

## **Living With Trees - Case Study**

### **Wakelyns Agroforestry** <http://wakelyns.co.uk/>

Set in the big fields of the mid-Suffolk plateau, there is a small island of radical farming.

Instead of huge monocultural slabs of cereal, we find a rich mix of vegetables, legumes, cereals, clover leys, fruits and nuts, willow and hardwoods growing together – welcome to Wakelyns Agroforestry.

This 23ha organic farm has been Ann and Martin Wolfe’s research station since 1994, where they have pioneered both wheat populations and agroforestry, gently growing an alternative production model to the surrounding prairies, exploring “how we can get those trees back into the centre of things...” Sadly Martin died in 2019, but his work and inspiration continue here and elsewhere.

There are 4 silvo-arable systems on trial here, all planted with 3m strips of trees running north/south (to minimise shading), dividing 12m or 18m alleys of crops (designed to fit agricultural machinery). There is hazel coppice producing high-grade thatching spars, hurdles, nuts (if you can get them before the squirrels!) and woodchip. The hazel is planted in double rows and one is cut every 5 years, keeping the protective hedge intact. The willow coppice works in a similar way, but the rapid growth is ready for cutting after just 2 years, producing a high volume of woodchip for the farm boiler and export to biomass suppliers.



Then there is an area of orchard, with a wide variety of apples, pears, plums and other fruits growing as medium-sized trees in strips alongside the arable crops. Lastly, the timber trees are now some 30-40 feet high, including oak, ash, hornbeam, Italian alder, wild cherry, lime and sycamore.

Diversity is at the heart of Wakelyns. Martin observed that natural plant communities contain a wide variety of species and genes, which respond to environmental variation, such as weather, climate, diseases, competition. This ‘functional biodiversity’ increases the resilience and productivity of the whole growing system and also offers a place for us humans – we like to live and work there.

There is diversity everywhere you look at Wakelyns: not a flat field, but working in 3 dimensions, above and below ground; not a single wheat variety, but a breeding population of wheat able to adapt to its environment; not a single output (eg. grain), but also fruits,

nuts, coppice, firewood, timber, shelter, habitat, carbon sequestration – the benefits literally stack up.

Industrial intensification has led to simplified landscapes with standardised crops for maximum production. Wakelyns has developed a benign complexity more akin to the abundance of nature. It is a beautiful little landscape, both intimate and busy, familiar but radical. If ever we needed agricultural production which is resilient, biodiverse, free from energy-intensive inputs and toxic outputs, protective and human-scale, the time is now!

After walking up and down the cropping alleys, sampling the ripe fruits, imagining a future farming with trees, it is a shock stepping out into the big bland surrounding fields, a sudden exposure, and a reminder of the challenges ahead.



*One row of hazel cut, next to clover ley*