



Special Focus:

## Farmer Stress & Wellbeing

# Farmer & Collective Care at Rock Steady Farm

By Maggie Cheney

This is a good point in the season to talk about farmer care. In the Spring, there's always such a palpable joy and energy, everyone is fresh and full of possibility. And here we are in October - still in the hustle of fruiting crops, staring down weeks of the growing season ahead, bodies tired, energy strained. Covid is still here. Climate chaos is a reality. And there's a lot to be deeply disturbed by in our country and world. It's a time when it's easy to forget about joy, and hard to feel cared for.

For those of us with more marginalized identities, self-care can be especially hard. Combating self-shaming narratives, internalized racism, and the heavier burden of the day-to-day reality of showing up in bodies that may not feel like our own, or as a person of color in a majority white community in a society latent with white supremacy, just getting through, let alone thriving, is a daily challenge.

So how do we remind ourselves about the importance of care? How do we reconnect to the wonder of growing life and to the generosity of the soil? How do we deeply connect to the people we work with, especially across racial, socio-economic, gender, and cultural differences? Equally important - how do we truly prioritize care in the first place? How do we justify the investment?

In our experience, we don't have time not to prioritize care and build stronger relationships. When we speed past our humanity, everyone loses.

At our farm, we are always trying to balance the fast pace in the fields with the slower pace of building relationships and trust with each other. We find that if we prioritize interpersonal and team communication in a structured way daily, weekly, monthly and seasonally we are able to avoid larger conflicts, miscommunication mishaps in the field, and overall harm.

We invest time, money and effort into care at Rock Steady.

For the last three years, we have hired facilitators Cedar and Lucien, from Relational Uprising, as well as Kristie Cabrera, a Disability Justice consultant, to help us define and promote a culture of care within our team. Though we have worked with some of these brilliant guides since our beginning, we have expanded our work to in-season sessions with all staff. We pay our farmers for their time at these sessions, and for the time required for feedback exchange and trust building with each other.

I know, I know - a farm, paying for this?! Some years it has added up to \$5,000, other years closer to \$10,000. Note that we are a team of 12, running a large and complex \$600,000 operation, so it takes a



Amara Ullauri (they/them) facilitating a workshop for the Rock Steady crew (top). Rock Stead Crew 2022 (bottom). Images provided by author.

lot to keep the humans in harmony with each other. For some farms, this cost may seem unattainable, or out of the realm of possibility; for us, this work is critical to the overall health of our business, just as important as paying for a new tractor implement, or a tax accountant. After all, people are some of the most important assets of all.

Taking time out for these practices to define and promote a culture of care within our team might feel like a slowdown in the moment, but it actually saves loads of time, money and stress in the long run. When people are communicating well, tasks get done more efficiently, and people are working together and hopefully leaning on each other more so that people's physical bodies are not getting pushed too hard, which might in turn lead to farmers needing more time off or quitting due to injury.

Interpersonal conflict and injury are some of the most common causes of staff turnover on farms. And staff turnover causes huge stressors for small farms, sinking hours into the hiring process and retraining for highly skilled work — there are huge costs to this, along with increased stress that can overwhelm the precarious survival of the business.

Creating a workspace infused with care and deeper understanding has proven to be cost-effective for us. It is one of the ways we are actually living the values we want to uphold in our everyday lives.

### Individual v. Collective Harm/Care

Of course it is important to think about what you can do to care for yourself and your community as an individual, but it is just as important to address it as a whole organization, in a structured and clear way. Just as tackling racism has to happen on the individual and collective level, it's the same thing with care practices. And for us, it is all interconnected.

For example — structural racism is systemic and collective. The system infuses and trickles into our personal individual relationships, causing conflict, shaming and harm. This is especially true when working in a multi-racial team from different class backgrounds. It sometimes takes skillful care to disentangle the harm of systems of oppression from that of individual actions. It takes a lot of time to see people for their full nuanced selves, including and beyond our identities. In addition, there can be a lot of care within individual relationships, but if there's not an organizational culture that supports and prioritizes relationships, things break down quickly.

We take valued lessons from nature - the interconnections between root systems in the forest via mycelia, the

symbiosis, we see that the mutuality of plant families are essential for a forest's survival. We want to replicate this way of being in relationship with each other on our farm. But given our current individualistic society, and agricultural system, this takes careful work. There is much learning and unlearning that we have to do. We cannot all just "try our best" as individuals, or think that because we have a powerful common mission and vision that that means we will all be in community together easily. This might all sound obvious, but it is surprising how rarely farms can really put the time, money and effort into constructively building better work culture, communication and relationships.

Here are some of the ways we're showing up at Rock Steady to all this:

- We created and consistently revisit our Community Agreements (sharing below)
- We spend 45 minutes on Monday as a team before jumping into the harvest hustle — how are you arriving, physically and emotionally? What do we need to know about you to show you care? What support do you need?

(continued on B - 3)



## Upstate New York to West Cork: Why We Travel

By Karma Glos



Michael & Karma lunching at Knockdrum Stone Fort. Image provided by author.

I believe our urge to travel was inspired by French interns. Early in our farming, we hosted several French agricultural students. These students were required to spend a season in an English-speaking country working on a farm, and for us, it was a good introduction to sharing our budding farm knowledge with aspiring farmers. Our final French intern, Sophie, hailed from Toulouse and invited us to visit if we ever managed to cross the pond. In 2009 we decided to attempt a winter vacation while leaving our farm in the hands of a capable intern. Sophie was still game to host our visit, so we arranged for ten days: starting in Toulouse and extending down into Languedoc. This magical and very successful trip triggered a love for travel that we have endeavored to indulge in every winter since then.

Escaping the farm for a couple of weeks each winter became a bit of an obsession, with me in particular. Many pieces needed to fall into place to make these trips a reality. First, we needed to find a trustworthy and reliable farm sitter -- no mean feat when you have large numbers of livestock and a wood stove to keep burning. In addition, funds had to be saved throughout the year to pay the farm sitter, book flights, and rent a cottage. We were able to fund most of our travel through credit card points, a game we discovered worked quite well for us due to large feed bills. Once we had enough points to cover the flights to Europe, I hunted down weekly rental self-catering cottages that were a steal during the off-season. So, while we liked to travel around, we saved on accommodation by mostly staying in one place and cooking for ourselves. Besides, staying in one place enabled us to absorb the culture and get to know people, albeit briefly.

