

Experts Pen Forest Farming Guide

By Eric Banford

Forested land is most commonly managed for timber or hunting. It is rarely used to its fullest potential. Local residents Steve Gabriel and Ken Mudge hope to change that, offering a strategy to farm the woods to produce fruit, nuts, mushrooms, medicinal herbs, ramps, maple syrup and other foods and goods. Their strategies are outlined in the book "Farming the Woods," recently published by Chelsea Green Publishing.

Gabriel and Mudge came together when Steve took Ken's agroforestry class at Cornell. Gabriel eventually helped to teach the course, and over time they began collaborating on research. As they taught together, they realized there wasn't a good, single reference for what they were teaching. The idea for this book slowly evolved, and they each started working on chapters that emphasized their expertise. Gabriel focused on the permaculture angle of forest farming, while Mudge drew from his research on American ginseng, forest-cultivated mushrooms and his work at Cornell's MacDaniels Nut Grove.

"We were pulling our materials from a number of readings," Gabriel recalls, "and Ken mentioned to me that he wanted to write a book. At first I was going to help edit things, but as

we got started, we decided that I would co-author. He's got a lot of technical expertise, and I was able to bring the permaculture perspective in, which really looks at the whole forest system."

Mudge recently retired after serving as an associate professor of horticulture at Cornell, where he was involved in agroforestry research, teaching and extension for over 20 years. In 2002, he rediscovered the MacDaniels Nut Grove, which was originally planted in the 1930s by pioneering horticulturist L.H. MacDaniels.

"What I've enjoyed doing is trying different crops and see what will grow there," says Mudge of his time working in the grove.

Agroforestry traditionally consists of the following elements: forest farming, riparian buffers, silvopasture, windbreaks and alley cropping. Mudge and Gabriel add forest gardening to the mix. "Forest farming is cultivating non-timber forest crops under the canopy of an established forest. Forest gardening has to do with starting from scratch to build an ecosystem that mimics a forest," says Mudge. "I'm interested to see how experienced agroforesters react to the addition that we've made."

Mudge says that he and Gabriel raised money to conduct case studies

of specific forest crops and traveled to talk with experts as much as they could. "Steve visited pawpaw farmers in Ohio, mushroom farmers in the Midwest; I went to North Carolina to visit Rodney Webb, who grows mushrooms and medicinals. We did case studies with farmers in this area, like Steve Sierigk in Trumansburg," he says.

Gabriel says the book is targeted at farmers and woodlot owners who have forests they are not fully utilizing. "Folks who own land with woods that want to expand the potential production. There's a mix of crops that really make sense for commercial interest and also for hobby, and a lot that is really just for the hobbyist. And it's about relating to your woods in a healthy way."

Gabriel feels that forest farming is a good way for beginning farmers to pursue niche markets, since there are already many established vegetable and animal farmers. "If you're a beginning farmer, this is a good opportunity to get started with something unique. With shiitake mushrooms, for instance, you can soak and harvest logs before or after work. It lends itself to a flexible schedule," he says.

"First, it's a book about how to grow mushrooms and ginseng, but there's

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bigger-picture stuff, too, that hasn't been brought up enough," Gabriel says. "The ecology and the climate-change chapters, in terms of the context, the big-picture stuff I didn't really feel was out there and might be really necessary."

Mudge encourages readers to finish the book before beginning to grow crops in their woods. "You really need to look at your land and see what it's suitable for. It's a very deliberate process. Once you know what your land is capable of, then you can make some choices, and there are intensive chapters on specific crops so you can get detailed, how-to information," he says.

Plans are in the works to promote the book at appropriate events, such as the Northeast Organic Farming Association's annual gathering. Local events will be held at the Tompkins County Public Library and Buffalo Street Books in the coming months.

As Gabriel and Mudge state in the introduction: "This book is about many things, but fundamentally it is about a new way to relate to the forest. It offers not only new ways of seeing and valuing forest for both preserving and enhancing forest health but also the potential to make an income. However, the tips, tricks, and techniques within are no good if readers don't take time to connect to the forested landscape. It is our love for the woods that keeps us going above all, and the reason we wrote this book."

For more information, visit <http://farmingthewoods.com>.



Photo by Eric Banford

Ken Mudge with a lion's mane mushroom he found in the Arnot Forest.