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Forest Gardening: Choosing Smaller Trees & Shrubs

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In my [last blog](#) I described how a forest garden is designed to mimic a small woodland or forest comprising up to seven 'layers'. These are usually made up of edible, medicinal or useful plants, trees, shrubs, climbers, herbs, ground cover and bulbs or tubers. I also explained what kind of trees you can choose to make up the tallest part of the canopy.

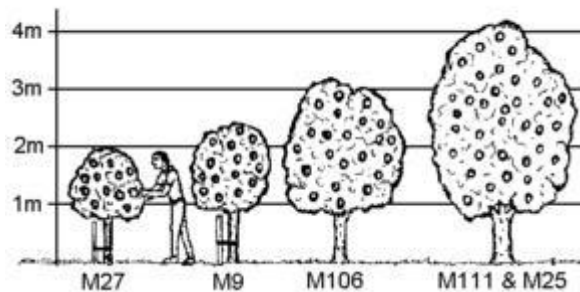
I suggested Mulberry, as one option. The variety Illinois Everbearing is our variety of choice because it is almost seedless, hardy, with long yields though the summer and it fruits relatively quickly in its growing life. Since writing the blog, my two mulberry trees have come into fruit. Whereas a friend's mulberry planted like an ornamental in a more conventional garden has been raided by the birds, mine are nesting at the back of my forest garden, peaking out above the lower trees in its own eco-system, another advantage of my semi-wild forest garden.

The Next Layer:

Small Trees & Large Shrubs

In a cooler temperate climate more careful spacing of trees is important because we lack light. If you are reading this blog in warmer climes like Florida you can cram in far more trees and shrubs but the principles are the same, just the vertical 'stacking' of biomass within the space can be more intense.

Trees of course can be pruned but I favour choosing the right rootstock for smaller trees rather than pruning trees on vigorous rootstocks back every year. The best rootstock for smaller apple and pear trees is M9 and MM106 which are semi-dwarfing. Both were developed in the UK at [East Malling Research Station](#) in Kent.



The M9 reaches a height of 8 to 10 ft (2.4 to 3.0 m), coming into fruit after 3-4 years, reaching full capacity of 50 to 65 pounds (23 to 29 kg) after 5 to 6 years.

MM106 is a little more vigorous and reaches a height of 14 to 18 ft (4.3 to 5.5 m). Trees on this stock begin producing fruit within three to four years, and yield 90 to 110 pounds (41 to 50 kg) after some seven or eight years. It is better on poorer soil. Apples and pears form the basis of this layer of our forest garden and are selected for their preference to our soil type, climate, taste, capacity to cross pollinate and also to crop sequentially throughout the harvesting season. The idea is to try and spread out your harvest as long as possible with earlies, mids and lates rather than plant tree crops that all arrive at once.



Other trees in this layer are damsons, plums and gages, especially luscious green and golden gages. Our favourite is Oulin's Golden Gage, a stunning fruit that tastes simply heavenly.

In my forest garden I also have medlar, an unusual tree, originally from Turkey, that produces fruits that can be made into jams, chutneys and wine. The fruit is left to 'blet' on the tree (i.e. until after the first frost which breaks down the fibres and makes it ripen). We also grow Nepalese Pepper, a beautiful tree that produces a delicately spiced corn that can be dried and ground up for the table.

Another smaller tree is the cobnut of which there are a number of varieties. They produce bigger nuts than our native hazels and we grow them as small standards which makes them easier to harvest. They do have a tendency to sucker which we discourage by cutting the suckers back to leave the energy for the tree itself.



Other smaller trees we have are Chinese Dogwood, Siberian Pea Tree (nitrogen fixer), a truffle inoculated Hazel, plus some large shrubs like josterberry and worcesterberry. We grow mostly standard varieties, but you can select more unusual trees and the Agroforestry Trust's website will give you some great ideas. As I said in my last blog, however, always choose trees, shrubs and plants that work well in your climate and soil. Don't for instance try to grow acid loving plants on alkaline soil, it usually isn't worth the effort.

Celebrating the Local & Heritage Varieties

Look out for heritage varieties and those that may be local to your area. We have one apple tree whose recorded history goes back several hundred years and comes from the next village three miles away – now that's localization. These more uncommon varieties may not have the commercial qualities that are required by the supermarkets but they are often extremely tasty. Think of your garden as an opportunity for biological preservation and celebrate the local, the heritage, and non-commercial. I love my old varieties with their charming names. They are resonant of another time when we lived without oil and ate local produce. I have no doubt that time will come again.

Read more: <http://www.motherearthnews.com/organic-gardening/forest-gardening-choosing-smaller-trees--shrubs.aspx#ixzz2XikDqsZ0>