At the time of our first trips, we were a much more diverse and complicated farm operation. Even though there wasn't too much to be done on our vegetable operation in the winter, we also had farrowing sows, flocks of laying hens, workhorses, and a beef herd. Streamlining the chores so we can hand them over to a sitter is always a challenge. The best option is always to leave the work to a former intern or employee who already knows the ropes and has a vested interest in the happiness of the farm. Only someone who loves the farm and cares for the stock can instill a sense of security when we are thousands of miles away. In addition, we pay them fairly well, emphasizing that this is a job and a responsibility, not just a farm holiday.

The cost of the farm sitter is built into our travel budget; we cut costs wherever we can in order to fund the farm care. We cannot relax if we're worried about the livestock, pipes freezing, or driveway plowing. We must have a skilled, knowledgeable caretaker and we must release that responsibility to them. I believe letting go of that awesome responsibility for a little while each year helps us keep a sane relationship with the farm. The travel releases us, albeit momentarily, from that connection, allowing us to renew.

After France, we also visited England, Wales, and

Trinidad & Tobago in the following years. But of all the places we explored, Ireland truly settled in our bones. For me, particularly, Ireland felt like home. Early on we traveled through County Clare and County Kerry, finally settling in West Cork as our winter retreat. For several years now we have made our way to the same house, in the same village in West Cork. Ballydehob lies at the head of Roaring Water Bay and the base of the Mizen Head Peninsula. It's a quiet village in the winter, but the pubs are open, the charity shops are good, and there's a little natural foods store just a few houses down. The village has such a pull on me now that when I'm not there I'm covering canvases with portraits of the buildings and following village life through social media. I miss it so much when we leave that I cry when we return.

To me, it's such a strange feeling to be so in love with a place where I only spend two weeks a year. But the pull is real. Over the farming season, I keep pushing forward, knowing that for two weeks in January, I'll be back in "our" village, hearing the jackdaws call, wandering the boreens in the rain, and cozying up to pint at Rosie's Bar in the evenings. Over the years we have made friends with other small farmers digging for a living in the hills around Bantry, Dunmanway, and Skibbereen. We've followed real estate signs and poked around cottages, dreaming of moving someday. Though moving to Ireland is virtually impossible (immigration being prohibitive if you're not of EU or recent Irish descent), I still keep current on all real estate in West Cork. I know what cottages are for sale and how long they've been on the market, and I keep them saved in a file. Silly, I know, but a girl can dream.

No matter where we have traveled, these experienc-



Karma's Ireland Canvas. Image provided by author.

es have been a key part of our mental health and well-being. We have developed and maintained connections with people throughout the world, which gives us a broader, more empathetic view. And they have introduced our daughter Rosy to other cultures, languages, and landscapes. She has continued her passion for travel to Patagonia, Suriname, and throughout the US. And even as the flights become more and more environmentally problematic, we still struggle to make it happen. Maybe we can save all our "flight budget" for just one trip across the Atlantic each year. Or maybe we will need to give up most air travel altogether and find places to explore closer to home. I'm sure that time is upon us. However, after missing two winters in Ireland due to Covid, we are currently all booked for January 2023. We are going to the same house, in the same village and we will settle into the same pub each evening. We don't yet have a farm sitter arranged, but the responsibilities are fewer these days and I'm hoping we can find someone to keep the home fires burning for two weeks in January.

Karma farms Kingbird Farm with her husband Michael in Berkshire, NY and can be reached at [kingbirdfarm@gmail.com](mailto:kingbirdfarm@gmail.com).



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(Rock Steady - from B -1)

- Each team member has the option for at least 3 in-depth check-in sessions with managers or owners - beginning, middle and end of the season. This is a time to exchange feedback, voice concerns and ask for support and opportunities to grow as a human and farmer.
- We're currently trialing channels for empowering peer feedback sessions — spaces to give and receive feedback from co-workers.
- Off-season visioning and planning sessions, so that everyone is heard and included in decision-making.
- We hire outside professional facilitators to support interpersonal conflicts and commit to training our staff in communication skills and specific inter-dependent and relationship-centered culture building.
- As a farm, we also continue to raise wages and support finding affordable housing by giving housing subsidies, which is a huge issue in our area. Striving to meet our farmers' financial needs is obviously one of the most essential ways we can show care, and it's a real challenge inside our food system.
- When times are particularly tough for farmers we have also given mental health bonuses to be used at the farmer's discretion.
- We create time outside of the farm for shared joyful experiences. Going bowling, going to a local cider house, corn maze, hosting a drag or dance party. We also pay for the team to have meals together. A few years ago we made it an item on our online store - "buy farmer's lunch" and annually we get about \$1,200 to be used this way.

Let it be known, we are not perfect. There is no perfect. But we have learned and grown from past mistakes, which have led us to prioritize all the above in the ways that we do. 2022 was a tough year for us - numerous people were out with Lyme, injuries, mental health struggles, family members who needed a lot of support, a three-month-long drought, and the stresses of navigating the third season of COVID. We did not have time to prioritize the mid-season facilitated sessions in the ways we had in the past. And we experienced first hand the risks in that. Interpersonally, this was a harder season for us. But this is not new to us. Over the past seven seasons, we have felt our farm get rocked, we have seen people hurt, and we have experienced pains and mishaps that we do not want to see in our present day or future. And over the years, the more we prioritize this care model, the smoother our seasons go, the more efficient, the more profitable, and the more staff retention. We are watching, learning, and continuing on this path because we truly believe that it works.

#### For Further Reading:

Rock Steady Farm, [rocksteadyfarm.com](http://rocksteadyfarm.com)  
 Emergent Strategy, [akpress.org/emergentstrategy.html](http://akpress.org/emergentstrategy.html)  
 White Supremacy Culture, [whitesupremacyculture.info/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun\\_-\\_white\\_sup\\_culture\\_2020.pdf](http://whitesupremacyculture.info/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture_2020.pdf)  
 Saying Goodbye to Grind Culture, [medium.com/lions-story/saying-goodbye-to-grind-culture-in-2021-a806bf465a7f#:~:text=Grind%20culture%20is%20the%20idea,and%20the%20last%20to%20leave.](http://medium.com/lions-story/saying-goodbye-to-grind-culture-in-2021-a806bf465a7f#:~:text=Grind%20culture%20is%20the%20idea,and%20the%20last%20to%20leave.)

