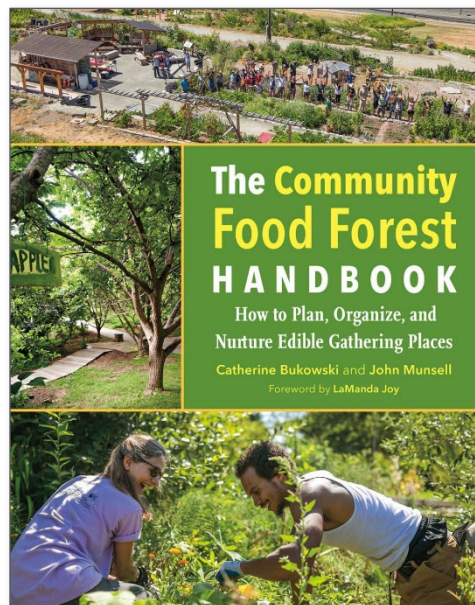


## Growing ecologies: Growing communities

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Review of *The Community Food Forest Handbook: How to Plan, Organize, and Nurture Edible Gathering Places*, by Catherine Bukowski and John Munsell. (2018). Chelsea Green Publishing. Available in paperback and Kindle; 272 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.chelseagreen.com/product/the-community-food-forest-handbook/>



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The contemporary community gardening and urban agriculture movements have transformed the fundamental notion of the city, chal-

lenging the urban/rural dichotomy and applying an agronomic model to remake urban spaces as productive systems. Recently, another model has emerged, that of the food forest, which is based on the form and function of forest ecosystems for producing food. Much like the early innovative efforts of urban agriculture, community supported agriculture operations (CSAs), and other alternative food system projects, the emergence of food forests across the country has been a grassroots effort informed by a few key references and with little coordination across individual efforts.

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*The Community Food Forest Handbook: How to Plan, Organize, and Nurture Edible Gathering Places* provides a very timely and thorough overview of this new type of productive landscape. Of the 30 food forest projects that form the basis of the

book, only one has been in existence for more than 10 years. The authors, Catherine Bukowski, a Ph.D. candidate at Virginia Tech, and John Munsell, professor in the College of Natural Resources and the Environment at Virginia Tech, each with extensive experience in agroforestry, summarize the lessons learned from a systematic analysis of these examples to develop a guide for groups involved with or intending to develop their own community food forest. This handbook effectively documents the state of the art of this emerging practice.

The introduction takes the reader, addressed as “you,” on a discovery tour that reveals the enigmatic qualities of a community food forest—a seemingly wild arrangement of diverse plant communities with an open invitation to harvest or forage. The authors then parse the various elements that distinguish a community food forest from that of a natural forest or community garden. As a small-scale representation, food forests mimic the spatial patterns and functions of a forest ecology with three or more vertical layers of edible plants. They are also open and accessible to a broad public with intentional community participation.

This community aspect is also the critical dimension and primary emphasis of the book. While there are guides for establishing the biological components of food forests, such as the two-volume set, *Edible Forest Gardens*, by Dave Jacke and Eric Toensmeier, this handbook expands the discourse beyond recommendations for soil preparation or plant selection to address all the social considerations of how a food forest can be integrated into a community. It provides both the conceptual framework on social systems as well as practical tools for how to work with diverse stakeholders, engage communities, raise funds, assess leadership, and a range of other effective practices.


The book is organized into four sections. The first part, “Understanding Community Food Forests,” provides background on the movement, and conceptual frameworks of systems thinking and the diverse set of capitals (social, human, natural, etc.) necessary to create and sustain a project. By presenting this framework, the handbook’s structure allows readers to then choose relevant sections rather than follow a linear sequence. Readers inter-

ested in getting grounded in agroecology, for instance, may want to skip to that chapter in Part 3, which also includes a discussion of the importance of public space and a comprehensive overview of the various allies such as landscape architects and urban foresters who can contribute to the multiple values of a community food forest. Part 2, which begins with a chapter on planning fundamentals, is perhaps the most useful section for anyone starting a community food forest, as it lays out the phases of project planning and management, including potential pitfalls to avoid. The final section, “Reflecting on Community,” emphasizes the critical assessment of the community relationships, who the project is for, types of engagement, and especially, the power dynamics involved in a community-based project.

The challenge for any handbook is how to provide a comprehensive scope and practical guide with enough depth, rigor, and critical thought to make a meaningful contribution to readers with specific knowledge and expertise in related areas. This book effectively navigates the spectrum between these two objectives. Since community food forests are by definition hybrid spaces, the handbook brings together diverse knowledge sets, albeit at an introductory level. The tone is clearly aimed at the general reader and for that reason it would be difficult to use it as a main reference for academic purposes. However, its very effective grounding in systems thinking and theories of change and its models of different types of capital investments make this more than just a practical how-to guide. Its core strength throughout is the well-researched examples. These examples are embedded in each chapter to illustrate the concepts, and each section ends with a full chapter devoted to a specific case study.

The concluding chapter summarizes the extensive examples, concepts, and detailed guides into 10 themes presented as “recommended actions,” such as “Flexibility is Key,” “Keep Adding Layers,” or “Create a Governance Structure Early.” Recognizing the early stage of development of the community food forest as a new typology and practice, the authors also identify critical needs for more urban food forestry research and developing networks for sharing information, expertise, and

support across different projects. The primary contribution of the book is the sustained attention to the community aspect of food forests. Just as ecological design for food forests is based on

ecosystem concepts of redundancy and multi-functionality, this handbook provides extensive guidance for how to initiate and sustain the social systems. 

## References

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