



Veganic Forest Farming and our Farm Blessing

We are a small veganic*, forest (agroforestry) farm just to the north of Perry Woods, in Selling, near Faversham. We have recently relocated much of our farm from our leased site in Boughton-under-Blean to our new site that we have bought. We did this because we need security to farm in a more sustainable way, through using no-till, agro-ecological techniques, including planting thousands of trees and other perennial plants. We are off-grid (our power comes from our solar panels and 100% of our water is harvested from the rain), use no single-use plastic and no concrete.

* Veganic growing is also sometimes described as 'organic plus'. The word 'veganic' (also known as vegan organic or 'stockfree' organic) is a conflation of the words, vegan and organic. Veganic growing or farming is broadly defined as the organic cultivation and production of food, fuel or fibre crops focusing on a minimal amount of harm or exploitation to any animal. It also avoids the use of pesticides, herbicides and other synthetic chemicals (some of which are still permitted in organic growing). It does not employ animal fertilisers and factory farm and slaughterhouse by-products such as farmed animal manure, blood meal, bone meal, fishmeal, or feather meal that are regularly used in other organic crop systems and it also avoids Genetically Modified Organisms. Instead it focuses on building soil and biodiversity using green manures, companion planting, no-dig methods and natural 'pest' controls.

Animal agriculture is one of the main drivers of climate change and the leading cause of deforestation, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss. Many people believe that we need giant farms and monocultures to feed ourselves. However, at least 70% of all our food is grown by small (peasant) farmers. Veganic farming encourages biodiversity, prevents habitat loss, land,

water and air pollution and soil erosion and ensures that we tread lightly on the earth, respecting all life and honouring God's Creation.

Agroforestry systems focus on the interactions amongst trees and crops rather than just on the individual plants/systems themselves and are designed to provide a diversity of products whilst simultaneously protecting, conserving, diversifying and sustaining vital economic, environmental, human and natural resources.

Agroforestry is not new! For example, orchards with grazing animals is one type of agroforestry. As vegans, we do not use any farmed animals in our system but there are plenty of wild, self-determined animals involved – in fact we could not do it without them!

Other types of agroforestry include growing rows of fruit trees alongside wide alleys of wheat or annual vegetables. This method is called 'alley cropping'.

Forest farming is one end of the wide spectrum of agroforestry. Forest farming focuses on the perennial crops, including fruit and nut trees and currants and berries. It includes systems such as food forests.

Agroforestry brings many benefits. Research has shown that agroforestry is more biologically productive, more profitable, and more sustainable than forestry or agricultural monocultures. Temperate agroforestry systems are already widespread in many parts of the world and are central to production in some regions. Agroforestry increases water retention, reduces soil erosion from rain, wind and sun, protects other crops and people from wind damage, sequesters more carbon, provide shade, moderates extremes in temperature, ensures habitat for wildlife, increases mychorizza and soil organic matter and the synergy between plants (companion planting) reduces disease and damage by wildlife.

We are farming on 4.65 hectares at our new site. The land was previously grazing for horses. Since securing the new site in September 2021, we have planted or relocated (from our Boughton site) around 1,000 trees and shrubs – including shelterbelts, hedgerows and a woodland strip plus

crop trees (apples, pears, cherries, figs, mulberries, plums, sea buckthorn, autumn olive, walnuts, hazelnuts, sweet chestnuts, berries, currants, herbs and other more unusual fruit and nut crops) in a variety of configurations. Over the next two or three winters, we plan to plant another 3,000 trees and thousands more perennial plants.

We are very grateful to have had funding from DEFRA (Countryside Stewardship), LoCASE (Low Carbon in the South East), Woodland Trust, Kent Downs AONB and Plants for a Future.

Our aim is to grow food (and other crops, such as building materials, medicinal plants, fibre crops) in harmony with nature, restoring wildlife habitats, improving biodiversity and to supply our local community. We prefer to talk about 'community sufficiency' rather than 'self-sufficiency'! We love collaboration and connection – evolving, learning and thriving together with other people, projects and businesses.

We aim to sell our produce within a 10-mile radius, to local shops and cafes and through some direct sales. We are also co-creating education, training and research projects and have already held a butterfly walk and talk, been part of the national Agroforestry Open Weekend and organised a workshop with local school children where we reconnected with nature and made a giant dream catcher.

As well as working with many local people, through being a host on the WWOOFing (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) platform, we are pleased to welcome people from all over the world who are interested in agroecological farming and living. WWOOFing matches up people keen to work on organic farms to learn new skills with host farms who need additional help and love the idea of sharing their farm with different people. www.woof.org.uk

We have received a huge amount of love and support from our friends and family, including our lovely church family and have always wanted to involve local people as much as possible in our ongoing plans.

As part of our community growing together, on 12 August 2023, we invited local people and people from our church family to a farm blessing and gathering. This was to bless the land, the trees and plants, the human and more-than-human people and our plans to work in harmony as part of Nature with the whole of God's Creation to co-create a healthy, happy, abundant and inclusive space.

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the Divine one has done this?
In God's hand is the life of every living creature
and the breath of every human being.

(Job 12: 7-10)

Forty of us walked around the boundary of the farm, stopping at various points to listen to a reading or poem, sing and pray together and hear a Bible reading. As we walked, we talked about our plans for the farm and we remembered our loved-ones, our ancestors and those who will inherit the Earth from us. Then, at each point we listened to a lovely blessing put together by local friend in Selling, Kathy Bullows, who also runs a Church of the Wild group in the area.

We blessed the home (our little wood-clad static caravan and home-made compost loo), the farm helpers' accommodation (our home-made showperson's wagon that we call Wilma), the boundary, the farm entrance, the woodland area and the memorial garden for our ancestors and those who are yet to be born. We ended our perambulation at the food forest and sat in our circle of Scot's pines, where we listened to Revd. Maurice Worgan sing 'The Green Blade Riseth' and together we sang 'The Trees of the Field'. Then we shared a peacemeal, passing around rainwater and sourdough bread made by local veganic baker, Chris Foster, using our own grown heritage wheat flour.

As we shared communion with each other, we said these words...

May this simple meal nourish you: physically, spiritually, and completely.

May the love within this moment inspire you.

May you live courageously and joyfully - as someone who is truly free.

May hope embrace you.

May deep peace transfigure you to live as a beacon of wild hope.

(Noel Moules)

It was such a beautiful occasion and we felt truly blessed. We will all remember the day for the rest of our lives.

One Hundred Years

I want to spray a whole field with my love,

Soak it!

So that in spring ten thousand wildflowers appear

And shake their seeds.

And so every spring,

Until one hundred years from now this whole valley

Will remember my love,

Though I am gone.

(Hannah Fries)

Franciscan Paradox Blessing

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, equity, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and change their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with the foolishness to think that you can make a difference in the world,
so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

By Jo and Rosa Kidd and many human and more-than-human friends and family.