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Seattle's Beacon Food Forest Breaks New Ground in Community Building and Local Food Production

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On a hillside just two and a half miles from downtown Seattle, a forest is taking root. Yet this is no ordinary Pacific Northwest forest of cedar, spruce, pine, and fir. This seven-acre plot along the western edge of Jefferson Park in Seattle's Beacon Hill neighborhood is the site of the nation's first food forest, an exciting project that blends community, environmental stewardship, and local food production.

What is a Food Forest?



A food forest is structured like a woodland ecosystem but substitutes edible trees, shrubs, perennials, and annuals for naturally occurring vegetation. Fruit and nut trees comprise the upper level, with berry shrubs and other lower-growing edible species beneath. Other plants are integrated to provide ecosystem services such as soil improvement and natural pest management. By incorporating all the components of a naturally functioning forest, a food forest can produce high food yields with limited maintenance.

"We're looking at the forest as a polyculture," explains Beacon Food Forest (BFF) co-founder Glenn Herlihy, who manages field work, marketing, and communications for the project. "If we're

successful in maintaining this garden to our wishes we will have a forest ecosystem that structurally mimics a natural forest ecosystem. We hope to not only replenish public lands through habitat but also make this habitat edible to humanity as well."

The History

The original idea for the BFF arose as a final group project that Herlihy and other founders completed for a permaculture design class. The group then sought local support for the project, developing the final design through a series of community design meetings. "We had like 60 people at the first meeting, then it was 90, then 120," says Herlihy. Community interest has continued to grow as the project has developed. Roughly 80 to 100 volunteers show up each month for work parties, and there are also a number of small committees with local residents involved.

The BFF is an all-volunteer community-run organization with funding from a variety of sources. The largest portion comes from the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, whose P-Patch Community Garden Program serves as an umbrella organization for the BFF and has provided staff support, leadership, advice, access to resources, and administrative assistance. "All p-patches have areas that are communal, so one of the things we have brought to the project is ideas on how communities organize themselves to garden together in a communal sense. These might be small orchard or berry patches. The food forest is kind of that on a very grand scale," says Laura Raymond, levy projects coordinator for P-Patch.

In addition to the P-Patch Program, the Department of Neighborhoods also supports the BFF through the Neighborhood Matching Fund, which matches community volunteer hours with dollars. The BFF has received two different matching funds awards. The first supported the community design process and the hiring of a design team, which includes landscape architect Margaret Harrison of Harrison Design and Jenny Pell, a permaculture designer with Permaculture Now! The second award is helping fund some of the project construction, particularly community gathering structures and a tool shed.

Additional support for the project comes through parks and green space levy funds approved by Seattle voters and allotted to the P-Patch Program for the purpose of starting and maintaining neighborhood gardens. "There's this great support on the community level from voters, and on the part of the city government to encourage this kind of creative ecological project, [which] fits within the urban agriculture goals that the city has announced," says Raymond. The land where the food forest is being built is owned by Seattle Public Utilities (SPU), and the Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation is also backing the project.

The Progress

The key goals of the project are "to provide land for a community to grow food, and to offer educational opportunities to the community to learn about food forestry and growing food," explains Herlihy. "It's also a genetic bank of plant material that we will propagate and seed save and transfer as people need it into their own yards and gardens. But the main thing is really

community building around food."



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Beacon Hill is one of Seattle's most diverse neighborhoods, which offers exciting opportunities for community building but also brings an array of challenges. In order to involve as many people as possible, organizers are conducting outreach in numerous languages, making sure to hold meetings on different nights of the week, and alternating work party days between Saturdays and Sundays.

In addition to organizational issues, there are challenges posed by the site itself. "We're talking pretty sloping land, so there's a lot of grading to be done. It's quite expensive to grade this land into a terraced garden," says Herlihy. The plot has excellent exposure to

the west and south, making it possible to grow a wide range of foods from different parts of the world, but there are no utilities onsite. Water must be brought in, as must electricity, which Herlihy says will likely come from wind and solar power.

Still, despite the challenges, construction of the Beacon Food Forest is well underway. The team broke ground on the project in September 2012 and has now finished all the grading work. Currently, volunteers are working on putting in the water system, as well as collaborating with the University of Washington to build a covered area for community gatherings and celebrations. "We're putting in retaining walls," Herlihy says, "and we're planting. We've just put in a beehive area and are building many, many hundreds of feet of forest floor."

Portions of the BFF will consist of traditional P-Patch gardens that will be maintained and harvested by individuals who receive a plot of land in exchange for an annual fee and a commitment to help with overall forest maintenance. Other sections are permaculture areas that will be farmed communally, with the bounty distributed to volunteers involved in maintaining the forest. Organizers hope to have enough of the forest built to hold an opening event in the late fall of this year.

The Community

As the forest begins to take shape, excitement about the project just keeps growing. Herlihy's greatest pride comes from the community involvement. "The people who are leading this project have just been unbelievably persistent and diligent and devoted," he says. "It's just that kind of pride in your community that breaks all kinds of barriers of culture and language. To really see people pulling together to work for the common good of the community - that just blows me away."

Raymond agrees: "I'm hopeful that it will be a chance where neighbors can really get involved, and neighbors who might not otherwise have a chance to get to know each other can really build relationships. Our approach as a program is really around helping people connect through an interest in learning about gardening or a love of gardens. When new people come out and when the relationships expand beyond the garden, that's really exciting."



Annika S. Hipple is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor specializing in travel and sustainability. Her website is www.annikahipple.com.

Photo: Food Forest Sign by [Roland Tanglao](#), Seedball by [PermaCultured](#), planting a food forest by [Keira McPhee](#)

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