

Project name: Edible Food Forest at the Topsham Public Library

Norm Steele Memorial Seed Grant Proposal
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Applicant name: Sarah Wolpow (Cumberland County MG class of '09)*

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Organization: Topsham Public Library; 25 Foreside Road, Topsham, ME 04086

Library contact: Bernardo Feliciano; 725-1727

Project summary: To add selected plants into the existing forest edge to create a “food forest” of edible plants.

Background:

The Topsham Public Library sits in an idyllic spot above the Androscoggin River in in Topsham. Currently the library building swims in a large lawn, with some landscaping, and a wide forested border with trails leading down to the river. The library is slowly developing this space into ecologically sound and educationally interesting gardens.

The food forest would add to a number of already existing projects on the ground.

Several years ago, a large perennial bed was installed outside the children’s section, with a focus on plants that would appeal to kids (e.g., lots of color, bird, bee, & butterfly attractors, scented plants and foliage, fuzzy plants, interesting seed pods, etc).

Last year, volunteers built a “hugel bed.” “Hugel is the German word for “mound.” The idea is to put down a layer of woody debris (decaying logs are perfect), add any and all available organic matter (we used coffee grinds & chaff, compost, leaves, and chicken coop bedding), cover with newspaper & straw, and then cut in holes and plant. Over time, the decaying wood holds water in the bed like a sponge, and becomes the basis for spectacular growth of beneficial soil organisms. In this bed we planted patty pan squash - the plants were astoundingly productive and were barely watered or weeded for the entire summer. Produce was donated to local hunger relief organizations, and given free to patrons, along with some educational information about hugel mounds.

This background is just to let you know that the food forest project is building on an active volunteer base and will be added to an ongoing educational endeavor on low-input, ecologically sound gardening techniques.

Project details:

The idea of Edible Forest Gardens is to create landscapes that provide food and other materials that people need (e.g., building materials, medicines, etc). These landscapes are modelled after functional ecosystems. If we consider the typical Northeastern forest - we can see that they are hugely productive in terms of food (for wildlife), habitat, benefits to air & water, materials, etc... and yet no one needs to water them, fertilize them, or weed them. What if we could create a similar structure, but substitute in plants that are highly useful to people - while at the same time providing similar benefits to water, air & wildlife, and require similarly low amounts of maintenance.

Thus, we plant in layers - a high canopy, a lower canopy, a shrub layer and a groundcover layer. We use plants that build soil, such as nitrogen-fixing plants. We use plants that repel pests, such as plants in the allium family. And we use pollinator attractors.

In the first phase of this project, volunteers will continue ongoing work to clear invasive bittersweet from the forest edge. We will then use heavy sheet mulches to suppress unwanted growth, and allow new plants, such as fruit and nut trees and shrubs to become established. Through the entire process we will be relying heavily on volunteer labor, as well as furthering the educational mission of the library by teaching about these techniques.

Financial request: \$200

Breakdown:

\$100: 10 bales of straw for a weed-free topping to the sheet mulch (to be done in spring of 2015)

\$100: Plants to start the forest garden (planting in fall of 2015). Possibly some fruit trees such as peach and Asian pear, possibly hazelnuts. More trees and plants will be added as the project progresses.

* Note that I spoke to about applying for a project in Sagadahoc County - she said the Board recognized that folks who live near county borders might be involved in projects in other counties and that I should go ahead and send in an application. Thank you!