

Midwestern orchard farmers have their own ideas of a good life - and are pretty smart too

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Farmers are becoming more interested in growing food from trees because orchards may be a solution for maintaining healthy ecosystems. Before industrialization, diverse orchards were common, producing a variety of fruits and nuts together while also providing forage or hay for livestock at certain times of the year. These approaches to growing a diversity of perennial crops together are coming back, now informed by science and modern designs. The US Midwest is a hotbed of these approaches in the northern hemisphere, but they are currently only a tiny fraction of the landscape. We wanted to understand how diverse orchards (which we call woody perennial polycultures) could be scaled up by learning from farmers that were already doing it.

We asked farmers about the unique complexities and challenges of growing fruit and nuts mixed together with hay and livestock, as well as what motivates them to make the often-daunting effort. From 13 interviews with 18 midwestern woody perennial polyculture farmers, we found that they largely used a small portion of their farm's land for their woody perennial (i.e. tree) enterprises, and did not earn a large portion of their income from them, though many expected their income to increase as their trees matured. Through experimentation, innovation, and farmer networks, the farmers had implemented unique approaches for balancing food production from their trees and livestock within their farms, which is an area largely absent from mainstream agricultural science and policy. The barriers these farmers report facing are mostly economic. The farmers were motivated to fulfill personal values anchored in their relationships to the land, to their communities, or to both. Farmers discussed the values of "long-termism," learning and sharing, diversity, stewardship and care of farmland, connection to nature and wildlife, self-sustenance, other-sustenance, and "the

good life" in explaining their decisions and perseverance.

Based on this study, we think that economic and agrarian policies for growing food on trees should: a) be designed to align with farmers' values and motivations and; b) take advantage of their expert management and farming know-how to drive appropriate and successful transitions to sustainable environments and livelihoods.



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