

Lesson from Nature

There are many lessons to learn from nature, a lifetime of lessons. But one that is both easy to observe and easy to apply in your home garden is the concept of guilds. A fruit tree, for example, that is planted with shrubs, perennials, bulbs, and groundcover will be healthier than one that is planted alone. This planting is more natural and the tree will benefit from the plants that provide mulch, shade, nutrients, attract pollinators, and block the wind.

Plant guilds can transform your landscape into a more natural garden eliminating weeds, pests, diseases, and stress. One of the best ways to prevent pests and diseases in the garden is to create a healthy, natural environment, and the path to a natural garden is to mimic nature in your landscape.

The word "guild" refers to an association of people with common aims and interests. Typically we think of guilds as groups of merchants and artisans from the medieval time period. Plant guilds, however, are associations of plants working together for the overall health of the garden. The guild idea is similar to companion planting, where you grow various plants that do well together. The plant guild, however, is designed around one central plant, usually a fruit or nut tree. Other plants are chosen to help the fruit tree by providing nutrients, mulch or blocking the wind. The result is a healthier tree requiring less maintenance.

Nature's Way

Nature intended plants to grow together in guilds. If you look at the layers of plants in a forest, you will see trees, shrubs, vines, groundcover, and bulbs all growing together. You can do the same thing and get the same benefits by maximising the growing area around your fruit and nut trees. By encouraging a more natural planting you help create a healthy garden ecosystem and get an increased harvest of berries, herbs, and flowers. The idea is to nurture a mini-ecosystem, not plant a sole tree, left to fend for itself. Every guild is based on the needs of the fruit or nut tree and the overall health of the garden. A fruiting shrub like blueberry or black currant is perfect for the under story, taking advantage of the protection and growing space underneath the tree. Plant the shrubs so that they do not block access to the tree. If you have a row of fruit trees, plant one to three bushes between every two trees. Comfrey is planted in a ring 2 to 3 feet from the tree, as a ground cover to reduce root competition from grass and provide a source of nitrogen in its leaves. The comfrey can be cut three to five times a year and used as mulch under the tree. Tulip or daffodil bulbs planted inside the comfrey circle provide early spring colour and further reduce grass competition.

A small vine like raspberries or sweet peas can be grown up the fruit or nut tree. Plant the vine inside the comfrey circle with the bulbs. You can plant larger vines such as grapes and kiwi, but not on dwarf trees and only on trees that are at least seven to ten years old so you do not smother the tree.

To help in pest control you can plant your favourite mint or sage. The aromatic leaves and flowers will deter many moths and other pests. And perennials such as fennel, Echinacea, and yarrow attract beneficial insects that eat garden pests. I like to add edible flowers into the mix as well. Calendula, borage, and nasturtium are three favourites that will self-seed and come back year after year. Mints, yarrow, edible flowers, fennel, and all other plants should be planted at least 2 feet outside of the comfrey circle. Plant as many of these as space allows. Again, be sure not to block your access to the tree. You should still be able to access the tree to harvest fruit and for maintenance. You can also plant guilds around older trees Infinite Possibilities

Each guild will be unique depending on your site conditions and what fruits or nuts you want to grow. All guilds, however, are made of similar components: a fruit or nut tree, a fruiting shrub, a source of nitrogen and mulch, bulbs for beauty, mint for pest control, perennial flowers to attract beneficial insects, a small vine to climb the tree, and edible flowers. It only takes a little space and a desire to eat fresh fruit, nuts, and berries from your landscape. And while it can take three to seven years for some fruits or nuts to come into production, over time you will have an abundance to harvest. In the meantime, you can harvest all the other berries, herbs, mints, and flowers.

- Guild Template for a Fruit or Nut Tree
- Fruiting shrub
- Source of nitrogen and mulch
- Bulbs for beauty
- Mint or Sage for pest control
- Perennial flowers to attract beneficial insects

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