

# fruits of the forest

TREES, HERBS AND GEESE ALL HAVE A PART TO PLAY IN AN EDIBLE GARDEN TAKING ROOT NEAR FALMOUTH

Words by **Liz Norbury**, photographs by **Charles Francis**

All summer long, the young medlar tree in the Forest Garden at Budock Water was a glossy mass of emerald leaves – and after such a good start in life, it looks set to produce fruit in a year's time. "You don't want a tree to fruit in its first year. You want the roots to establish," says Simon Miles, who created the garden. "But next year, I should have 40 or 50 medlars." He adds with a smile: "That's a lot of jam and jelly."

And there won't just be medlar jelly in Simon's jam jars. Ugli fruit will also be put to good use, along with the berries of berberis, mahonia and *Cornus capitata*.

Everything grown in the Forest Garden is edible, has medicinal properties, or has a practical use. Apples and pears share the site with pokeroot and hawthorn – which Simon uses in his work as a herbalist – and bamboo canes destined to become pea sticks. He makes salads with lime leaves, hibiscus and fennel flowers, grinds chestnuts to make flour for pancakes, and uses green crops as a mulch.

"Forest gardening brings together agriculture, forestry and horticulture," explains Simon. "It has a layered system, with lots of different plants interacting in harmonious ways. The top layer has structural trees like chestnuts, the next layer down might have hawthorn, apple and pear, then there are shrubs and berries, herbaceous plants, and ground cover."

Forest gardens, he adds, are also low maintenance and environmentally friendly. "If you have a field of wheat or barley you have to plough it, plant it, cultivate it, spray it, then harvest it with a tractor. In comparison, a forest garden is a no-dig garden once it has been planted – yet everything will fruit and flower within four years."

Simon's initial plan was to create a garden where he could grow and harvest herbs for use in tinctures. But EU legislation requiring a licence for the use of each herb scuppered his plans: the cost would have run into thousands of pounds.

Then two years ago he was inspired by a TV documentary which highlighted projects set up across Britain to meet the challenge of diminishing oil supplies. "I was invited to go on a



field trip to visit the places mentioned in the programme, and one of them was Dartington, where there is a forest garden," he says. "I came away so enthused, and decided I could do something along the same lines."

"When I first started, I had to learn a whole new set of rules. I've been in horticulture since I was 17, became a landscaper and tree surgeon, and then ran the parks department at Carrick Council – but I had to bin a lot of stuff I'd learned at college because it's not relevant to this type of gardening."

The land he found close to his home town of Falmouth had lain unused for almost 40 years, so he started off with a blank green canvas. "The first thing I decided to do was get some geese," he says. "The grass feeds the geese, the goose manure provides nitrogen for the soil, and I get something back when I sell the geese at Christmas. Everything has its place: the geese, the trees, the bushes, the climbers. The garden will eventually be not just a man-made forest, but also an intensive ecosystem."

The garden makes use of deep-rooting plants like comfrey, which has the ability to access minerals and trace elements from the subsoil to benefit neighbouring plants. Also important are herbs with a strong scent, such as lemon balm, which attract beneficial insects, and flowers for bees, like buttercups and clover.

Simon's latest project is a wildlife pond. "There are few pests and diseases in a forest garden, but the pond will give a habitat for frogs and toads, which will help manage the slug population," he says. He has tried to interest the geese in adding slugs to their diet, but without success.

Simon now plans to offer a garden design service. "The principles of forest gardening can be applied even to a small back garden," he says. "You could have shrubs, climbers, blueberries, redcurrants and ground-cover raspberries. Next year, I'll be running workshops – and eventually I want people to be able to come here for a bowl of forest garden salad and a mulberry smoothie." ●

For more information about the Forest Garden, contact Simon Miles on 01326 250090 or visit [www.forestgardeningatcornwall.co.uk](http://www.forestgardeningatcornwall.co.uk)



**FAR LEFT:** SIMON AT WORK PRUNING **INSET FROM TOP:** SWEET CHESTNUT - MARRON DE LYON; MEDLAR ROYAL; ALMOND INGRID (PRUNUS PERSICOIDES INGRID) **BELOW:** CRAETAEGUS SCHRADERIANA