

Beneficial plants for a food forest

## Food forest plants for insects/bees

Bees and insects need access to plants that are easy to get the pollen and nectar out of. These tend to be old-fashioned varieties where the flowers are wide open with shorter bodies.

Any flower of the umbrella type is perfect – carrots, fennel and dill are classic examples of these.

Here is a list of beneficial flowers that you can grow in your food forest garden to attract beneficial insects and bees.

Alyssum

Aquilegia

Asteraceae family: asters, sunflowers, zinnias, cosmos and dandelions.

Boraginaceae family: borage, comfrey and phacelia

Brassica family: Broccoli, Cabbage, Mustard, Collards

Calendula

Californian poppy

Carrot family (Apiaceae): fennel, coriander and parsley

Cornflower

Delphinium

Forget-me-not

Foxglove

Fruit trees: apple, pear, citrus and plum trees.

Lamiaceae (or mint) family: basil, bee balm (monarda), catmint, lemon balm

Mint

Lavender

Lobelia

Marigold

Nasturtium

Pansies

Phlox

Rosemary

Sage

Scabiosa

Snapdragons

Sweet peas

Thyme

## Food forest plants as dynamic accumulators

In the world of Permaculture we often find reference to plants known as Dynamic Accumulators.

Basically, this is the idea that certain plants (often deep-rooted ones) will draw up nutrients from the lower layers of the soil, and these nutrients will be stored in the plants' leaves.

When the leaves fall in autumn and winter and are broken down, those stored nutrients are then incorporated into the upper layers of the soil where other plants will benefit from their deposition.

\*Amaranthus Retroflexus

Bee Balm (Monarda spp.) (p)

\*Borage

Birdsfoot Trefoil (Lotus corniculatus) (p)

\*Chickweed (Stellaria media) (p)

\*Chicory (forage feast)

\*Cleavers (Galium aparine)

Coltsfoot (p)

Comfrey (p)

\*Cup Plant (Silphium perfoliatum) (p)

\*Garden Cress

\*Corn Salad

\*Dandelion (Taraxacum officinale var sativa) (p)

\*Lamb's Quarters

\*Meadowsweet (Filipendula ulmaria) (p)

\*Miner's Lettuce

\*Stinging Nettle (p)

\*Plantago major (p)

\*Salad Burnet (p)

Hairy Vetch

\*Yarrow (p)

\* = human edible

(p) = perennial

## Green manure plants

Green manure is the idea that you can grow a lot of biomass on site to feed the soil. Usually it is either chopped and dropped, or lightly dug in just as it starts to flower.

In a permaculture food forest garden, you may choose to let the annual green manures grow and naturally self seed and die, which removes the manual labour required to harvest and dig in a green manure.

It is common practice to sow green manures at the beginning of creating a food forest garden as they help build the soil, as well as out compete the weeds due to their fast growing habits.

My favourite green manures include broad beans or their smaller cousin the tic bean, and buckwheat.

Alfalfa/lucerne\*

Annual Ryegrass

Arugula/Rocket

Buckwheat

Broad Beans/Fava Beans\*  
Field Peas\*  
Hairy Vetch\*  
Mustard  
Oats  
Red Clover\*  
Rye  
Sudangrass  
Teff  
Wheat (Includes Spelt, Triticale)  
White Clover\*

\*Legumes. They add nitrogen to the soil as well as carbon mass by the way of leaves. Common combinations include Rye and Clover, Vetch and Oats and Peas and barley.

## **Good chop and drop plants for a food forest**

Generally speaking, all of the plants on both the dynamic accumulators and green manures make the best chop and drop options for building up the soil in a food forest garden.

Chop and drop is a permaculture idea where you are growing much of the garden's nutrition and mulch in place. All you have to do is go along once or twice (or more) a year and chop the tops off the plants and allow the leaves and stalks to drop to the ground where they act as mulch and will naturally break down and start to feed the soil.

The most common plants to use as chop and drop in a food forest are probably comfrey along with some of the faster growing nitrogen fixing trees like Tree Lucerne (tagasate)

Rhubarb makes a good chop and drop option as you harvest the stalks leave the (non edible) leaves on the ground. They are great because they are so large and prolific.

## **Rhizome blocking plants for stopping weeds as a natural barrier**

If you are like many areas in NZ, you probably have some sort of rhizome based invasive grass or weed right where you want your food forest to grow.

Mulching thickly will probably stop the grass from growing up and through (though only once the mulch is 30cm or more thick does it seem to totally give up trying to grow).

Around the edges of your food forest garden where the invasive grasses and weeds still grow, you can use thickly planted rows of densely rooted plants. These act as a natural rhizome grass barrier to help keep couch, quack, twich and other horrible grasses out.

For the natural rhizome barrier to be effective you will want it about 2 foot wide, and the plants spaced very closely together to allow them to establish their thick root network quickly.

## **Here are some rhizome blocking plants that you can use:**

Sorrel

Turkish rocket

Yarrow

Vetiver grass

Rhubarb

Siberian iris

Mint

Burdock

Muscari bulbs

Chives

Periwinkle - Vinca Major

Japanese Mugwort

Oregano

Thyme

Garlic chives

Goldenrod

Sweet Cicely

Giant Perennial Sunflower

Jerusalem Artichokes

Be aware that many of the rhizome blocking plants can also be invasive themselves. However, they are easier to maintain and contain than the grasses that you are trying to keep out.

Most of them are also beneficial in other ways, so for me the benefits outweigh the negatives for sure.