Maggie Cheney is a founder and worker owner of Rock Steady Farm in Millerton NY and can be reached by email at [Veggies@rocksteadyfarm.com](mailto:Veggies@rocksteadyfarm.com)



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Rock Steady crew members Maggie Cheney with chard (left) and Kyle Ellis with garlic chives (right). Images provided by author.

## ROCK STEADY FARM

### Community Agreements

Our Community Agreements have been created by Rock Steady farmers and staff to ensure that we are upholding our commitment to center the safety and inclusion of Queer, Trans and BIPOC people in agriculture and do our best to create a safe space for all folks to be in relationship with the land.

We invite all Rock Steady Farm visitors to honor these principles with us.

We are open to receiving feedback and questions about these commitments at any time.

1. Honor the land and sacred waters: We are part of the Housatonic Watershed, Housatonic comes from a Mohican term meaning "river beyond the mountain" that encompasses 8 major tributaries and 24 sub-watersheds that begin in the Berkshires and flow out to the Long Island Sound home of the Canarsee Lenape. We are not only connected to the area of what we now call NYC through the food we share, but through the water that flows through us as well. In total we are connected to 2,000 square miles of the Housatonic Watershed, home to the Munsee Lenape, Mohican and Schaghticoke nations, stewards of the watersheds, tidal floodplains, seeds, minerals and so much more that makeup life on these lands. As we sow seeds, prepare beds and share food, we continue to reflect on our impact as settlers on stolen land and offer gratitude to all the beings who have come before us, first nations who continue to fight for sovereignty, and those who we may not meet generations ahead of us.
2. Be in a practice of self-awareness: We all enter this space carrying various types of privileges related to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc which influence our beliefs, actions and behaviors. We practice awareness of how our words and behaviors can have a harmful impact despite our best intentions.
3. Address conflict and harm: We visibilize conflict as an opportunity to unlearn harmful interpersonal dynamics and collaborate on strategies to build healthier relationships. We practice resonance as a way to connect and attune to each other while we address harm, acknowledge the impact of our actions, and challenge common responses of defensiveness and dismissiveness in the face of conflict. We are aware that a compassionate response after experiencing harm can be difficult especially if there is a lack of trust in the relationship. We respond to harm and violent behavior according to the depth of the relationship and trust. We interrupt violent behavior that promotes homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic and/or racist beliefs in order to preserve a safer space built on trust, respect and self-awareness. This is not the space to shame or bully anyone based on appearance, gender identity, abilities or any other factors.
4. Find ways to repair harm: We collaborate to create repair where harm has been done by upholding our empowering feedback agreements and asking for external support from the community when necessary. We seek to include our diverse experiences and meet our unique needs in our accountability process. Collectively, we can find solutions to reduce the potential for harm to happen.
5. Communicate with inquiry and clarity: We practice clear, active and direct communication with consent (see below) to nurture trust, safety and accountability. We communicate with inquiry as a way to stay curious and hold complexity instead of leading from assumption. We hold grace and compassion for each other, and stay open to learning new ways to collaborate.
6. Practice giving and asking for consent: Consent is crucial to maintaining a safer space for everyone working and visiting the farm. We practice asking for and giving consent that centers the agency to decide for ourselves what is best and right for us at any given time. This is applied to asking consent about
  - Emotional labor: "Hey is it ok if I vent about my weekend during lunch?"
  - Physical touch: "Can I give you a hug?"
  - Information Sharing: "Can I post this photo of you harvesting carrots on our social media?"
  - Feedback: "Can we check in about our miscommunication earlier?"
7. Cultivate relationships: Our relationships with each other, our extended community and the land are sacred spaces where we can build trust, safety, resilience and interdependence. We prioritize practices that help us attune to each other (grounding exercises, storytelling, resonance, playfulness, etc) and deepen our connection. We move at the speed of trust, acknowledging that vulnerability and intimacy is nurtured consensually over time.
8. Challenge the binary: Our farm team, community and landscape are composed of diverse functionalities, identities, backgrounds, learning styles and needs. We create a culture of belonging by actively disrupting binary thinking that limits the possibilities of coexistence. We don't assume anyone's gender identity, sexual preference, survivor status, economic status, immigration or documentation status, background, health, etc. Please use people's correct pronouns. If you are unsure, just ask, don't assume. We invite various learning styles and workflows because there is no one right way to do things.
9. Learn from mistakes: We challenge white supremacist values of perfectionism by acknowledging that mistakes are ok. Sometimes mistakes can lead to unexpected positive results and opportunities for learning. We are not going to do well all the time and that is ok as long as we stay committed to accountability and being in a learning process together. We encourage each other (throw glitter not shade) and offer support to build new skills when necessary. Our collaboration is based on mutual learning, and the belief that "No one knows everything. But together, we know a whole lot."
10. Practice communal care: We thrive on communal care, a practice of giving and receiving care in ways that are consensual to our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. We value breaks, rest, patience and slowness to be gentle with ourselves, others and the land. We see these practices as antidotes to the dominant "grind culture" that celebrates overwork and burnout as markers of success, especially within agriculture. We agree to also care for each other and our extended community by practicing our COVID-19 policy.

In addition to our agreements, we also commit to respecting Rock Steady's rules and safety protocols on the farm.



## Farmer Stress, Suicide, and Support

By Elizabeth Gabriel

Mental health is often an overlooked challenge farmers face nationwide. There are a multitude of issues that contribute to farmer stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression. Farmland loss and land access challenges, rising production costs, plummeting farm incomes, and unpredictable climate and weather are a few well-known issues. Also, racism and patriarchy are far too common in the agriculture industry as a whole and are ever present on farms of all sizes, intensifying levels of stress and fear for farmers of color, women and LGBTQAI+ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) farmers. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic caused heightened stressors for many small and organic family farmers as supply chain problems developed, restaurant accounts halted, and cautionary practices interrupted business as usual. For a population already facing difficulties securing adequate and affordable health insurance, it's not a surprise that suicide rates amongst farmers and ranchers are well above the national average given that mental health services are less available and accessible in rural areas - where most farmers live. And these days, the same is true nationally, for urban residents and folks willing to do therapy remotely, therapists and counselors are booked with waitlists and, and it can be nearly impossible for people of color to find an available BIPOC therapist.

