

# Cycle of nourishment

Two gardeners have transformed their Northland property into a self-sufficient sanctuary that provides sustenance for the body and soul while giving back to the land.

**WORDS & PHOTOS** WENDY MADDISON





1. Mexican sunflower (*Tithonia diversifolia*) is a perfect pioneer species. 2. Cows are an integral part of the garden. 3. Walkers on the Te Araroa trail can pop in for camping, facilities and great food. 4. The food forest was productive year-round after two years. 5. Wool can often go to waste but makes an amazing mulch. 4. Abhay and Jayanti have made the north their home and created a haven of food and peace to share.



**T**ucked under the misty hills of Takahue, 20km south of Kaitaia, you'll find two sacred cows, two Hare Krishnas with a passion for food and a lot of banana trees. Welcome to Krishna Sanctuary.

Purchased by Abhay (Aaron) and Jayanti (Jaya) in 2020, the property is approximately 2.5ha, and while their 8000sqm food forest is still under development, it currently provides them with the fruit and veges they need. In addition, Krishna Gardens provides a welcome stop for walkers on the Northland Forests section of the Te Araroa walking trail, offering a lunch packed with exotic flavours, camping, cabins, a hot shower and other facilities – a big improvement on noodles, peanut butter and a cold flannel.

#### FOOD FOREST GOALS

Abhay and Jayanti's intention was to be as self-sufficient as possible, bringing them north where the climate is warmer and the land is cheaper. They immediately started planting the food forest, focusing on a wide variety of grafted trees to get things underway faster and establish a year-round food supply, which they achieved after only two years. They quickly worked out what was going to grow well on the site – predominantly trees that tolerate wet feet, like bananas, which, incidentally, provide food all year. Recipes using various parts of the banana tree, including their vegetarian sausages, have become a specialty in their kitchen. These days they don't waste time trying to grow plants that can't tolerate their soil conditions.

Trees were initially planted at 6–8m spacings, then the gaps were filled in with smaller plants. Ultimately, the plan is to create a microclimate, where biomass is dropped to provide natural mulch. They take care not to walk under the fruit trees to avoid compacting the soil around the roots.

A crucial step was to do a soil test, which found low levels of phosphorous and sulphur. Wanting to do things naturally, they purchased imported guano instead of using NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) fertiliser. They then realised that guano was essentially bird poop, so they started focusing on planting trees to attract birds to achieve a more sustainable system. Also, two sacred (aka old and retired) cows were introduced, producing spectacular manure, which is 2 per cent phosphorus.

#### SYNTROPIC SUPPORT

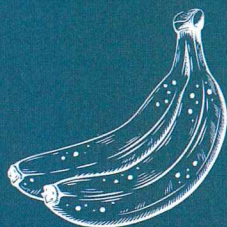
Nearer the house, there is a vegetable garden and wild gardens with self-seeding plants, as well as plenty of turmeric and ginger. There are large patches of sugar cane, which Abhay and Jayanti crush using a special machine, extracting a delicious juice that can be reduced down to homemade sugar – as natural as it comes!



**KRISHNA SANCTUARY  
IS LOCATED 20KM  
SOUTH OF KAITAIA**

## Green bananas

1. Pierce green bananas with a sharp knife.
2. Boil with the skin on for 15–20 minutes until soft (use a knife to check).
3. Peel, chop up and use in a curry, or mash and fry as you would with potatoes.



FROM LEFT A plate of delicious sustenance; Bananas grow in abundance.



While initially intending to create a food forest with only edible plants, they later shifted their focus to syntropic gardening. This method aims to incorporate trees and plants that specifically support the growth of edibles, by providing mulch, support, shelter from the sun and frost protection.

Two essential plants have been used to achieve this. The first is bana grass (*Pennisetum purpureum × americanum*), which grows simply from putting a stem in the ground, achieving a maximum height of 2m after only four months. This provides a barrier and shelter, as well as excellent fodder for the cows. The other is Mexican sunflower (*Tithonia diversifolia*), a nutrient accumulator. Its beautiful yellow flowers are loved by bees and other beneficial insects, while the foliage creates an excellent green manure, so it's perfect to chop and drop. It also shades out kikuyu, is easily propagated from cuttings and provides an excellent windbreak for delicate fruit trees.

