

My woodland

Neil Maberley describes his Monmouthshire wood as an oasis in the forest.

We live in a 1,300-hectare commercial forest, surrounded by giant conifers and very little in the way of broadleaves to break up the monotony. But in the middle of all this lies our garden. Not for us the serried ranks of annual bedding plants or circular beds of roses, but something that somehow fits in with the surrounding landscape – and it includes a lot of trees!

One would have thought that, being surrounded by a commercial forest, the last thing we would want would be yet more trees. But about four years ago the opportunity arose to purchase the parcel of former Christmas tree nursery that wrapped around the lower part of the garden.

Negotiations to buy didn't exactly start in the most traditional of ways. We received a letter from the Forestry Commission informing us that we had "occupied a piece of their land". This, it turned out, was a very small strip, which we thought we had already bought from them. However, every cloud has a silver lining, and as well as the so-called ransom strip, we managed to persuade the land agent to sell us an additional 3.5 acres, consisting of the aforementioned tree nursery and a strip down to the river.

This additional land has made a major difference to the overall feel of the garden and also brought us into contact with the Small Woods Association.

In the beginning

Let's put some foundations on why we are where we are today. Sue came to the house in 1980 when her then husband

was posted to the Mynydd Du Forest, near Abergavenny, as the Forester. In those days the forestry workers lived where they worked – a far cry from the outside contractor regime of today. Nant-y-Bedd was the Forester's house and there were cottages for the other workers scattered along the road. Previous occupants hadn't really been that interested in gardening, but one event in particular helped to form the garden into its current form – and starts to explain why an article in a magazine about small woods seems to be all about gardens!

In 1976 – remember that scorching hot summer? – a sudden cloudburst saw a flood rip through the garden. The Forestry Commission brought in a JCB or two, straightened out the stream and sent the then Forester off to the arboretum to get some trees to make the place look a bit tidier.

He came back with eucalyptus, spindle, walnut, oaks, maples, London plane and a cedar or two. These trees now form an interesting basis to one part of the property and goes to explain the wonderfully eclectic variety of trees in the garden.

In 2000, we bought the long shed opposite the house along with a small parcel of land behind it; a few years later we managed to get the other FC shed and the yard along with what used to be the tree nursery. Then finally came the 'occupation' letter and the whole jigsaw fell into place.

Many people faced with a dense, overgrown, unmanaged conifer plantation would probably have been

tempted to fell the lot and start again. We decided however to bring it back into management through removing the usable deadwood and thinning for firewood, allowing more light for the sprinkling of broadleaves and generally opening up rides for access and views of the river and waterfalls on the opposite bank. But first we had to keep the semi-feral forest sheep out. A new fence quickly accomplished this and the effects were magical. From a bare brown desert we now have a spreading green carpet of wood sorrel, bluebells, cowslips and all sorts of regeneration.

It isn't all Norway spruce and grand fir; at the extremities are a couple of small, but magnificent stands of Douglas fir and scattered about are patches of ash, rowan, willow and sycamore. Much of the sycamore has, unsurprisingly, been squirrel damaged, but there are two huge specimens as bookends to the stream bank and three more in the yard, including one of a very peculiar shape – maybe once laid as part of a hedge round the Forestry Office? Who knows?

In normal cases the planting would surely have gone all the way to the river bank but, in a wonderful bit of serendipity, the main electricity power lines for the valley need their own space, so we have an unforested 'ride' that is now our hazel coppice – the hazel having regenerated naturally. Power lines aren't what gardeners really want, but in this case.....

It's not all going to become fuel for the voracious woodburners. The lower of the two 'bookend' sycamores will soon be home to a tree-house for our grandchildren. Five of the Douglas firs, just above that, have been carefully dropped, converted into sleepers and planks, and now form the basis for our natural swimming pond – making walls that are much nicer to sit on, and become homes for tadpoles, newts and other beasties and are so eco-friendly compared to concrete. Not to be outdone, one huge ash is often home to a brood of fluffy owlets.

Lighting up

The biggest use for the timber is of course as firewood. We cook, heat water and the house on wood all year round on the Esse (Bessie). We have a smaller Handol stove that makes winter evenings a pleasure, and woodburners in the office and our shepherd's hut, although these are only used occasionally.

We use softwood for daytime burning. It gets the cooker really hot very quickly. Some people don't like burning conifers, but we find that as long as it is very dry there's not much of a problem. Hardwood is generally kept for when

we are out and overnight. With careful planning, overnight burning makes getting cooking in the morning so much easier, although it does tend to mean more cleaning out the insides of Bessie a tad more frequent.

Hardwood comes into the storage system as and when it is available. Trees have a habit of dropping branches, so someone has to do the public-spirited thing and open the road up for neighbours and visitors. Last Christmas, a couple of beech trees fell across our fence behind the house. They are already on their way to the yard for splitting and stacking.

We try to use all of the tree. Hazel is coppiced for bean sticks, birch for pea supports, brush is chipped for paths and we are experimenting with using woodchip in our composting regime.

Maybe here is the opportunity to mention the "boy's toys". A lot, but by no means all, of the work on the trees is done with the aid of a 64-year-old diesel Ferguson TEF20 with a collection of implements ancient and modern; a Massey-Ferguson cordwood circular saw (very scary!), a Balfor hydraulic 4ft length splitter (which gives the tractor power steering when it's on the linkage) and a GreenMech chipper, which gives us excellent path making material. A standard chainsaw, a pole chainsaw and a 21ft extendable handsaw make up the rest of the kit.

Back in the garden,

The trees offer a wonderful array of colours and shapes across the year. Visitors often ask "what is that tree?", so we have just invested in some professional tree ID labels for the key ones – I just hope we've got the names right! Someone will tell us if we haven't.

Most are allowed to grow normally, but we pollard the London planes and Sue treats smaller specimens of holly and beech to annual haircuts, making them into 'lollipops' – the posh name is cloud-pruning. We also coppiced a red oak that was putting out too much shade and it is growing quicker than ever. Sue has also got a couple of ash out of which she has made arches or bowers – something they seem quite happy to put up with.

We have walnuts (when the squirrels allow), apples, pears and a Szechuan peppercorn that all add to the household diet, and we have high hopes for some Asian pears planted last year.

Where do we go from here?

That's a question I ask myself quite often. There is a management plan, but unfortunately it hasn't yet quite made it to paper – it's all in Sue's head, which isn't the easiest place to read it! I think that, in general, the idea is to keep thinning out the conifers, opening up rides that improve the views of the river and allowing more space around the



specimen hardwoods ('halo thinning' in the words of the experts).

Amazingly Sue has recently planted a few dozen Christmas trees (albeit slightly more specialist ones than those there already) along with some new eucalyptus (to replace the two mighty specimens we lost) and some oaks from acorns gathered nearby.

What else? Well, we have already been a venue for some foraging courses – mushrooms being one that springs to mind – where an amazing mix of wild cocktails were concocted using ingredients such as Douglas fir shoots, wood sorrel and hogweed – and we plan to hold more this year.

PICTURES
Left: annotated garden plan.

Top: A couple of old geezers and a pile of firewood.

Above: wood sorrel under the old ash.

More information

Nant-y-Bedd is open Friday to Sunday in July, August and September, plus other times by arrangement.

See www.nantybedd.com for more details.