Mental health treatment and therapy also still hold a stigma, especially for the baby boomer generation, which means that help is sought usually late in the game - sometimes too late - when these conversations or support needed to happen years earlier. Ironically, Covid actually helped raise awareness about the real challenges farmers face on a daily basis. The evening news showed farmers dumping milk because it wasn't being purchased. The scarcity of meat and other supply-chain issues that escalated

during Covid (and still exist today) drew federal and state attention. We're seeing "the conversation shifting a little," says Kate Downes, Project Coordinator at Seven Valleys Health Coalition, formerly with NY FarmNet, "people are starting to talk more about mental and physical health together and about suicide as a whole, hopefully lessening the stigma around these topics".

A Center for Disease Control report from 2016 suggested that suicide by farmers, foresters and fishermen ("the Triple-F" occupational group) was nearly five times that of the general population. While some errors were later found in this report (self-employed farmers, ranchers or agricultural managers were not included in the Triple-F group), the fact remains that if the Triple-F group and managers were given their own group, they'd rank first and third in suicides in 2012 and 2015, respectively. There are a number of reasons for this high rate, Downes says. "The work is dangerous, it requires long hours, it's hard manual work and usually unpredictable because of weather, market prices, and productivity. In most industries, you get to choose your price - not in dairy or farming in general. Farmers are operating under so much daily stress. When somebody is under stress, they are likely to make poor decisions, intentionally or unintentionally."

In December 2020, the American Farm Bureau and Morning Consult conducted a survey of rural adults and farmers/farmworkers to explore how the pandemic affected mental health personally and in communities, and also looked at how attitudes and experiences around mental health have changed in rural and farm communities. The poll concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on many farmers/farmworkers, with the highest suicide rates in 2020 being non-Hispanic American Indians and Alaska Natives and non-Hispanic Whites. It also identified that almost half of those surveyed (1,000 of the 2,000 respondents) attach at least a fair amount of stigma to seeking treatment or help for mental health - which only exacerbates the mental health crises.

An increase of resources like the USDA Farmer Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) is seeing more people directly call about mental health and family counseling and not just financial guidance. Service providers like Black Farmer Fund, Cooperative Extension offices, NOFA, the Farm Bureau, Farm First, National Young Farmers Coalition, Farm Service Agency and Farm Credit East, just to name a few, have all become active in supporting this increased interest and need for mental health assistance.

In New York State, NY FarmNet provides services to support farmer mental health including providing stress management talks with agriculture service providers and extension agents. They also offer educational programming about farm business development and succession planning. They have family and financial consultants available for the long haul, sometimes who work with clients for years to work through a transition and they connect clients to needed groups like grief support.

NY FarmNet recently started a free Mental Health First Aid training that is open to the public and "compensates service providers such as CCE, farm bureau, ag mediation, National Young Farmer Coalition, and Black Farmers United to become trained facilitators in MHEA", says Downes, and "helps create a baseline language for discussing farmer mental health". NY FarmNet has not only been teaching people to understand what mental illness is, but also encouraging people to talk about it. "We're not teaching trainees to be counselors per se," Downes continues, "but training them to be able to talk about it and encourage others to talk about it. We know mental health greatly impacts our farming and rural communities, and silence about the topic is one of the disease's greatest threats".

The trend in mental health support is to individualize the challenges people face, i.e. assume it's the individuals responsibility to make it better. In the Northeast, the Farm Bill funded FRSAN grant was received by a collaborative group of organizations - National Young Farmer Coalition (Young Farmers), Northeast Farmers of Color, Migrant Clinicians Network, Farm First, Farm Aid, and University of Maine Cooperative Extension - and is known as Cultivemos. Cultivemos wants to "shift the system, rather than the person," says Jac Wypler, Farmer Mental Health Director at Young Farmers. They continue, "For example, 'Hey farmer, take a walk, take deep breaths' makes the stress personal rather than recognizing the systemic nature of our society and system that is not holistic and supportive of well-being. It's critical to work on solutions that are community and system-focused." Cultivemos aims to improve behavioral health awareness, literacy, access, and outcomes for farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers by developing a service provider network that can assist and meet the unique needs of agricultural workers. Cultivemos focuses on BIPOC growers, farmworkers and young farmers because these are the groups disproportionately harmed by the structural root causes that lead to farmer stress and mental health issues, and are rarely the population supported by other service providers. (Read more about Cultivemos on page B-9 in this issue)

### Peer-to-Peer Support

An effective, invaluable and affordable mental health support method for farmers and farmworkers can be peer-to-peer group networks, becoming more and more prevalent as stress and anxiety heighten, as people are willing and needing to talk about challenges, and therapists and health care professionals have waitlists for new clients. There is a handful across the Northeast and these groups - some ad-hoc, self-organized or integrated with women in ag groups, but most organized by a service provider - can create a network of people with similar life experiences, similar stressors and a safe platform to listen and share.

Other networks are one-on-one like Farm First Vermont's "Farmer Peer Network" which is now in full swing. Farmers can contact other farmers for support around stress and resources. For this network, "farmer peers" take a two-part series of paid trainings covering subjects like de-escalation, the

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(Farmer Stress - from B-4)

resources available to help farmers in Vermont and how to offer nonjudgmental active listening that helps people feel heard and reduces their stress. There is currently a cohort of nine farmer peers providing active support and a second cohort will complete the training in February. Farmer peers come from all over the state and from various types of farms. An advisory board made up of farmers is helping inform the process of this program.

While service providers don't provide medical treatment, they are essential connectors between the farmers and the specific resource they might need, whether that's a support group, financial support, mental health therapy or something else. They have a cultural understanding of farming culture that often general mental health and social workers lack. The provider might also have a prior relationship with the farmer, leading the farmer to feel greater trust and comfort in reaching out for help.

#### Limitations

Most service providers work with farm owners and not farmworkers (from migrant workers to farm employees who do not own a farm). The people who usually contact them for help are farm owners and this is also who they market services to. Many service providers rarely have bilingual support on their staff continuing an all-too-common language justice issue in agriculture. While a provider could connect a farmer who needs help with translation and interpretation service, it wouldn't be the same service as having providers who speak Spanish and languages other than English, says Karen Crowley, Manager at Farm First in Vermont.

Given 80% of psychologists, 63% of counselors and 59% of social workers are white, according to Data USA, it's not surprising that another common limitation is that most providers are white and cultural competency levels are mixed. This creates a significant barrier to supporting farmers and farmworkers from marginalized groups - the groups who experience the largest hurdles in farming because of unequal access to land and resources and systemic and blatant racism.

