



REFOREST

Living Lab 7: United Kingdom

***Growing vegetables
with the help of
trees at Gibside
Community Farm***



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Living Lab 7

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The farm

Growing has been in my life from when I was a baby and was taken with my Grandad and Dad to the allotment. I started being a farmer in Newcastle, becoming part of the group that started the City Farm. I went on to eventually work for the City Farming movement. Later on in my career, I worked for the Soil Association for 10 years in the local food team, starting up Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects around the UK. In 2013/14 I decided to set up my own; I approached the National Trust with a number of folks who lived locally as I couldn't buy or rent anything at the time. So after much work, we have a 25-year tenancy, which is needed to fulfill the criteria of being able to get tree grants.

Our main silvohorticulture field is 5.8 hectares. Getting the overall rotation into this space was the most important thing. The length of the plots is restricted to 100 m. After looking at other agroforestry farms with 20-25 m wide rows we decided that the vegetable plots needed to be 21 m wide, this allowed us to fit in a final row at the end. We grow alliums, brassicas and potatoes in the beds. Inbetween the plots there are 5 m-wide tree alleys which are 5 years old, and include trees such as hazel, willow, and species that yield delicate and tough fruit i.e. russet apples and medlars. Major shelterbelts with several rows of semi-mature native trees protect the farm from wind.

We sell the vegetable produce through a weekly bag scheme and do some online sales. We also sell potatoes, garlic, onions and leeks to organic wholesalers locally. We're hoping direct sales will replace wholesales.



The way to agroforestry

Agroforestry was needed at the farm because the site is high and exposed, we have a lot of wind and harsh weather generally, the trees are here to create a microclimate to be able to grow the vegetables.

For all of us involved in the CSA, the environment, economics and community are equally as important as each other, it's a 3-legged stool. If you're not doing your bit for the environment, why are you bothering? If we don't keep an eye on the economics we won't be around for very long, and we are trying to develop the community part all the time. There needs to be more focus on access to food for people who are not in the position of being able to pay for it. We deliver potatoes to a soup kitchen and have long standing relationships with asylum seekers and refugees who we encourage to come to the farm.



I am self-taught with agroforestry, but I learn a lot from inviting relevant people to the farm for tours. I have visited other agroforestry sites such as Wakelyns to see what they are doing and have talked to people about what works for them, I much prefer learning this way rather than reading books. I would like to know more about which species may be best suited to include in our shelterbelts, as some of the trees haven't taken in a section of it.

Agroforestry in practice

At the start we managed to get a grant from the Woodland Trust, but they could only supply us with native trees which weren't suitable for the tree alleys. So, I went to a local charitable trust who gave us a £3000 grant to be able to get trees that suited our system and had the wide variety of species we needed.

We needed to fit the rotation in the field based on how the land was being managed, and the alley width and length was critical; we needed a good working length for field scale. We looked at examples of how other people have done things. Our orientation was perfect, that stood in our favour.

One of the main challenges we have is finding a way to reduce tillage. Currently we are deep ploughing and green manuring, but we want to do as little tilling as possible. So, to be able to find an approach that doesn't require expensive equipment but also doesn't require doing it by hand would be great.

The agroforestry benefits the farm hugely as without the shelterbelts and tree alleys it would be very difficult to grow vegetables, they give us so much protection from the wind. The trees and the orchard are also an additional source of income and will be especially in the future when they become more established.

We haven't had many issues with pests because we promote biodiversity through the crops we grow and how we manage them, I don't mind sacrificing a bit of neatness and efficiency to accommodate for biodiversity.

I think all vegetable growers should do agroforestry, it's especially good for adding value to marginal land such as can be found on our site, which is high and exposed.



What is ahead?

I think the learning is in people doing a similar thing. I hope through the living lab there are lots of ideas exchanged.

There is still a wind issue on one side of the farm as a couple of rows of agroforestry didn't take and need to be replaced. I would like to know if anyone in the living lab knows tree species that may be suitable for this, possibly medicinal varieties. I would like to understand what others are trying to do to minimise tillage in their system. Integrating livestock will be an option in the future - we have access to sheep.

I'm always looking for people on the same wavelength to get involved in some way. We have a craft group who have created a willow plot. Recently, I've been in touch with a vegan pie maker who will take some of our imperfect potatoes to reduce waste. We would like to increase our vegetable bag sales; it is more rewarding than selling wholesale.





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