along your path—you even know all their names and how to use them. Flowers bloom all over the place. The scent-filled air

buzzes with insects on their appointed rounds. The whole landscape has transformed into an edible paradise. Some of the earliest forest gardens have now been growing for over fifty years, and those who study them are learning much about designed ecosystems and their development.

[...] As more people put in forest gardens, restored useful and ecologically appropriate species to their yards, and made the soil healthier, a number of interesting things happened ecologically. First, more birds began reinhabiting the human-made landscape, as did more insect life. As ecosystem balance began to reemerge with our help, the amphibians and reptiles came back too. Then people noticed they had fewer pest imbalances in their landscapes, and pesticides became even less necessary than they were before. As the soils improved, the plants got healthier, and less runoff flowed into street sewers. People needed less fertilizer and irrigation as time went on. The health of the streams, lakes, ponds, and rivers improved as fewer nutrients washed into them from what

had previously been mostly compacted lawns receiving strong doses of fertilizer. The fishing got better.

Previously isolated forest fragments linked to each other as home gardens came into ecological balance and spread through town. People's yards became pathways for plants and animals to interact across neighborhoods that had previously blocked them. Sometimes this was "good," and sometimes it was "bad," but most folks understood that it meant the web of life was reweaving itself.

Eventually, people around the country grasped the forest garden idea. Edible forest gardens sprang up in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Experimentation by the interested public increased. Research by government agencies and universities began—after some commotion. This resulted in the development of new plant varieties for perennial polycultures throughout all the climate and soil regimes of North America. Our human habitat started looking, feeling, and acting more like a natural ecosystem. Agriculture as we knew it was transformed. So were the suburban, urban, and rural places where we lived, and the way we saw ourselves in the context of the natural world. As the forests, meadows, and waterways of the world became more diverse, healthier, and more alive, we felt healthier, more alive, more connected, and less alone than we had for generations. Things were better in the world since forest gardening came to North America at the end of the twentieth century!

It's a nice vision, isn't it?

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*Excerpted with permission from Edible Forest Gardens by Dave Jacke with Eric Toensmeier, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2005. [www.chelseagreen.com](http://www.chelseagreen.com).*