



Farming for the Future

David Wolfe takes us on a tour of farms that are planting innovative agroforestry systems in temperate Britain

“Through agroforestry, the full gamut of benefits trees provide can support a farm’s productive areas, such as improving soil health, providing shade and shelter for livestock, and creating new habitats for birds and insects. Together, these can support the overall resilience of a farming business.”

Defra, UK, January 2023

Though it may be a new term for some, ‘agroforestry’ includes traditional practices which in the UK would have included sheep or poultry grazing in orchards, pannage (pigs put into woods to fatten on autumn acorns), or even just trees as shelter belts for crops or livestock.

Modern implementations of agroforestry include more formalised systems of ‘alley cropping’, with north-south lines of trees separating strips of more conventional agriculture. People who enjoy classifications sometimes refer to ‘silvo-pasture’ – trees with animals, ‘silvo-arable’ – trees with field scale crops, or ‘silvo-horticulture’ – trees with smaller scale horticulture between. In each, the trees may be planted for timber, fruit or biomass production with the trees as much part of the farm output as everything else which is happening in the field. ‘Forest farming’ is a tree dominated system where the emphasis is on the trees producing the desired crops themselves.

Often, of course, the reality is more complex, with real-world implementations involving combinations or variants of those system types. In all of them though, the additional benefits in carbon sequestration and biodiversity gain from the trees are obvious; with other potential gains including moisture retention, shade benefits, and a reduction in soil erosion and the spread of wind-borne diseases. No surprise then that agroforestry can be an obvious component of a permaculture farming system.

Since the early 1990s, we have seen a renewed interest in agroforestry and in the more modern versions of it, with a recent upsurge in agroforestry planting and its wider public and government recognition. Here we showcase some of the farms in the UK and Ireland celebrating their agroforestry planting. Each of them, along with over 30 others, will be open for visitors over the course of Agroforestry Open Weekend May 2023.



Wakelyns, Suffolk

Wakelyns comprises over 20 hectares (49 acres) of agroforestry in north-south tree lines with an organic rotation cropping system in between.

Ann and Martin Wolfe bought Wakelyns in 1992 after Martin's earlier scientific career showed how mixing even just three varieties of a cereal crop together could restrict disease and stabilise crop yield. Their idea was to further experiment with forms of agriculture by using diversity and reversing the trend to crop monoculture through organic rotation agroforestry. From 1994 they planted, and then maintained, one of the oldest and most diverse alley-cropping agroforestry implementations. Wakelyns first featured in *Permaculture Magazine* in 1997.

Different areas at Wakelyns have different tree line spacing – 12m, 15m or 18m (39, 49 or 59ft) – and different types of trees in the tree lines, some for timber, some (hazel and willow) on a short rotation coppice for fencing and for biomass, and a wide variety of fruit trees (including 40+ types of apple, as well as pears, many sorts of plums, quinces, cherries and much more).

Since Ann and Martin's deaths (in 2016 and 2019), David and Toby Wolfe and their families have continued with the organic rotation agroforestry while also evolving Wakelyns into a hub for farming, food and the environment.

Within the organic rotation cropping in the alleys, they now grow

YQ population wheat (as developed at Wakelyns in conjunction with the Organic Research Centre and John Innes Centre), hemp and lentils; and host 'RealVeg CSA', no dig organic horticulture by Holly, Chloe and Rachel. Spring 2023 will also see vines added as a component within some of the tree lines themselves.

Diversifying and making Wakelyns more sustainable has involved a new focus on 'short [food] chains', 'enterprise stacking', and people.

Short chains means that, rather than trying to crop and sell the raw produce (wheat, flour, fruit, vegetables, etc.) they are often baked and cooked by Henrietta in the Wakelyns Bakery for sale as food to families within the local area and beyond. In another short chain stacked enterprise, Adam and Emma from 'Willow Phoenix', use Wakelyns and others' willow and hazel in a range of on-site weaving and landscaping projects. Claire and Kitty's 'Contemporary Hempery' has brought hemp to Wakelyns as a valuable organic weed-suppressing crop within the organic rotation which will also produce fine fibres for high-quality clothing (and with the shiv woody cores being used by Summer Islam and her colleagues from 'Material Designs' as part of their 'regenerative architecture' sustainable construction projects). 'People' means welcoming people to visit, learn and stay over at Wakelyns.

<https://wakelyns.co.uk>



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Agroforestry Open Weekend 2023

May 2021 saw six farms with agroforestry planting, all in East Anglia, co-ordinating their opening for visitors over a single weekend. For 2023, well over 30 farms with agroforestry, across the UK, Ireland and beyond, will be opening their gates during 19-21 May 2023 in what is hoped will be an ever-growing annual event to showcase and celebrate agroforestry.

Information about the event and the farms is available at: www.agroforestryopenweekend.org

Everyone is welcome but booking (using the info given by each farm on the website) is essential. All our participating farms look forward to welcoming you.