In Vermont, Farm First is trying to incorporate important elements like implicit bias and other race-related topics into their peer network training. There are particular programs - and hopefully more to come - in many states specifically for Black, Indigenous and Latine farmers; the Black Farmer Fund (Northeast) and the Vermont Releaf Collective (VT) are two. Additionally, the Cornell Farmworker Program works directly with farmworkers in New York and has been able to - among other things - advocate for farmworker rights, and provide critical bilingual financial and mental health support, but this isn't that common. Another organization, Not Our Farm, has developed amazing action-oriented resources for farm owners to better support farmworker rights, but many more are needed and dissemination of these resources must be broader. Additionally, more advocacy is needed at the State level to shift funding to get into the hands of the most marginalized farmer groups and to bridge the gap between mental health professionals, doctors and outside resources.

The farmer mental health crisis has always been serious. Today, in the context of the many other crises we are experiencing - constant downward pressure from cheap food policies, climate chaos, inequality and violence, and the disinvestment in the economies of rural towns and counties - accessible and quality mental health support that values the individual is more important than ever and is a critical baseline step that is far easier than addressing the systemic causes of these stressors.

\*



### Further Resources & Support for Farmer Mental Health and Suicide Prevention:

- Suicide Help Line - 988 (this is a new number)
- Farm Aid's Farmer Hotline at 1-800-FARM-AID (1-800-327-6243) has a team of hotline staff there to listen. Hotline hours are Monday through Friday 9am-10pm ET / 6am-7pm PT.
- The Farmer Resource Network is a free search tool to find organizations and resources useful for farmers, agricultural service providers, farmworkers, farm communities and farming families including publications, videos, podcasts, training courses and more. [farmerresourcenetwork.force.com/FRN/s/](http://farmerresourcenetwork.force.com/FRN/s/)
- Black Farmer Fund (NE), Rapid Response Fund, to support black farmers across the NE in emergencies; [blackfarmerfund.org](http://blackfarmerfund.org)
- Farmer Stress Assistance Programs (FRSAN); [nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/farm-ranch-stress-assistance-network-frsan#](http://nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/farm-ranch-stress-assistance-network-frsan#)
- Community Restorative Training (US), a bi-lingual stress reduction and mental wellness program designed specifically for essential workers in the Latine community; [crt-eco.org](http://crt-eco.org)
- Farm Crisis Center (US), provides an up-to-date list of national, regional and local resources for farmers in crisis, or who need mental health support; [farmcrisis.nfu.org/](http://farmcrisis.nfu.org/)
- Not Our Farm Zine (US); [notourfarm.org](http://notourfarm.org)
- Cultivemos (NE); [youngfarmers.org/cultivemos/](http://youngfarmers.org/cultivemos/)
- Be Well Farming, Cornell Small Farms Program (NE); [cornellsmallfarms.org](http://cornellsmallfarms.org)
- FarmStrong New Hampshire (NH), part of the Cultivemos collective of mental health support providers; [extension.unh.edu/farmer-stress](http://extension.unh.edu/farmer-stress)
- NY Rural Health Info. (NY), mental health professionals in rural areas; [ruralhealthinfo.org/](http://ruralhealthinfo.org/)
- NY FarmNet (NY), [nyfarmnet.org/](http://nyfarmnet.org/) & free, confidential hotline: 1-800-547-3276,
- NYS Agricultural Mediation Program (NY), solving disputes, conflict coaching; [nysamp.com](http://nysamp.com)
- Cornell Farmworker Program (NY), Creating Positive Workplaces: A Guidebook for Dairy Producers; [cornellfarmworker.org](http://cornellfarmworker.org)
- Farm First (VT); [farmfirst.org](http://farmfirst.org)
- Vermont Agricultural Mediation Program (VT); [emcenter.org/vtamp/](http://emcenter.org/vtamp/)

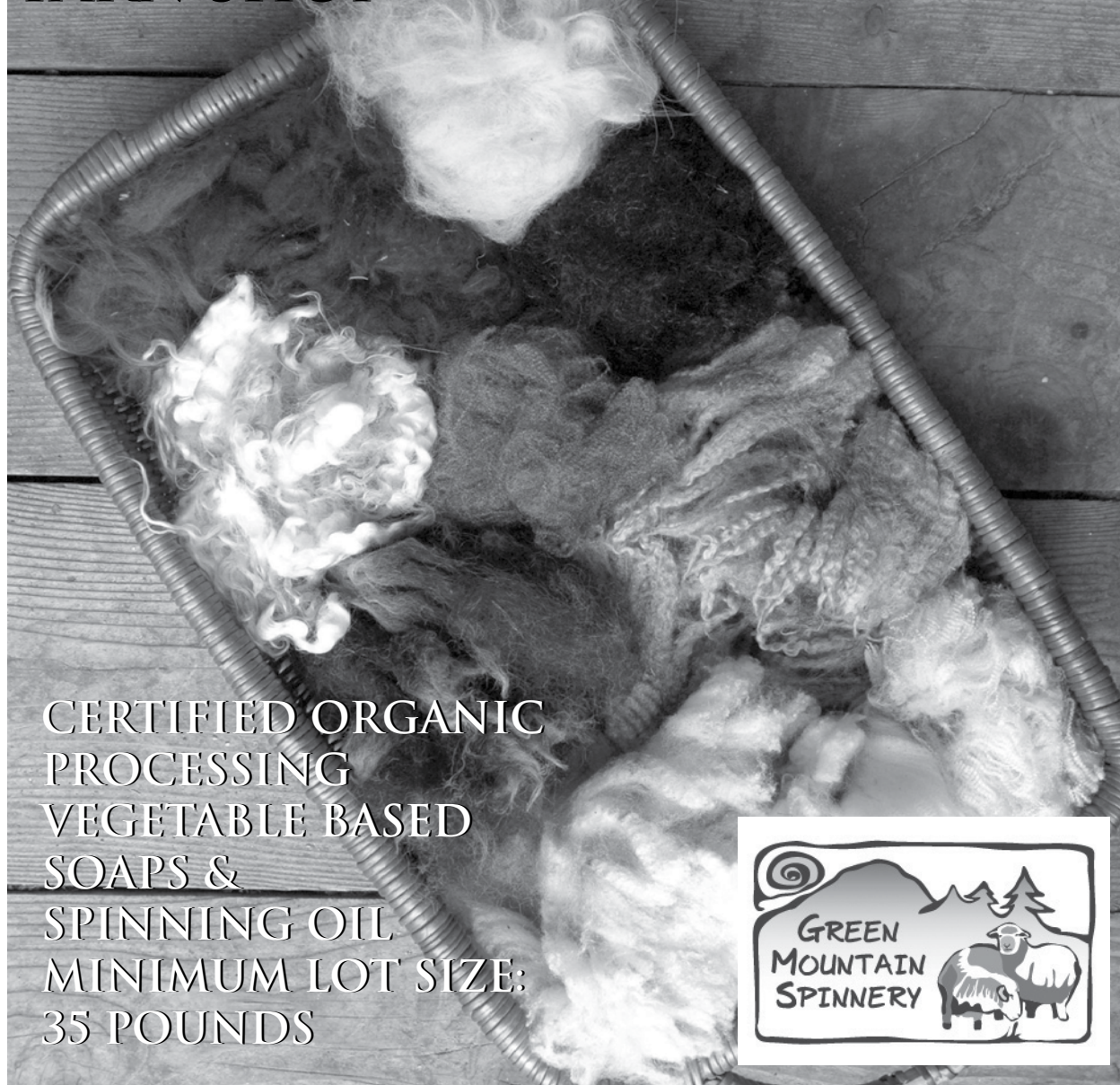
This list is by no means exhaustive. Please reach out to the Suicide Hotline (988) if you have thoughts about suicide or to your regional NOFA office to find a mental health support provider in your state.

