



Observing Nature

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Observing nature

The most beneficial thing you can do as a gardener before establishing anew or improving an existing garden or food forest is to observe nature. This is truly where you should spend at least 50% of your time in planning. By observing nature, documenting & collecting data, you are getting a first hand view at how everything naturally fluctuates. This will be key in figuring out the most effective way to establish your garden or food forest so that everything you incorporate flows with the grain of nature rather than against nature. I recommend observing your property for at least 4 full seasons or a full calendar year before establishing anew garden or improving an already established garden. Don't worry in the meantime you can fill that void of gardening by growing perennials in pots & learning to compost for later use. So what are we looking for when observing a potential area for a garden?

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Topography

What surface features does it have to offer as in mountains, valleys, hills, rivers, creeks, wetlands, etc. Are there slopes or is the land semi or fully flat & predominantly leveled. Why does this matter? All of these elements play key roles in how water drains onto or off the land. If the land floods often you'll want to consider adding in proper drainage to prevent root rot within your plants. It also really gives you a good indication on where you potentially may want to start your garden or food forest.

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Soil Does the soil appear to be visibly healthy? Is it bare & compacted? Compacted dead soil means more work and planning ahead to ensure it is ready for planting.

Testing & learning the soil composition is also crucial in deciding what amendments may need to be applied prior to planting.

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Erosion

Is there beyond natural erosion happening in this area & do you plan to improve it? Has erosion caused severe leaching of soil nutrients & structure? This all matters as observing this will prevent you from having to put in continuous work to fix a problem that will just continue to happen.

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Precipitation

Does this area receive adequate amounts of rain during the growing season? Does it drain well as mentioned in topography? These elements matter so that when you decide on plants you can ensure those plants actually thrive in the conditions in which you are planting.

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Natives

What native plants are currently thriving in this area? These plants will be crucial in succeeding in establishing a new garden / food forest with the least amount of unnatural future interventions which actually results in less work for you. If certain edible or beneficial plants are already thriving in this area it is best to replicate and incorporate that likeness for your land. This gives you the best shot of everything coming to balance and essentially taking care of each other. Once again making less work for you in the future.

Invasives Discovering whether plants are natives or invasives on your land can help you

formulate a solid plan to prevent further growth of those plants in your area. This also helps the overall health of a natural ecosystem. By helping to keep invasives from spreading and to a minimum population, you can ensure your native plants have the best opportunity to thrive & continue living for many years to come.

Invasive plants can also attract insects & wildlife that typically would not otherwise be in your area. Both of which could absolutely be a threat to your land & its natural processes you are trying to mimic and preserve.

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Wind Believe it or not wind plays a huge role in ensuring you have a decent yield or harvest. Year after year gardeners report tall vegetables such as corn and okra being blown over from thunderstorm wind damage. By observing your most common & strongest thunderstorm wind directions during the active growing season you can establish your garden in a fashion to where the least amount of wind is blowing full force onto your tallest more sensitive plants. You can also use this information to plan a layout or design this area that places your tallest plants near a wind breaker such as trees or a building. Obviously keep in mind those plants' sunlight requirements so that you are not placing them in an area that does not receive adequate amounts of sunlight.. Just like too much wind can harm different plants, too little of wind can lessen the yield of other plants such as tomatoes or corn which need wind for pollination or what we call wind driven pollination. Mild winds also help build stronger stems & stalks as a plant grows from a seedling to a fully matured planting bearing fruits or vegetables. .

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Climate Start by observing and documenting your predicted last spring, and first fall frost

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dates and compare it to the frost dates you actually experience. This information will be crucial to planting any annuals. Knowing these two dates will also give you an approximate amount of days in your entire growing season. This will tell you if you have long enough growing season to grow certain varieties of plants.

Knowing your plant hardiness zone is key to knowing what perennials you may be able to incorporate into your land. These zones are determined by decades worth of collected data for the lowest average temps during winter. The plant hardiness zone map can be found on the USDA website and can also help you determine what perennials will survive your winters. You can also look into & document the average number of days that you experience extreme heat or extreme colds. This will better prepare you for those days ahead to offer certain plants a bit of shade when needed during the summer's hottest days, or a bit of insulation when needed for those extremely cold frosts.

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Sunlight

You'll want to plant according to a plant's requirements for sunlight hours. The amount of sunlight hours a plant receives is directly correlated with how well a plant will thrive. Most plant care cards state what plants require but are oftentimes not clear on what that amount of sunlight actually means. For instance full sun refers to the plant receiving 6-8 hours of direct sunlight daily. Several plants will not tolerate 12 full hours of direct sunlight especially on the hottest days of the year. There are also many shade loving plants that do not do well in full sun conditions. When plant care cards state partial sun, this translates to either 4-6 hours of direct sunlight, or 6-8 hours of indirect sunlight.

Irrigation How simple or hard is it to properly irrigate this area if needed in a time of drought? Is there possibly a more natural way to irrigate this area to prevent disturbing anything? Is there an already established well? A natural spring or creek that can contribute to the land without disturbing any natural flows. This could possibly be where a lot of people put in the most effort and leg work before establishing a new garden/food forest, or maintaining one. This eliminates the need to panic last minute over figuring out irrigation solutions in times of need. Plant cell damage can happen pretty quickly in dry conditions. Even well established plants with large deep root systems that have lacked rainwater for several weeks can be vulnerable to cell damage. For young tender plants it can happen rather rapidly causing the plant to die.

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Once you've spent your time collecting this data over a span of a year you will seemingly already have a good idea on how things fluctuate on this land. You'll also have a starting point on how you can start to successfully incorporate the plants and features you would like to add that contribute to the land's overall health but also benefit you in several ways. Take your time during this observation as it will undoubtedly save you time in the future. Obtain or draw your own topographic map of your land to better help you document what you observe. Save this document to reference when planning your layout for your garden, landscape, orchard, or food forest. Try to stick to incorporating unnatural processes to a minimum as much as possible. Nature is completely uncontrollable. When adding in a ton of unnatural processes you will undoubtedly run into issues where things will need constant repair. You also will not know the long lasting effects of these unnatural processes until years later when it may be impossible to reverse their effects which could quite possibly be all your hard work, plants, and animal life on your land. Even after spending a year's worth of observing and documenting you may still want to speak with

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locals in your area that have been lifelong residents, or even your local county coop extension office. Ask as many questions as possible and document everything you can.

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