The Forest Dye Garden at ELL

The Forest Dye Garden is an experiment to see which dye plants will grow successfully in the conditions at Edible Landscapes using Forest Gardening methods. We're not following a textbook because we haven't yet found one that includes both dye plants and forest gardening.

Our aim is to grow enough plants that produce red, yellow and blue, plus assistant plants. Then harvest the plants and show people how to dye with them. Progress so far:

~ Reds ~

Madder has been a surprise success. Conventional wisdom says it grows best in sunny chalk meadows but it is thriving in woodchip under the Ginko tree.

Giant Rhubarb After several plants disappeared, possibly eaten by something with good teeth and a strong stomach, we are now protecting two plants with root training plastic and have hopes that they will survive and grow.

~ Yellows ~

Native Golden rod took a long time to establish, perhaps because it's under an hyperactive holly tree but is now producing flowers. We need to work out how to stop them turning to seed after harvesting so we can use them.

St Johns Wort also slow to get going, we're layering the shoots to produce more and making sure it stays clear of leaves in Autumn and winter so it doesn't rot.

Buddleia A new addition to the shrub layer, still small but growing successfully.

Chamomile Just hanging on to life, it might need different soil and more sunlight than we have

Weld is a biennial, it just doesn't like it at ELL, most plants die, a few produce small flowers. Probably a combination of root competition from the holly and limited sunlight.

Yarrow Growing slowly

~ Blues ~

Young Fustic (Cotinus) Planted several years ago and still only a few inches high. Possibly a plant that needs more sunlight than ELL can give it.

Woad is normally so successful that it's considered invasive. We haven't had that experience at ELL. There's probably a number of reasons including root competition from the holly, dry summer conditions and squirrels with a taste for the young leaves. We've departed from normal forest garden practice, dug over a patch of soil to remove the holly roots and replanted in the autumn to try and establish some plants.

Japanese Indigo is an annual that needs a lot of water. As ELL aims to minimise watering we've taken a different approach with this plant and improvised a hydroponic system using buckets and air root training pots. It's worked well and we have produced enough to try fresh plant dyeing techniques.

~ Purple and Green ~

Murasaki, another Japanese plant, is growing well and self seeding. The roots produce a purple dye. Soon we will be able to dig some up and try it out.

We are planting a small **Alder Buckthorn** hedge so we can make green ink with the berries

~ Tannins, Acids and Protein Plants ~

Ginko and Rhubarb both contain Tannins and Oxalic Acid, which are used in plant dyeing. We are planning to plant **Staghorn Sumac** as another source of tannin. There are thoughts of growing soy beans to "proteinise" cellulose fabric in 2026.

~ Foraging ~

Finsbury Park, the New River and the Parkland Walk are full of useful plants to forage. More info here: https://texere.substack.com/