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Sustainable Solano helps build food forests in Vacaville yards



Volunteer Tammie Little of Fairfield spreads mulch at a Sustainable Solano food forest installation in Vacaville Saturday. Food forests are low-maintenance gardens that minimize the need for hose water and are reliant on other aspects of nature such as sunshine and rainwater. (Nick Sestanovich/The Reporter)

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Through growing issues such as inflation and drought, many are thinking of ways to save money on produce and conserve water. One concept to ameliorate these issues is the growing trend of food forests.

Food forests are a low-maintenance form of gardening that is less dependent on watering and more dependent on plants relying on one another, as well as natural elements such as sunshine, for growth. They have been popping up throughout the U.S. for the last few years, and now there are two in one neighborhood in Vacaville alone with installation on a third commencing this past Saturday.

Sustainable Solano, with a grant from Solano County Water Agency, hosted one of its periodic food forest installations Saturday, which utilized volunteers to transform a decaying lawn in a front yard on Copper Way into a garden of fruit trees and pollinators atop a bed of soil and wood chips.

“It’s organically coming into a neighborhood expansion,” Sustainable Solano Program Manager Nicole Newell said of the three community food forests. “We’re looking at how to conserve water, so we’ve got roof water that’s diverted into in-ground swales, which are basically just ditches filled with wood chips, to allow all that roof water to spread and seep into the landscape.”

Newell said the wood chips, which can be obtained from any tree cutting service, help to build organic matter. The gardens are also surrounded by fruit trees, bearing such produce as apricots and mandarins, and flowers.

“It’s a group of plants that work to benefit each other,” she said. “The pollinator plants will pollen the butterflies and the bees, and that will help to pollinate the fruit trees, which will provide more fruit. Then there’s nitrogen fixers, which fix nitrogen in the soil. Plants need nitrogen, so each plant has their function.”

In addition to providing fresh fruit, Newell said the gardens can serve as replacements for ordinary lawns, which she emphasized can take an average of 70,000 gallons of water for upkeep.



Sustainable Solano project designer Scott Dodson, left, and volunteer Duane Murphy connect a downspout to a swale to catch roof water to pump into the garden in a newly installed food forest in Vacaville. (Nick Sestanovich/The Reporter)

“A mature food forest takes about 20,000 once it’s established,” she said. “It’s a huge water savings.”

Newell said Sustainable Solano was contacted by the home’s owner, Mike McGuire, who saw a sign for the agency at a food forest in his neighborhood and wanted to do something similar for his front yard. McGuire said his front lawn at the time was “ugly.”

“I couldn’t see the value of watering in a drought, let alone putting in new sod,” he said.

McGuire also said weeds would sprout up whenever it rained, so he began looking at alternatives and liked what he saw in his neighbor Winston’s yard. So far, he was already impressed with the work the volunteers were doing.

“It’s much improved over the bare lot we had,” he said.

Carla Murphy, who lives one street down from McGuire, had her food forest installed three years ago after learning about Sustainable Solano when she was doing web searches on planting in her backyard. This led to her attending Sustainable Solano workshops and applying to truncates her yard into a food

Homeowners are allowed to name their food forests. McGuire named his “Orchid Lily,” and Murphy named hers “Mangia,” which is Italian for “Eat up.”



An example of a completed food forest on Carla Murphy’s front lawn. (Nick Sestanovich/The Reporter)

Murphy said she hopes more people will be inspired to replace their lawns with food forests.

“There’s food security when you’re growing your own,” she said.

Newell said food forests are beneficial not only during droughts but storms as well.

“We did a site in Suisun City, and right after we got all that crazy amount of rain, there was standing water in his (the homeowner’s) neighbor’s yard, and his yard had no standing water. These gardens are designed to hold the water and not have standing water into the landscape.”

The event brought out plenty of volunteers to help spread the wood chips around, mix in the soil and do other activities. Akilah Tutt of Fairfield learned about it through EventBrite and decided to take part, as she enjoys being outside planting.

“I hope that more people do something like this,” she said. “Because of everything that happened with corona, now’s the best time to learn how to plant in your own gardens and to replenish the land.”

“The world has got so many challenges,” she said. “Every installation, there’s these moments where it’s like, ‘This is the world I want to leave my kids behind.’ We’re working together to build something and do something outside.”

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