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Food Forests Green Solano

by Aleta George | May 14, 2023





Figs, oranges, chickens, and flood mitigation all in your suburban front yard?

The group Sustainable Solano is promoting the idea of “food forest gardens” to pump up local food and climate resilience efforts. This spring, they hosted open gardens that they helped plan and plant, offering visitors a chance to find out just what a food forest is: a garden layered like a natural forest that includes fruit-bearing trees and edible plants. One more garden tour is planned for June 3.

Greyhawk Grove was one of 14 food forests in Benicia and Vallejo open to visitors on Earth Day. It explodes across a steep front yard on a rural street in Benicia and illustrates how a garden can be an extension of the people living in the house.

Best friends Nam Nguyen and Natalie DeNicholas graciously welcomed visitors by picking pea pods and handing them out, sharing eggs from their Easter-egger chickens, and answering questions about plants, such as the blooming wonga wonga hedge on one side of their driveway. Nguyen and her

two kids, Perry, 12, and Graham, 9, live in the main house. DeNicholas lives in the converted garage with her daughter, Persephone, who is 12.



DeNicholas, Nguyen and Persephone. Photo: Aleta George.

Beyond the front-lawn with Benicia's Greyhawk Grove. Photo: Aleta George.

The young people of the house sold lemonade and cucumber-mint-limeade on the front sidewalk, and Perry displayed a homemade, poster-sized map of the garden featuring sections named after



members of the family,
including Perry's poppies.

*Map of
the
garden.*

Nine years ago, Nguyen planted the garden, dug two swales, and installed a laundry-to-landscape greywater system with the help of Sustainable Solano and volunteers. Greywater irrigates the Pink Lady apple, fig, Little Cado avocado, and citrus trees. It took four years for the garden to mature enough to share bounty with neighbors, says Nguyen.

"The issue now is not getting things to grow but keeping the paths clear," she adds.



Along with its fruit, greens, and herbs, Greyhawk Grove has benches for sitting, framed poetry for reflection, and spring bulbs for cheer. “Winter is my sad time, so Nam planted the bulbs for me,” says DeNicholas, as a hummingbird fluttered to an apple blossom. “We are aware of mental health in this house, and it’s nice to have a calm place in the garden.”

Two weeks after the Benicia and Vallejo tour, Sustainable Solano hosted the Fairfield-Suisun City Demonstration Food Forest Tour. *El Bosquecito*, or Little Forest, was one of five gardens open to visitors. The garden is located at the southern end of Suisun City, within view of the boat launching ramp on the Suisun Slough.

Homeowners Edlin Simental and Jonny Gomez were aware of the risks of living near a waterfront with sea level rise when they bought their house in 2021. But Gomez, who grew up in Suisun, and Simental, from Los Angeles, love the lifestyle of living by the water and were willing to take a risk on their “forever home.” The front and back yards needed work, however, and when the couple learned about Sustainable Solano’s



program to help landowners transform their yards using the principles of permaculture, they signed up. Given their location near the marsh, Sustainable Solano and designer John Davenport helped them plan and plant a food forest garden with flood mitigation in mind.

Photo: Aleta George.



Like most of the houses in the neighborhood, theirs was built at ground level with traditional landscaping that sloped toward the house. With the help of Sustainable Solano and volunteers, they removed the lawn and dug a crescent-shaped swale that runs the length of the front yard. Three more swales extend from the crescent to the sidewalk, each of them three-feet deep, three-feet wide, and three-feet long. Wood chips pack the swales that serve as paths. Lavender, California poppies, borage, and yarrow burst across the food forest's lower layer, with persimmon, cherry, lime, lemon, and peach trees beginning to bear fruit and provide shade.



*Little forest and floodplain. Photo:
Aleta George.*

During this winter's heavy rains, several of their neighbors' yards turned into ponds, but El Bosquecito absorbed the rainfall and the runoff from the roof,




and the swales provided a pathway to the tree collar, a type of Brassica with a single stalk that can reach five-feet tall.

Simental and Gomez kayak and paddleboard in the slough and enjoy daily walks in the marsh. “Being so close to the marsh it’s almost rude not to have space for the wildlife,” says Gomez, who recently earned a permaculture design certification.

Sustainable Solano is offering one more tour of demonstration food forests in Vacaville on Saturday, June 3. The self-guided tour will highlight an array of gardens, each unique, and each demonstrating that a food forest is more than the sum of its parts.

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Aleta George

writes about the nature, history and culture of California. Trained as a geographer at San Francisco State University, her passion is to look for the intersection of influences regarding a place or an event. She is a frequent contributor to Estuary News Group and Bay Area Monitor. Her work has also been published in Smithsonian, High Country News, Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times, and

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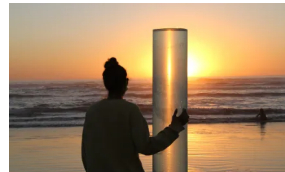
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