### Hey Vermonters - Join the Farmer Peer Network!

The Farm First Vermont Farmer Peer Network will be in full swing by the end of the year. We are very excited that soon farmers will be able to contact other farmers for support around stress and resources. Farmer peers take a two-part series of paid training in things like active listening skills and de-escalation. There is currently a cohort of nine farmer peers who have completed the first series and will continue their training this fall. We are now recruiting farmers for a second cohort. Our peers come from all over the state and from various types of farms. An advisory board that is also made up of farmers is helping to inform the process.

For more information, go to [farmfirst.org](http://farmfirst.org).

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## Resilience in Times of Uncertainty

By Ann Adams

While this article originally appeared in *IN PRACTICE*, the *Holistic Management International Journal* in January/February 2021, the fear, anxiety and depression that Covid exacerbated still prevail today. The coping mechanisms explained herein remain useful. -Editor

As we enter 2021, we find our world vastly changed from how the year began. If someone had told me that most Americans would be walking around wearing face masks in public and that we would be keeping the elderly in locked-down facilities while schools were closed, I would have scoffed at them for having read too many science fiction books or being deluded with conspiracy theories.

And yet, for better or for worse, this scenario has played out in a variety of ways around the world as individuals and families struggle to figure out what they need to do to be safe and move forward in these uncertain times. The Holistic Management community has been affected both positively and negatively as some people face decreased business and others have found ways to thrive in the current market.

But, as COVID responses and fallout continue, I have seen more fear, anxiety, and depression being articulated by individuals. I am not the only one witnessing such feelings emerging. The internet is filled with statistics about the increase in people experiencing greater challenges with keeping themselves and their families feeling grounded and positive.

Psychologist Dr. Ana Nogales wrote in her article “The Stages of Coping With the COVID-10 Pandemic” on the Psychology Today website, that most people will go through the following stages as they deal with COVID and the uncertainty that comes from any massive systemic societal change.

### COVID Stages

- Panic
- Action
- Confusion
- Anxiety/Depression—fueled even more by uncertainty
- Anger
- Adaptation

I can certainly attest to having gone through these steps, and I also believe that having my holistic goal has helped me find the “middle ground” that feels right to me as the media shares the extremes of people choosing to remain self-quarantined to those who feel they do not need to wear masks. As a family, we have looked at our desired outcome and our unique risks and opportunities. We have then defined our family policies about when we will and won't wear masks, who we will let in our house and with what precautions, etc.

We are trying to adapt to these new rules to be able to engage and connect with our family (which includes grandchildren and a 95-year-old mother) and our community while being responsible citizens within the context of new state regulations. We also recognize our good fortune of living out in the country with the freedom such a lifestyle affords us while surrounded by nature and flexible work schedules.

But part of our efforts to stay grounded includes recognizing that the Covid pandemic and all its challenges are a once-in-a-lifetime experience (at least that is certainly my hope). While my mother's generation lived through two world wars and the Spanish flu, many of us have not had to adapt to this kind of global challenge before.

In talking to numerous friends and family members, and taking the pulse of my own energy levels, I am aware of a certain fatigue. Given that I don't have school-aged children at home who need homeschooling during work hours like many young parents in the U.S., I can only imagine what other people's fatigue levels might be.

I think there are a lot of people who are beating themselves up for feeling like they can't keep going. But, I think we need to look at the toll that occurs after the collapse of most of our systems that have broken down or had to be significantly altered over the last six months (i.e., religious institutions, schools, community support networks, etc.). We have used up our “surge capacity” to make that transition.

The idea of “surge capacity” is articulated in the article “Your ‘Surge Capacity’ is Depleted—It's Why You Feel Awful” on the website Elemental. They define “surge capacity” as “a collection of adaptive systems — mental and physical — that humans draw on for short-term survival in acutely stressful situations, such as natural disasters.” However, as stressful situations continue to draw on, this ongoing great uncertainty can lead to chronic stress and burnout.

To combat this stress and burnout, we have to acknowledge that we are facing a time of great uncertainty and we are still figuring out how to adapt to this new reality. While there are numerous people predicting how long COVID will be a global risk, no one really knows. Likewise, as the personal response to various policies and regulations developed to address COVID seems to generate more social conflict, we begin to fight each other rather than fighting a common enemy. This fuels further uncertainty and creates ambiguous loss—a loss that is unclear and doesn't have a resolution. Moreover, we have multiple losses—of trust, freedom, rituals, and ways of life, so we grieve these multiple losses (or react to them with some emotion like anger or fear).