### CREATURE COMFORT

The cows add a sense of serenity to the land, with the up-close cow experience often being the most popular part of a visitor's stay. More importantly, they provide the extra fertiliser required for heavy feeders.

As for compost, 'humanure' from the composting toilet is utilised carefully. Food scraps are not composted, but simply thrown on the ground around plants. Needless to say, there are rat traps scattered around too.

So far, Abhay and Jayanti's main challenges have been the unsuccessful introduction of free-range chickens, which were too

destructive and scratched out the mulch. Going out each night with a torch to squash a variety of beetles is also rather labour-intensive.

A big victory was the acquisition of solar moth traps from Eco Trap NZ, which utilise a UV light to lure guava and codling moths to their demise.

Abhay explains how important it is to develop relationships with local farmers, from whom he sources additional manure, wood chips, old hay-bales and wool. While wool mulch can get caught up in the weed-whacker, it is high in nitrogen and sulphur, takes about two years to break down and has been known to get low-yielding trees back on track. It's best applied over wet soil and will retain water and slow down kikuyu growth.

### A BOUNTIFUL OFFERING

Going forward, the plan is to complete the food forest to a point where it requires little maintenance (i.e. no grass to mow) and minimal input from outside, such as fertiliser. Abhay and Jayanti also hope to get their own milking cows.

For now, they offer sanctuary and sustenance to weary walkers, but their focus is also shifting towards teaching others about cooking, gardening, self-sufficiency, yoga and Ayurveda, as well as providing a place for retreats (did I mention the wood-fired hot tub?).

Garden tours are available, and don't forget to book in for a Krishna Kai lunch during your visit, because the incredible flavours will remind you what it's like to eat real food again.

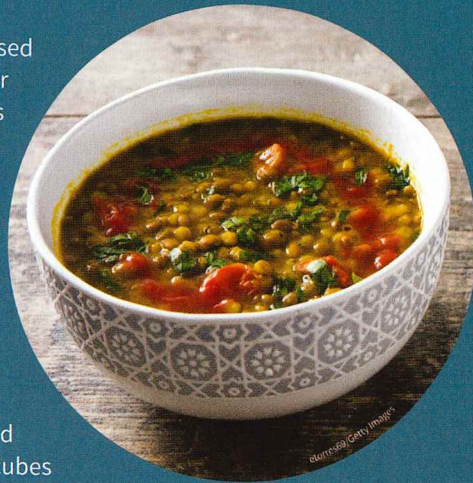
*Find out more and make bookings at [krishnasanctuary.org](http://krishnasanctuary.org)*

## Hearty dal soup

Serves 2-3

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup red lentils, rinsed then soaked in water for a couple of hours
- 4 cups water
- 1 large choko, peeled, deseeded, washed and chopped into medium-size cubes
- 150g pumpkin, peeled, deseeded, washed and chopped into medium-sized cubes
- 2.5cm piece ginger, peeled, washed and finely shredded
- 1 tbsp ghee (clarified butter) or coconut oil
- 1 tsp mustard seeds
- 1 tsp coriander powder (optional)
- salt and pepper, to taste
- lemon juice, to taste
- 1 tbsp fresh coriander, parsley or mint for garnish



### METHOD

1. Tip out the water the lentils were soaking in and rinse the lentils again.
2. In a saucepan with a heavy base, add the lentils and 4 cups of water and bring to a boil on a high heat. Once boiling, turn down the heat and let the lentils bubble away. (Red lentils release excessive amounts of foam, which is high in oxalates, so it is advisable, for better digestion, to remove the foamy water with a spoon while the lentils are cooking.)
3. When the lentils are half-cooked, add choko, pumpkin and shredded ginger, along with the salt, pepper and coriander powder (if using), and continue cooking.
4. When the vegetables and lentils are cooked, heat the ghee or oil in a small saucepan until hot, then add mustard seeds. Once the seeds start sputtering, remove them from the heat and pour onto the lentil and vegetable mixture carefully. Cook for a few more minutes so that the seasoning is absorbed.
5. Remove from the heat. Add the lemon juice and garnish with your desired herbs before serving.



**Wendy Maddison** lives with her cat in the 'winterless north' and is our specialist writer on backyard birds and animals.

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