



Getting Started Forest Farming in the Woods- A Simple 10-Step Guide

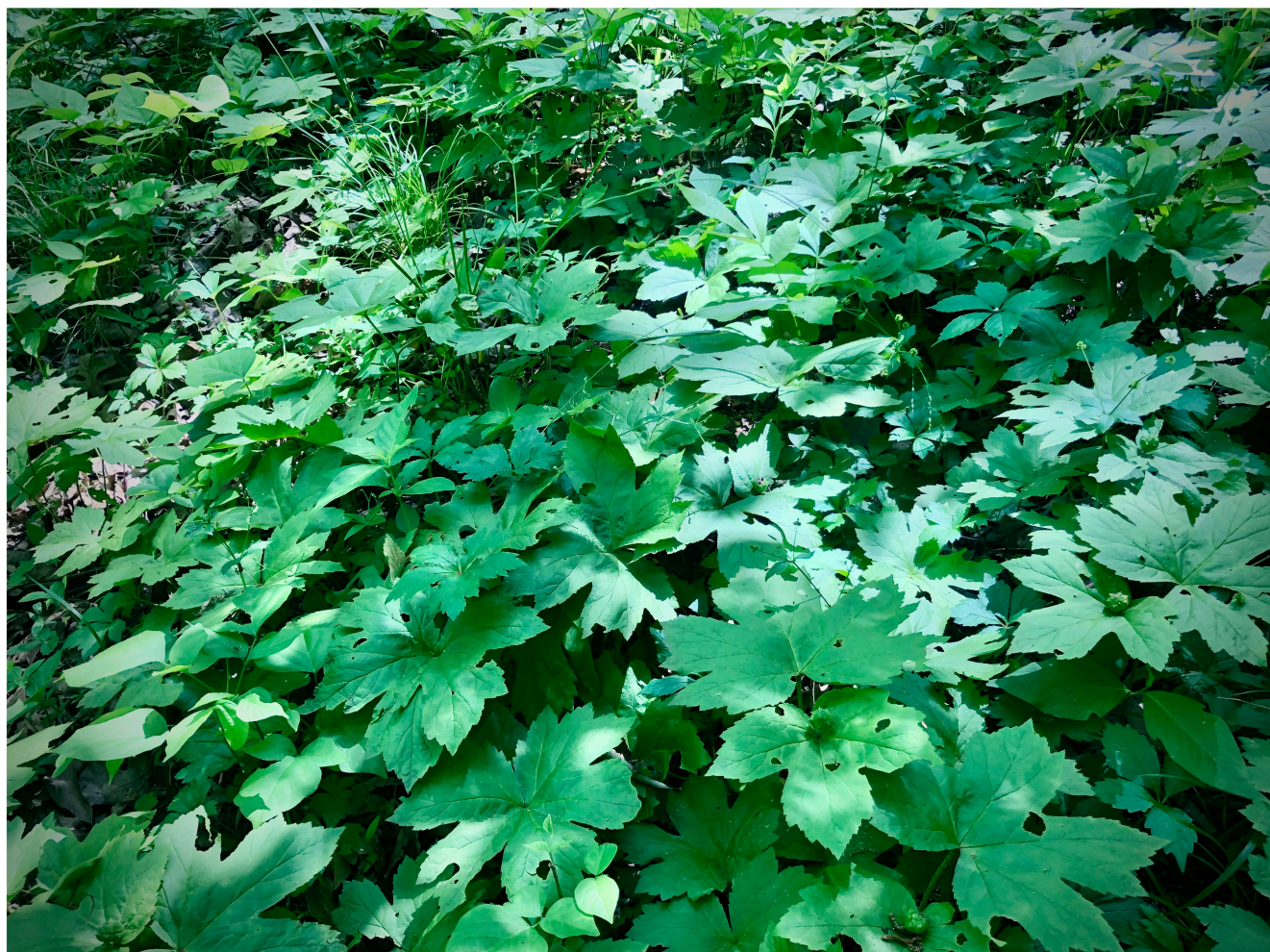


Photo of a patch of native goldenseal
that has been weeded



10 Simple Steps

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Forest farming doesn't have to be complicated. You don't need to wait for the perfect setup. It's possibly already growing, waiting for some support. Many native plants are food & medicinals that were actively nurtured. Today the relics of those flourishing gardens persists. Many human favored plants were bred to seed prolifically, and thrive, when managed under the right conditions.

You Can Start Right Now, With What's Already Growing

Here's a Simple Method That Works With Nature

Step 1. Follow Nature's Lead

This first step is a philosophy that supports all steps. Work with species that are site-suitable. Tending the right species in the wrong place rarely works, unless you want to devote serious time and effort to care.

Step 2. Take Inventory

Walk the woods. See what's already growing. Make a list. If you spot native medicinals like **goldenseal** (*Hydrastis canadensis*), that's your starting point. These populations can be improved with minimal care.

Step 3. Lightly Weed the Area

Start with the imaginary patch of goldenseal:

- Clip back competitive forbs & small shrubs like coralberry, that are shading the goldenseal.
- Use a small plumber's propane torch to toast the stumps.
- Remove taller understory shrubs like ironwood, and saplings like hackberry or hickory, that are casting shade on the goldenseal. Use a flame weeder on their stumps.

Avoid using chemicals in order to nurture soil health. Organic products are safer and can be sold at a premium.

These simple steps can double or triple the goldenseal population.

More sun means more flowers and seed production.

Step 4. Girdle Midstory Trees

If midstory trees are dense, select a few to remove. Many times the midstory trees are stagnant or unhealthy. Girdling helps increase light for your crops and avoids dropping a tree directly onto your garden. Retain healthy or valuable trees. Again, avoid chemicals.



Step 5. Evaluate the Overstory Canopy

If there are too many shade-casting overstory trees in poor condition, consider girdling one or two to open up light. Again, move slowly. Too much sunlight can be a problem. Observe after each action. Keep dead or hollow trees; they're ecologically valuable.

Step 6. Consider Burning

Controlled burning is another tool to reduce poor-quality midstory and understory trees. It also helps release nutrients and can open up the site for new plantings. After a burn is a great time to sow seeds of other native plants. Burning will likely lead to a lot of other species that are fast-growing to fill in the space, leading to more weeding. In some gardens it might make sense to burn and in some it might not.

Step 7. Monitor and Adjust

Give the freshly weeded garden a season or two. Watch how the goldenseal responds. Some follow-up weeding may be needed.

Step 8. Add New Species Slowly

Once your initial species shows good growth, you can start introducing others like:

- Ginseng, Black cohosh, Wild Ginger, Solomon's Seal, Ramps, etc.
- Pawpaw, Bladdernut, Blackberry, etc.
- Passionflower, Wild Grape, etc.

Plant small amounts scattered around. Watch and learn. Every site has its own feedback. Make additions every year to diversify the garden and optimize growing space.

Step 9. Think Long-Term

It's tempting to do everything at once, but the slow way often leads to better results. For example, planting all the ginseng seed at once might lead to low survival. Spread it out over years to learn which spots work best. Technique will improve, and so will the success rate.

What if the woodland doesn't have any existing crop plants?

Start preparing with weeding, and plant incrementally in various locations.

Step 10. Let the Forest Teach You

Mistakes will happen. The key is to return, observe, and adjust. Forest farming is a long conversation with the land. In just a few years, the single-species patch becomes a diverse, resilient woodland garden.

Want help getting started?

Message if you have questions, want guidance for your property, or would like a site visit. I work with landowners across the Midwest who want to bring their forest into production while supporting ecological health.

