

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

A forest garden

On a recent trip to Totnes, Erica and I had the opportunity to visit a forest garden on the Dartington Estate. Martin Crawford set up the garden on a two acre site more than 30 years ago, and is a pioneer of the forest garden movement, in which trees, shrubs and perennials are mixed to mimic the structure of a natural forest. The aim is to be sustainable (particularly in a changing climate), productive and require low maintenance. We joined a group in one of the few open areas in the garden, where he was handing round the seeds from a large patch of sweet cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*), which had a lovely aniseed flavour which apparently makes a wonderful liqueur.

We then proceeded to more shady areas of the garden. A forest garden is, by definition, a shady garden – in our temperate climate at least. (In tropical regions, where they originated, there are much higher levels of sunlight which can penetrate the lower levels of planting). One of the first trees Martin pointed out was the Sichuan pepper (*Zanthoxylum simulans*), the seed pods of which are more pungent than black pepper. Other tree edibles included sweet chestnut, quince, medlars and of course apples, pears and plums. At the lower level there were large clumps of Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum x hybridum*), a great shade-lover, whose emerging shoots can be cut and used like asparagus – who knew?

Martin talked a lot about ground cover on the lowest level of the forest garden, which forms a living mulch and helps to keep maintenance down. A key plant was the wild strawberry. Martin used to grow the yellow-flowering variety because it was evergreen, but it had tasteless berries and now, due to climate change, he can grow the more familiar white-flowering variety with its tasty fruit, which remains evergreen all year in the balmy south-west. The ground cover means very little weeding is necessary, mainly removing tree seedlings and bramble, most of which is just chopped down and left where it falls as a mulch.

There are large clumps of different species of bamboo in the garden, which Martin keeps under control by cutting the emerging shoots which stick out of the ground like knives. These are then stripped and used in cooking. Bamboo is also a very productive plant, its canes coming in a variety of sizes, and the stripping from the shoots can be used for twine.

Martin maintained that there are lots of plant crops which tolerate shade but many were not well known. Only perennial vegetables are grown, such as perennial kale; the more familiar annual vegetables need full sun and are high maintenance – some forest gardens do factor in more open clearings to allow for growing annual vegetables. As he said, no two forest gardens are the same!

Pollinator plant of the month – Autumn olive

The autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*) is a shrub which we saw growing in the forest garden, with small, fragrant, tubular creamy-yellow flowers borne in clusters. It was buzzing with bees on our visit, and has the RHS 'Plants for Pollinators' accolade. Once pollinated, the flowers turn into silvery fruit which ripens to red in the autumn. Once ripened, they are, apparently, sweet and juicy with an acidic edge. Regarded as a noxious weed in parts of the USA, it does not display any invasive behaviour in the UK, according to the Agro Forestry Research Trust. The bees certainly liked it!

Wild bee of the month – Blue mason bee

Also seen on our Totnes trip, this time in a small front garden on a patch of wallflowers, was a blue mason bee (*Osmia caerulea*). The females have large, box-shaped heads and a blue metallic lustre to the abdomen which gives the bee its name. Males are bronze with pale yellow hairs. A solitary bee, each queen works alone (rather than as part of a colony) to build a nest and lay her eggs. Like all mason bees, they are so named because they use mud like a masonry material to construct their nests, which can be cavities in masonry, holes in sandy cliffs or hollow plant stems. A single egg is laid in each mud-sealed cell, and provisioned with nectar and pollen to sustain it when it hatches into a larva, and the adult bee emerges the following spring.

We were thrilled to see a blue mason bee visiting our cob bricks in Farnham Library Gardens, which we had made with children in a workshop at the Library. It involved mixing clay, sand, straw and water, which was then shaped into bricks – a gloriously messy exercise which the children loved!

