

The Subsistence Gardener

PLANTING TREES

The three questions that one asks oneself when planting trees are:

Which trees should I plant? Where should I plant them? How do I look after them?

More often than not, one gets the answer to at least one of these questions wrong, and, as a result, the trees that one plants do not have a very long life, which is a shame for all concerned. **The subsistence gardener** can turn to basic principles for guidance, which increases the chances of success.

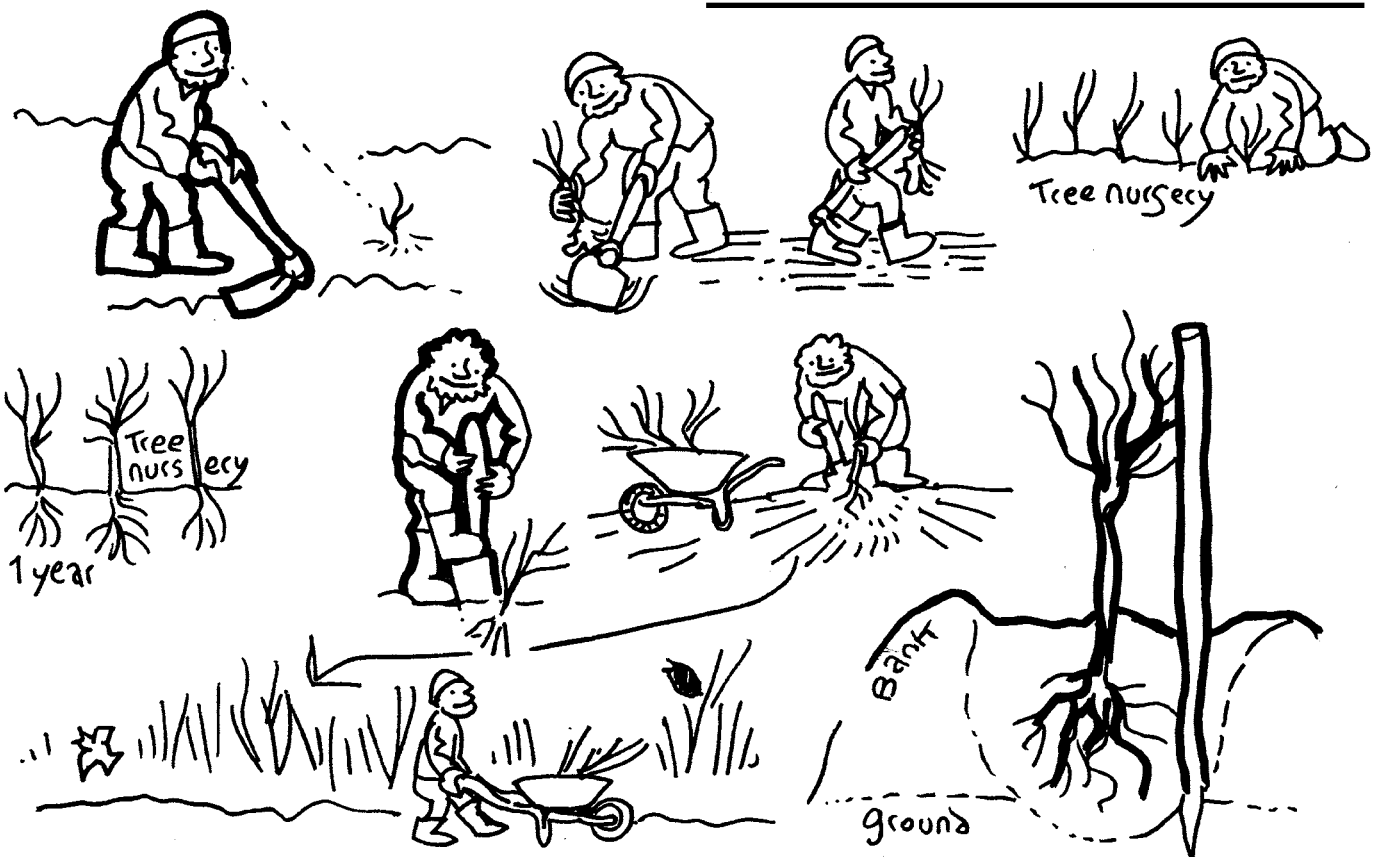
Which Trees to Plant, and Where to Plant Them

