

Finding Farming in the Woods

Janice F. Booth

Maryland Correspondent

BOWIE, Md. — In the suburbs of Washington, D.C., Lincoln Smith is trying to create a different kind of local agriculture.

"Here at Forested, we're trying to prove that forest-based agriculture can produce as much food per acre as wheat, which produces approximately 2,700 pounds per acre annually," said Smith, the founder of Forested: Creative Ecology, during a July 15 tour of the 10-acre property, put on by Future Harvest CASA as part of its Beginning Farmer Training Program.

About 40 people attended the tour.

Smith began Forested, an experiment in agroforestry, in 2012 through the support of the Washington New Church in Bowie, which leased a 10-acre lot to him.

"I didn't want to do anything without the community's support. The folks who live around Forested mostly have desk jobs, but they're interested in growing things that they can eat. They're very supportive," he said. "My motto is 'Food, Forest, Feast.'" According to Smith, agroforestry attempts to diminish the footprint of agriculture by managing coexisting 95% crops. "In the Mid-Atlantic region, if land is left untilled, it reverts to forest. That is what does best in this climate and this soil," he said, pointing out that trees can provide clean air, help control erosion, support wildlife, and produce nuts and timber.

"We're five years into the project and beginning to harvest! nuts, fruits and berries. We are working to discover and share how to work with the natural forest eco-system to feed ourselves," he said.

Beneath the trees, an eco-system flourishes. Medicinal plants, herbs and mushrooms, along with naturally pruned scrap wood, leaf compost and pine needles, are all marketable products requiring little labor.

Smith emphasized five key points he's gleaned from starting an agroforest:

- Diversity: Planting on the 10 acres is designed for low maintenance, avoiding labor-intensive crops.

"What grows here naturally? Nuts, berries, herbs, wild fruit. That's what I tried to understand, and how could we use those resources to feed ourselves," he said.

- Polyculture: There are multiple layers of crops beneath the tree canopy, including mushrooms.

"We think about height and encourage plants to grow in their best setting, tall plants to short, based on their access to the Southern sunlight," he said.

- Mimicry: Smith said he observes how plants grow in local wooded areas and tries to copy that natural design.

"Wild persimmons grow everywhere around here. We're figuring out how to use them or graft the tastier cultivated persimmon onto our hardy, wild trees," he said.

- Efficiency: Smith said he focuses on increasing yields in small plots. For example, raising ducks and geese in pens beneath the shady canopy works well, and fallen branches from the native locust trees make sturdy posts for deer fences.

- Experiment: Smith said he takes chances and learns from his mistakes and successes.

"Looks like the Chinese date or jujube tree will do well here. They're hardy and tasty. We're just discovering what to do with them," he said.

Ariel Herrod was at the tour and works in the Forested project as a trainee with Future Harvest.

"I know that farming is a leap of faith, but I'm preparing and the skill set is viable, whatever happens,!" Herrod said. "My goal is to be farming full time by 2025."

While she works on a diversified poultry farm, Herrod thinks she'll find a way to acquire her own farm, perhaps raising livestock on forested acreage.

"Maybe I'll raise pigs. They can eat the nuts that fall from the trees and people can eat the pigs that have been raised on organic feed," she said. "I have to think of farming that isn't labor-intensive. Agroforestry is a long-term, multigenerational commitment. That's what I'm looking for."

Anthony Nathe works for an urban agriculture project in Baltimore. He came on the tour to gather ideas for the Baltimore Orchard Project.

"We have some woods, an area about the size of three backyards. We'd like to learn more about how to produce food in the city's small spaces," Nathe said.

Ben Friton, a self-described agro-ecologist, works with Lincoln in the forest and travels the world consulting on how to feed the poor and displaced.

He's been to Africa to consult with relief groups that work to establish food sources in refugee camps and urban slums.

"I turned a corner when I came to the realization that it will never be profitable to grow food for those who have no money. So we have to find ways for the poor to feed themselves," Friton said.

Janice F. Booth is a freelance writer in central Maryland.