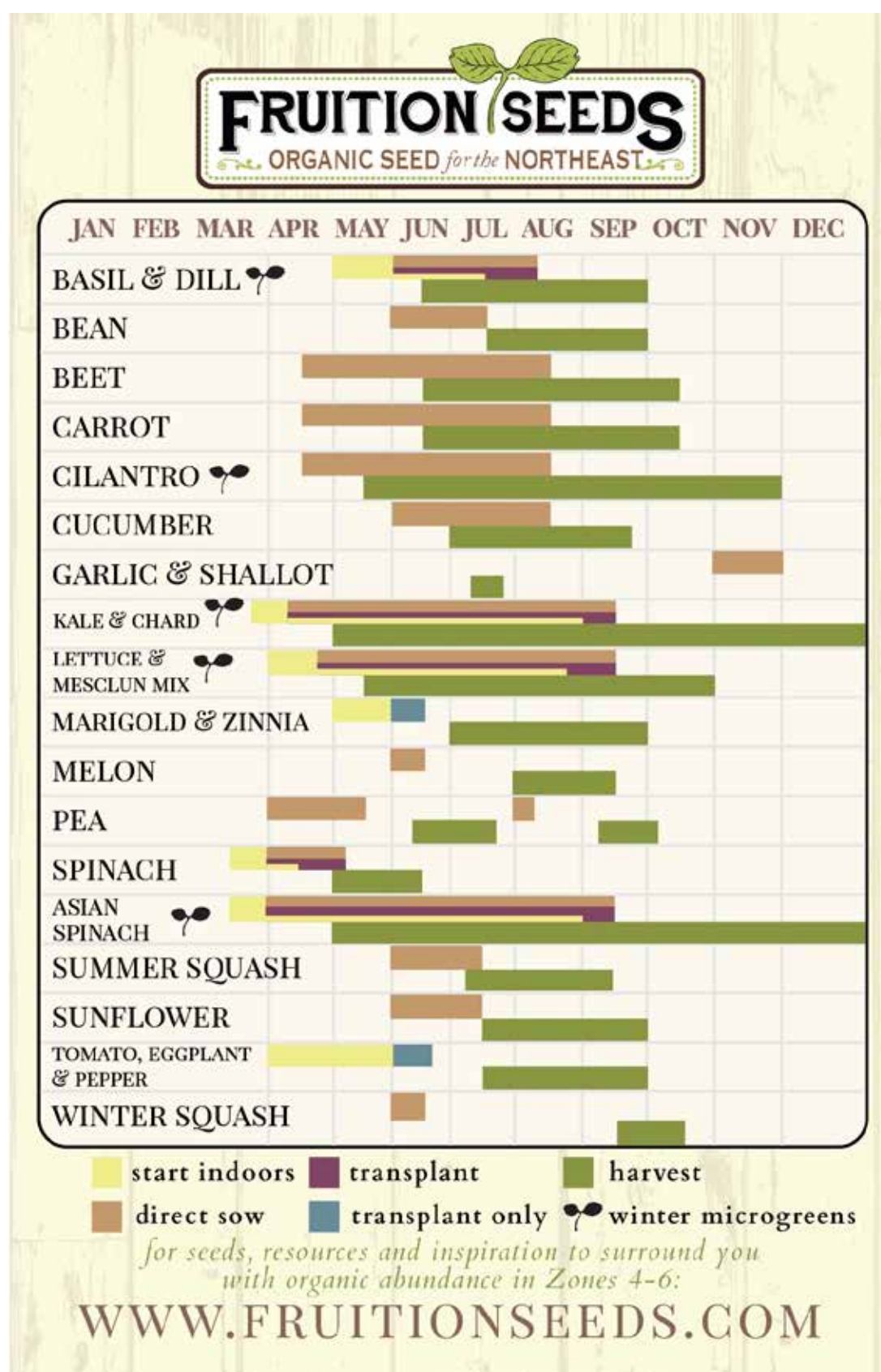
So how do we take care of ourselves in these uncertain times? Michael Maddaus writes of developing a resilience bank account. We create this resilience

first by recognizing that we don't know when this time of uncertainty will end. We need to take time for self-care, which includes building and maintaining relationships, now. In particular, we may need to build new relationships to help us with these new times. Many farmers and ranchers are building cooperatives or new retail markets to replace their restaurant markets that have dried up. Likewise, they are building new enterprises to address new needs or interests as people begin to realize the importance of a local food system and the agriculture producers who want to feed their communities.

But if you are not in the action or adaptation stages noted above and are experiencing the stages of anxiety, depression, anger, and burnout, berating yourself for not being a better, stronger, more capable person is not going to help. So many people are struggling right now. Now is the time for compassion—for self and others. It is through identifying what we are feeling and getting the help we need that we can build our resilience bank account and have the resilience in our land, businesses, and families to then be able to reach out a hand to another when they need it—creating healthy land and thriving communities even in times of uncertainty.

To learn more: visit [holisticmanagement.org](http://holisticmanagement.org)

Ann is a Holistic Management Institute (HMI) Professional Certified Educator and Education Director for HMI. She designs, implements and teaches training programs and offers consulting services in HM for family farms and ranches with a particular focus on goal-setting facilitation and financial planning and small acreage grazing. She owns a small farm in the Manzano Mountains, southeast of Albuquerque, New Mexico.





## Conflict Mediation

By Claudia Kenny

### Conflict Stress

Conflicts are stressful and over time can have destructive effects on our relationships. During a conflict, we feel stressed, annoyed, confused, hurt, mad or vulnerable and this is normal. Any information we receive that does not confirm us makes us uncomfortable. We want to be right. We want everything to fit into our version of reality - the meaning we attribute to our experiences. Conflicts are stressful because they challenge our need for stability. Anything that shakes our stability creates the conditions of a threat.

Our brains are always scanning for threats - asking, "Am I safe? Do I matter?" and sorting present-day experiences to identify similarities to difficult or dangerous situations from the past. The brain sounds the alarm when it finds a match. Activation happens very quickly. In this "activated" state our brain's neural circuitry to the prefrontal cortex which rules logic and reasoning shuts down. We struggle to recall data from memory, analyze and reason, take in new information and make decisions. Our capacity is limited.

### Mediation Can Help

When our capacity is limited and we feel stuck and without options, mediation is a way for us to talk about our disagreements and to consider ways to move forward. A mediator is a "multi-partial" support person who suspends their own judgments and hopes both parties have positive outcomes. During a mediation session, the mediator listens to understand each person's experience and point of view. The mediator reflects this back to the speaker to check for understanding and to learn more. This gives the speaker a chance to fully express what is most important to them about the situation including emotions. While the mediator is listening to understand one party, the other party has the opportunity to listen to what the speaker has to say twice - once from the speaker and once through the mediator's reflections. The mediator will listen to the second party in the same way.

Brain scientists have discovered that naming emotions, articulating what is most important about a situation, the big picture stuff, and being understood with the warmth of unconditional regard can help to settle our brain's "activated" state. When our brain's alarm mechanisms settle we regain our full capacity as our neural circuitry reconnects to our regulating pre-frontal cortex.

