

A New Food Forest is Growing in Hartford

Cindy Heath

The devastating effects of Hurricane Irene are still felt in the Upper Valley however, at Clifford Park in Hartford, a silt covered patch of ground left by the massive storm is soon to become a productive food forest. The Resilient Hartford Committee is collaborating with local soil and permaculture consultants and area residents to establish a community-managed space teeming with healthy soil microbes and a succession of medicinal herbs, native fruit and nut trees, and home-grown vegetables, all amidst a thriving forest.



partners and staff from several town commissions and the parks and recreation department.

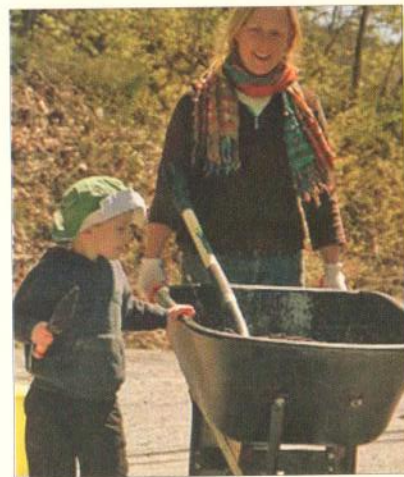
Clifford Park was chosen because of its proximity to surrounding neighborhoods, and residents living in the area of the park are invited to participate in the design process and help create the vision for the food forest by attending soil biodiversity, permaculture, and design workshops. A soil test has been conducted, an area for the food forest selected, and the design process has begun. In theory, says Kye, food forests are self-sustaining. “The idea is that the food forest will be low-maintenance because the ground covers, fruit, and vegetable plantings support the health of the larger forest.”

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“Grow More, Waste Less,” says that a complementary goal of the project is to ultimately restore the riparian buffer along the White River that was damaged by Hurricane Irene. “The project serves two purposes: restoring the land and growing food. I love the idea of a community space that is filled with food both for humans and the critters that will live there: the animals, birds and bugs.”

One unique but important component of a food forest is to honor the agricultural and land stewardship practices of the Abenaki people who came here before white settlers. A working relationship with the Winter Center for Indigenous Traditions in Norwich has inspired the group to acknowledge that the project is located on the ancient grounds of the Wobitekw Odanak [White River Village] once populated by members of the Abenaki Nation, and collaboration with local Native American residents is evolving.

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vegetables, all amidst a thriving forest.



Kye Cochran, Chair of the committee, explains the genesis of this project. "Resilient Hartford was formed 6 years ago in response to Hurricane Irene to help the community respond to future disasters. The idea of a food forest came about when Dylan Keiss, head of Parks Maintenance, suggested a fruit orchard or similar food growing initiative for areas in parks that were underutilized." In subsequent conversations, the Committee decided to engage Cat Buxton, a soil health and composting consultant, and Karen Ganey, a Norwich-based permaculture consultant, to guide the process. The committee is diverse and includes residents along with several community

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Just what is a food forest? According to Chelsea Green Publishing's explanation of a new book *The Community Food Forest Handbook*, by Catherine Bukowski and John Munsell, a food forest is an integrated ecosystem that mimics plants that we see in nature while providing organic food and connecting community members. Originally conceived to address food security issues in urban settings, food forests are trending across the country in communities large and small. One key feature of a food forest is the ability of the plants to support each other and change and adapt over time, creating a long-term sustainable land use that combines forests, agriculture, and people.

The Resilient Hartford committee has organized the project in phases, starting with soil building, followed by laying out the forest pathways, design and species selection, and finally an initial planting of fruit trees and "guilds," combinations of plants at the base of each tree that support the tree's individual ecosystem. Cat Buxton of

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Community input has yielded suggestions of fruits and vegetables to the committee and consultants including, peach trees, paw paws, and persimmons, as well as raspberries, blackberries, and currants. Karen Ganey of Permaculture Solutions notes that the ecologically driven design will likely include culinary and medicinal herbs as well as locally cultivated hickory and butternut trees. "Harnessing the power of the community in the process is important. We want the food forest to be inclusive and accessible to all people, and to accommodate people with different interests including providing food and medicinal plants free for the picking. It's amazing how companion planting creates a kind of reciprocity with many different plants working together to support each other," says Karen.

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Another aspect of the food forest is the intersection of social justice, climate change, and regenerative agriculture. A new initiative involving area high school students, Regeneration Corps, has selected Clifford Park as one of the sites that will be hosting students from Thetford, Sharon, and South Royalton, with Hartford students possibly joining in future work parties. Vermonters know a thing or two about resilience, and the food forest is yet another creative response to managing the impacts of hurricanes, and anything else that may come along. ■

To learn more or get involved in the Hartford Food Forest, contact Kye Cochran, chair of the Resilient Hartford Committee at kye@uppervalleyfood.coop. To donate wood chips, sawdust, corrugated cardboard, compost, or manure to help build up the food forest soil biomass, contact Matt Osborn, Hartford town planner at 802-295-3075 or mosborn@hartford-vt.org.