

Food Forests in Italy: state of the art and emerging opportunities

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Abstract Within the evolving discourse on Nature-Based Solutions (NBS), food forests are emerging as multifunctional systems that integrate ecological restoration, sustainable food production, and social innovation. Inspired by the complexity of natural forest ecosystems, they combine layers of fruiting and non-fruiting trees, shrubs, herbaceous plants, mushrooms, climbing lianas, tubers, bulbs, and rhizomes in self-sustaining arrangements that require minimal external inputs. This nature-inspired design not only mirrors the resilience of natural habitats but also enhances ecosystem services such as biodiversity conservation, soil regeneration, and carbon sequestration.

The FOOD FOREST project, funded by EIT Food, focuses specifically on Community Food Forests (CFFs), collectively designed and managed spaces where local communities actively participate in planning, planting, and maintaining diverse edible landscapes. CFFs are more than productive green areas: they are inclusive meeting places that foster environmental stewardship, social cohesion, intergenerational learning, and a shared sense of ownership. By blending ecological complexity with participatory governance, they act as catalysts for both environmental and social resilience.

In Italy, several key questions arise: What is the current status of CFFs and other food forests across the country? Are they being integrated into urban and regional planning strategies? Which are the ecological and social functions of each of them? And which evaluation methods could best demonstrate their effectiveness and long-term sustainability (e.g. SROI and LCA)?

This poster presents an overview of existing Italian food forests, with a special focus on community-led initiatives. It outlines their typologies, design approaches, and management models, while illustrating the multiple benefits they generate, such as enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, providing access to fresh and local food, fostering environmental education, strengthening social cohesion, and supporting climate adaptation strategies.

By positioning CFFs within the broader NBS framework, they can be framed as strategic approaches to urban regeneration. In line with the EU Nature Restoration Law, they offer tangible opportunities to reclaim neglected urban and peri-urban spaces while delivering multiple benefits that support a more just and regenerative ecological transition.