

## Spring gardening

Written by Rysia

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Spring is just around the corner, reports my neighbour Tatiana, and I hope she is right; it's now mid March and the eager blossoming of Spring has several times been quenched by more seemingly relentless snow. Needless to say our original romantic notions of the snow are quickly waning.

On our weekly visit to the local bazaar this Sunday, in addition to buying an amazing technicolour checked shirt for a paltry two leva (as an aside, the market is definitely the place to buy second hand clothes), we bought six fruit trees to plant in our garden: two apricots, two cherries, one apple and one peach. I am not sure of the exact cultivars, but they come from a local grower who assures me they are beautiful (curse my naïveté!); at the very least they will be suited to the soil type we have here so should take well. We shall see. To my dismay I could barely understand any of the instructions she was giving me; learning a language can be very disheartening when this happens, but at least in this instance I have the internet at my disposal to relieve my horticultural ignorance.

The false starts of Spring had led me to believe several times that the time to plant had passed – late Winter, before the growing season begins, seems to be the best time to do so. In addition there seem to be some trees in the garden that have already started to bloom, which alarmed me when we were once again plummeted into sub zero temperatures. Well, we can't control the weather... yet.

We are looking ahead to our busy next few years and so want to create an environment in which there are lots of self supporting plants, trees and shrubs, most of which will bear fruit or nuts. This is commonly referred to as the 'forest garden' or 'permaculture' model. In short it is one which will mimic a forest's structure in its layers of complementary ecology. It's not complicated, it just requires a bit of research into what is suited to your particular climate. Here

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in Bulgaria we suffer from long hot summers with very fertile soil so most things will thrive. There are different layers and methods to this structure, which I will describe below. A preference toward perennial plants is exemplary (also the way to go for the lazy gardener such as myself), because they will appear year after year from persisting rootstock.

### *Large fruit and nut trees*

In our efforts to create a forest garden environment we plan to grow large trees, an apple and a peach, in addition to those already in the garden – the walnut and pear tree (there is a small apple tree but we are thinking of chopping it down or grafting a tastier variety on to it). These will provide some canopy for smaller plants growing underneath and will improve the soil structure by way of their root system... in at least five years' time, that is.

### *Small trees and large shrubs*

Small trees such as the cherries and dwarf fruit trees are what we are going for at this early stage. As this is a major long term project and in many ways experimental, some aspects of it will only yield benefits for us in terms of food in years to come. In this way, it is not only fruit and nut trees and vegetables that will benefit us: shrubs such as budlea will attract bees and butterflies, which will help to pollinate fruit trees, thus increasing our fruit yield. On another note, I have read that acacias are good shrubs to grow in terms of fixing nitrogen in the soil, which also make great chicken feed. However the bottom of our garden is currently overrun with small aggressively growing acacias and I would rather introduce other trees and shrubs to out-compete them because they are covered in spines and grow ridiculously fast! Unmanageably fast... a complete pain!

### *Small plants and bushes*

Here I am talking about blackberries, gooseberries, redcurrants and raspberries to grow around the borders of our property. Then artichokes (why doesn't everyone grow these? It's ridiculously easy) and asparagus, rhubarb, walking stick kale, sea kale and strawberries. All very hardy and sun loving, although I think redcurrants need a bit of protection from the heat of the day. Onions and garlic – garlic is already growing in the garden but I haven't dugged any up yet to see what it's like. The plants I have mentioned so far are perennial. I do want to grow a few annuals, either because they are impossible to find here, or impossibly expensive (or impossibly poor quality... I could go on), or we are simply curious to learn how to grow them. Broccoli is one of them, which grows well with the onions and garlic interspersed to deter pests; in fact the broccoli variety I plan to plant is a 'nine star perennial' which is indeed a perennial but the crop diminishes after three years so I guess then I will have to reseed. Sunflowers, sweetcorn and french beans (we should be able to use corn stalks as trains for the beans), chilli peppers, potatoes, parsnips (Tom loves parsnips. I also love parsnips), spinach and fennel.

There is a box hedge growing around the trunk of the pear tree – although these are supposedly grown in a superstitious manner here, it would be great to plant some strawberries or blackberries underneath it... shade is difficult to come by in the summer. Although I suppose if my arm starts to wither away or we suffer a plague of locusts... might have to replant that box hedge.

### *Ground cover*

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There are a few things that are really good ground cover in terms of deterring pests (in the way that basil deters pests from destroying tomatoes), or being good competition plants for the things we want to eat (in a way that caterpillars will prefer nasturtiums to cabbage – if cabbage is the crop you want that is). Others provide good mulch, which is basically a layer of cover so that the soil retains moisture and out-competes weeds, or fix nitrogen (beans, clover). Geraniums, lovage and borage are great general insect repellents, so it would be great to intersperse these with all of the crops. I would also like to grow dandelions and dock leaves to feed the rabbits with.

I am compiling a list of germination methods for each seed... it's going to be a lot of work this year but hopefully at least some of the plants will survive. The harsh winter is my main concern, but there is no point in worrying about it! This is an experiment after all, and next year we shall see what has survived. I have also made a plan of the garden, below, which will might give an idea of the enormity of the task at hand (at the moment there is nothing there but grapes apart from the fruit trees which have already been planted).