The aim of the subsistence garden is for you to be able to meet some of your basic needs directly from nature. Today, we are accustomed to assume that this simply means food - partly because the use of fossil fuels has become second nature to us, and we no longer think of the garden as a source of the energy that we need in our daily lives. We need fuel for heating, and cooking, and for most craft and manufacturing processes; any form of reasonably comfortable life in most parts of the world, is not viable without some form of energy or another. If one is taking the information about global warming seriously, and if one is not convinced that high-tech windmills, solar panels, and nuclear power plants are the solution- then wood from the garden becomes the natural place to turn to for renewable energy and is fully consistent with subsistence gardening.

In practical terms, this means having as many trees for coppicing as possible. Fortunately coppiced trees are compatible with other elements of the garden, and it is fairly straightforward to lay out a plan for the garden that includes enough trees to keep you supplied with fuel, whilst still having space for cereals, vegetables, and fruit trees.

For example, if half a hectare is divided up into 700m² plots, each surrounded by coppiced trees, you could have a total of up to four-hundred trees – ample for your heating and cooking needs – and you would have well-defined areas around which to rotate your crops, grow vegetables, have a meadow, etc.

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When you study the topography of a piece of land – its orientation, how sloping it is, if it has wetter areas and drier areas, or if parts of it are stony – then, generally, the most logical way to divide it up into sub-plots becomes clear. Often traces of old banks and boundaries can be detected, and these can be followed.

Ideally, your young banks should be stocked with local, self-seeded trees. Trees found growing up in semi-wild areas, on verges, on the edges of woods, etc. can either be transplanted directly into their new growing position, or grown on for a year or two in an area set aside as a tree nursery.

Once you have your network of coppiced banks, it becomes easier to see where other trees can fit in. Generally trees do better when growing on a bank, even a small one, because the surface roots get more air; this is particularly true for fruit trees, which do well growing amongst coppices on a bank.

There is no super-quick way of producing wood for fuel; coppicing is the most efficient, because it leaves the tree roots intact, and the tree grows back vigorously after cutting, but it still takes a while for the root system to become established. If things go well, the trees can be cut seven or eight years after planting, the new growth will grow back straighter, and the second cut (another eight or nine years later) should yield a reasonable harvest (which will continue to increase with each subsequent cut).

Fruit trees grown on dwarf root stocks will give a crop

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in a shorter time frame. They can be planted amongst the young coppices, and will be a productive element on the bank in its early years. Fruit trees on more vigorous root stocks take longer to mature, and are a more long-term project. Time can be taken to work out which varieties work best in your area, and you can grow your own root stocks from seed. A single large apple tree, for example, can give enough eating apples to last a whole year, and, therefore, you do not need many such trees. If it takes a few years to work out the best site for these trees, it will be time well spent. The same applies to other trees, that may one day be useful for timber. They also grow well on banks amongst coppiced trees, and provide another sort of habitat in the garden, and will attract different birds and insects from the smaller coppiced trees.

Caring for Your Trees

When the trees are part of a productive garden, their care becomes automatic. Vegetation on the banks can be cut for mulch – allowing more light to reach the trees when they are young, and the trees can be pruned and trimmed to stop them encroaching on crop areas. Barriers erected to keep deer and other animals off the crops will also protect the trees.

Conclusion

The life cycle of trees is measured in centuries, but the time scale that we operate on in the modern world is, at the most, decades. This means that, nowadays, it is very rare for any tree-related initiative to reach its fulfilment. Planting in accordance with the principles of subsistence gardening does not provide any guarantee that your trees will be cared for after you are gone, but at least you will have bequeathed an invitation to the gardener who comes after you to maintain a degree of independence from the fossil-fuel economy.

