



Farm-to-Forest Connections

Explore how your woodland can be a beautiful and active part of your farm.

Farm woodland areas can offer diversity to your hobby farm projects. A view out your kitchen window encompasses a lot of life. Farm landscapes are hardly boring—everything from your new goat shed to the chickens strutting across the yard to the neat rows of your garden tells a story of rewarding, hard work; a love for the land; and dreams coming to fruition (hopefully sooner rather than later). At the edge of your pasture, a darker, wilder place looms: the forest.

Traditionally, farmers kept woodlots for timber and firewood supplies, for use as fencing materials, or for producing other products, such as maple syrup. With knowledge and creativity, even if you don't have a large forest, you can make your woodland an even more active part of the life on your farm. The possibilities are as abundant as your curiosity and interests: collecting plants and other materials to craft into beautiful objects or delicious foods or developing formal long-range plans that can contribute to your farm's income, for example. Here, we offer ideas to help you step into the woods with a keen eye for opportunities.

Bringing the Forest Home

Before you do anything, learn what you've got. If you understand the character of your woods—both the plants that grow there and noteworthy features such as streams, cliffs and springs—you can creatively and responsibly make it a valuable part of your farm. A good first step is to meet with a local naturalist or forester to walk through your woods. This expert can help you learn about the plants growing in your forest, including the poisonous or rare ones—in both cases, avoid them! You'll likely want to spend more time on your own with field guides, but a naturalist will offer insightful information about your specific forest. Ask lots of questions!

As you learn, record the important biological and landscape features of your forest in your farm journal to help you organize and plan for woodland uses. Sketch a rough map to help you visualize the layout of your forest.

Does your woodlot have a lot of paper birch trees? Some people use birch bark to make baskets. If you have gnarly old maple or walnut trees, you could explore woodturning; Toby Fulwiler learned to use an old lathe after moving to 92 wooded acres in Fairfield, Vt., and now produces wooden bowls as gifts for family and friends and to sell at craft shows.

Woodland Projects

Make use of woodland areas on your property by trying your hand at these simple crafts using materials from your farm's forest floor. Is the soil sandy or clay? Soil type influences the plants that can grow. Perhaps your woodlot supports edible or medicinal plants, such as blueberries, black cohosh, bloodroot or goldenseal—find out if they're considered endangered in your area before harvesting them. Some woodland owners actually create sanctuaries for rare plants. Fallen logs or timber might be useful for cultivating oyster or shiitake mushrooms.

Once you can give names and meanings to parts of your woodland, collect some materials for a craft project. Whether pressing plants for window decorations, including woodland edibles in your family's meals or crafting wreaths with materials gathered from the forest floor, the woods offer possibilities for all interests and skill levels.

Branching Out

Your property has boundaries, but your woodland projects don't have to. As you learn about and use interesting plants and features of your forest, consider neighbors, friends or skilled craftspeople in your community who might enjoy working with you and using some of what grows on your land. It may be the start of a productive relationship with unusual benefits.