



From suburban lawn to food forest

Ellen Eskildsen has created a Garden of Eden in Auckland with her backyard food forest.

WORDS & PHOTOS GRETCHEN CARROLL



1. The different layers of Ellen's food forest keep the family fed. Note the 'Rainbow Valley' pawpaw in the background. **2.** Ellen checking on her seedlings in her workshop's propagation area. **3.** The hammock where Ellen relaxes in her food forest, under the shade of the trees. **4.** Ellen likes to incorporate art in the garden, such as this sculpture, to create areas of interest.

This summer, Ellen Eskildsen plans to be 'forest bathing' on her hammock. The Auckland-based gardener loves to spend time in the food forest she has created at her family's suburban property.

Sixteen years ago, Ellen and her husband moved their family into their St Johns home, set on about a third of an acre. Back then, the garden was all grass lawns with borders, which meant constant mowing. Ellen started thinking about a new garden style for the property.

"After reading Kay Baxter's 'Design Your Own Forest Garden' booklet about eight years ago, I had an 'aha' moment," she recalls.

Ellen has always been interested in organic gardening. Her parents were Dutch immigrants and her dad was a keen gardener who grew enough produce for a family of six.

Based on permaculture principles, food forests follow the natural layers of a forest (tall canopy trees, lower layer canopy, shrubs, herbaceous layer, ground cover, vines and root crops).

SOIL HEALTH COMES FIRST

"The food forest is meant to be based on a system of vertical lines, as well as horizontal, making the most of all that space," says Ellen. It also factors in succession growth and planning for the different seasons.

Food forests start with the soil's health, says Ellen. Her garden has heavy clay soil, and early on she did a soil test and added nutrients.

"By amending the soil, you shouldn't have to use fertiliser. I have established compost bins under the fruit trees, which I lift up after a year and spread around the compost. I also spread mulch around and follow the 'chop and drop' mantra of permaculture."



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1. Ellen collecting one of the daily half-dozen eggs her chickens lay in their new coop, which Ellen built for \$20. 2. Ellen makes these birdhouses from recycled materials to sell on her courses.

Everything on site she tries to recycle in a closed loop, so what is produced on the land, stays on the land in some form. She also collects water from the roof to use in the garden.

Ellen believes chickens are essential for a food forest, and this year she made a chicken coop and tunnel for their five chickens using leftover building materials, recycled tools and pallets. It costs her all of \$20 and the hens are delighted.

THEMED AREAS

The garden has various areas – one being a rain garden incorporating plants she chose for their tolerance to wet feet, such as banana palms, alocasias, flaxes, kawakawa and astelias in a part of the property that used to flood. When the storms hit Auckland in early 2023, that area didn't suffer because those plants were able to absorb the water. A wooden fence on the other side did fall down, however, so Ellen and the neighbouring families have decided that instead, they're going to create a porous fence of passion fruit vine and share the produce.

There's also a patio by the house hosting pots of herbs and covered with a grapevine. Adjacent is her Japanese garden area, which was one of the first areas she created. There is only one small patch of lawn left, situated near the patio, which Ellen is in the process of changing to terracing. She does all the terracing, fencing, retaining walls and building herself, learning skills along the way, and has completed a permaculture course and an earthworks course.

Ellen says it's hard to achieve the high-up top canopy of the food forest in urban areas, but in her

garden's case, there are tall cabbage trees and loquat trees growing in the rain garden section.

There are 35 different types of fruit trees on the property, and a large vegetable patch where the family harvest broccoli, cavolo nero and bok choy, to name only a few.

Ellen has noticed that since establishing the food forest, there's been an increase in bird and insect life, and the garden has been recognised by the Moths and Butterflies of New Zealand Trust.

"Many beneficial insects are attracted by plants such as borage, and this is essential for a food forest," says Ellen.

Ellen has a separate workshop where she propagates seedlings and makes a variety of things, such as birdhouses, out of recycled materials.

LABOUR OF LOVE

Ellen's other love is art, so she includes her own artworks in the garden and likes to make sculptures out of branch cuttings. "I love to create groups of colour using different plants and art in the garden."

While her family enjoys eating the produce, the garden is her "labour of love". Ellen gave up work a year ago and has turned the garden into her full-time job. She hosts tours for garden clubs and playcentres, runs courses that teach the basic principles of permaculture and food forests, and creates garden designs for urban areas. For more information visit stjohnsfoodforest.com

"I want to give people inspiration for their suburban backyard," says Ellen, "and give them an idea of what you can grow in this environment."

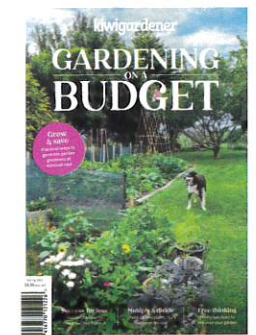


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