

# Food Forest in the City: Seattle's Beacon Hill Begins a Radical Experiment with Common Space

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Photography by Madeline Reddington



The beginnings of the Beacon Hill Food Forest.

Early this summer, Seattle's [Beacon Food Forest](#) (BFF) will hold an official opening ceremony for what may become the country's largest public space for gardening and foraging. Currently two acres, the permaculture project is designed to grow into a self-sustaining forest, but it will take some care and a whole lot of volunteer hours to get there. If this "test run" of the two acre development is successful, the forest will expand to fill a seven-acre stretch on Beacon Hill between 15th Avenue and the golf course, where foragers can pick fruit, berries, nuts, vegetables and herbs at will—for free.

Urban farms are not new; they are appearing in several cities across the US, like Detroit, whose residents were abandoned by capitalism in much the same way Havanans were cut off from communist chemical agriculture supplies and fossil fuel in the '90s. Many Detroit residents have responded to the city's economic crisis by bringing people back in touch with growing food—creating community gardens of all sizes, using organic planting strategies and sharing what they've learned. Similar movements are helping other urban families and neighborhoods devastated by the recent economic crash. And as Leigh Gallagher points out in her book [The End of the Suburbs](#), there are even gardens appearing in abandoned malls. But the food forest on Beacon Hill is original in that, one, it is not a response to a disaster, and two, it will be a common space open to all. The BFF is in the middle of a major and rich American city, yet it is much like those unregulated spaces that often surround the cores of cities in developing countries.



But the BFF isn't just for high-income dabblers fetishizing what is for many in poor cities, suburbs or countries a necessity—a source of free food outside of the system. This is a project that's engaging the diverse and savvy network of people that make up Seattle's urban populace and who have deep concern for the future of our cities and way of life. Though there is something ancient about BFF, it is in essence futuristic. Volunteers young and old learn about onsite work-parties via Facebook and Twitter, the orchard includes fruit trees from around the world (some of which were suggested by nearby Asian communities), and when planning the park, the founders sent out 6,000 postcards in five different languages to local zip codes for input. Sustainability—both ecological and social—must include diversity to survive.



With inclusiveness generating community support, the BFF should be able to produce a fantastic variety of fruits to pick from. And as every blackberry season demonstrates, Seattleites are no strangers to foraging. Also, finding pickable foods in the city has already been made easier with resources like [Fallingfruit.org](#), [City Fruit](#) and [Find Fruit](#), which map fruit plants here and there via user-submitted pinpoints (some of the locations are public, some private). Those who made, run and use the app or websites have the same goal as the food forest: connect local people to nature in their cities, each other and their food. They also provide a way of rethinking urban space, which is no longer simply partitioned into private and public areas but a fluctuating web of useful information.



In making a community endeavor of something as intimate as food, BFF is an experiment about trust. It's a refreshingly bold move—testing the idea that putting faith in the public engenders honorable behavior. The founders hope to see people treat the shared space with consideration, respect each other and harvest responsibly. Skepticism abounds. And yet, it seems to be working so far. Last summer, a newly transplanted young tree bore one solitary quince fruit. Though at the mercy of anyone who might walk by, the fruit quietly grew untouched for two months and as soon as it reached the peak of ripeness, disappeared. Sure, maybe some kid threw it at a car. But maybe, just maybe, an urban forager found that it was just enough for a single, tiny jar of jam.

**Madeline Reddington** is a freelance writer and multidisciplinary artist exploring the intersections of art, science and human interaction. She started *The Stranger's* biweekly Slog column, "The Science Today." Madeline has written for Metro Newspapers and *Performer Magazine*.

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