Brain scientists focused on conflict describe our neural reality as a balance between stability - the need for coherence - and plasticity - the need for learning, growth and change. We need coherence (a clear version of reality) and can become alarmed when challenged with disconfirming information - like another's version of reality. At the same time, our brains have neuroplasticity so our capacity and our potential as humans to learn and change is vast.

With a supported conversation a sense of the threat can often shift for participants, opening possibilities for the future. Participants in mediation begin to take in new information, build understanding, problem solve and make decisions. Participants are often able to come up with some agreements for moving forward constructively.

If you are struggling with a conflict, consider mediation. Conversations are confidential.

### About NYS Ag. Mediation Program

NYS Agricultural Mediation Program (NYSAMP) was established in 2001. NY is one of forty-three states with USDA-funded mediation programs designed specifically to serve the farm community. Since 2001, over 9000 participants have chosen our services as a way to work through a difficult situation. Trained and experienced mediators provide effective ways to help people solve problems themselves and mitigate the stress of escalating conflict. NYSAMP provides the agricultural community an opportunity to get mediation support for unpaid

bills, machinery and supplier credit, farm-neighbor disputes, interpersonal farm family issues, farm transitions, farm leases and farm labor issues.

NYSAMP provides services in every county in New York. Mediation is always voluntary and confidential. Services are free or low-cost and customized to each situation to meet the needs of the participants.

For more information visit our website [nysamp.com](http://nysamp.com)  
Call us for a free consultation: 866.669.7267

*Claudia Kenny is the Co-Director of NYSAMP and brings over 25 years of experience as a farmer and food system activist working on agriculture-related projects with diverse stakeholders in the Hudson Valley. She is a trained mediator & facilitator. She is a passionate lifelong student and teacher of Compassionate Communication. She and her husband own and operate Little Seed Gardens, a 97 acres family farm in Chatham, NY.*

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## Relational Agriculture: Gender, Sexuality, and Sustainability in U.S. Farming - Part I

By Isaac Sohn Leslie, Jaclyn Wypler & Michael Mayerfeld Bell


This is Part I of II. Part II will be published in the Spring issue of TNF, to be published March 2023.

### Introduction

Food production in the U.S. is organized through family life; 97% of US farms are "family-owned," although often rented out to other families and reliant on hired labor. Rarely can single people make a farm enterprise economically viable on their own. Farm operators often rely on a business partner who is typically also an intimate partner to directly contribute to the farm business or indirectly contribute off-farm income and healthcare. Although farmworkers are often single, many times their intimate partners are also directly or indirectly involved in the farm operation. These often gendered and sexualized relationships in farm life are so ubiquitous that they have long gone unquestioned and their effects on the social organization of agriculture are little noticed.

The replication of traditional gender and sexual relations in industrial and alternative agriculture is what rural queer theorists call the reproduction of the heteronormativity of the family farm. A queer lens on agriculture asks how heteronormativity impacts gender dynamics and sexual minorities in agriculture. It also exposes how sexuality organizes food production for all those who farm because everybody - regardless of their gender or sexuality - enacts and is affected by gender and sexual relations. A queer lens is a relational agriculture lens that invites us to appreciate the full social relational diversity of agriculture and how agriculture's inherent social relationality impacts sustainability. Em


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(Relational Ag - from B-7)

bracing agriculture as inherently relational means paying more attention to gendered and sexualized relationships on farms. It also means actively including the perspectives and experiences of women and queer farm operators, workers, and intimate associates about those relations, while not neglecting the perspectives and experiences of dominant groups. Acknowledging the relationality of agriculture further means recognizing the frequent inequalities of gender and sexuality in food and farming, and thus calling upon us to remedy these injustices.

#### A Look at Relational Agriculture on U.S. Farms

We seek to crystalize our growing knowledge about the importance of gender and sexuality in food and agriculture. We emphasize that gender and sexuality are not a sideshow but should be understood as central to the organization of food and agriculture with implications for sustainability. This article begins with a brief history of how the U.S. state oriented the family farm by promoting a particular set of gender and sexual relations conducive to industrial agriculture. It then reviews how women farmers are re-orienting gender relations and the implications this has for developing sustainable practices. Along the way, we explain how race and class lenses are critical for understanding gender and sexual agricultural relations, and highlight key lessons from food justice scholarship that guide our approach to “queering” this literature. We bring sexuality into food justice by discussing the emerging literature on how queer farmers are re-orienting sexual relations on farms and how this helps to make visible the role of sexuality in organizing food production on all farms. We argue that achieving socially just and ecologically sustainable agriculture demands understanding and re-orienting heteropatriarchal relations on farms. We offer relational agriculture - defined as a tool for making visible and re-orienting gender and sexual relations on farms, rooted in feminist and queer agrarian praxis and brings sexuality into food justice and demonstrates the centrality of gender and sexuality to agricultural sustainability - as a tool for doing so.

#### Orienting the Family Farm

The U.S. model of farming within and among a nuclear family unit emerged as a recent social construction. Just over a century ago, the family farm did not exist in the way we think of it now. Organizing farm life around a nuclear family with a male head of household in charge of food production was never a “natural” phenomenon, but a social creation. Indeed, matrilineality was common in agrarian societies, as were extended family forms of kinship. Both remain prevalent in varying degrees and forms in some areas today, especially in India, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Starting in the 1930s, USDA pushed a nuclear patriarchal model as part of its effort to address concerns about the declining rural birth rate. One way the USDA did this was through its new 4-H program, which it used to educate rural youth about heterosexual romance to increase rural reproduction. 4-H has since educated 70 million people. By the 1940s, 4-H clubs featured sexual education classrooms and, as Gabriel Rosenberg, author of *The 4-H Harvest* in 2016, wrote “4-H organizers focused on how they could train rural youth for healthy, wholesome marriages,” creating clubs “conducive to heterosexual romance”. 4-H camp taught children how to engage in heterosexual courtship. 4-H produced materials that “asserted that the economic and biological union between a revenue-producing male ‘farmer’ and a nurturing ‘farmer’s wife’ constituted both the ideal and normal form of organization for rural life” (89). As such, rural heterosexuality was not a given, but “required the state’s assistance” (103–104). The state’s efforts to teach heteronormative relations through 4-H continues today, exemplified by the Trump administration’s demands that the national 4-H organization withdraw a recent policy that explicitly welcomed LGBTQ+ members for the first time, pressuring local 4-H organizations to revoke guidance documents for LGBTQ+ inclusion.

The USDA also used 4-H to shift rural gender norms so as to align with industrial agriculture. The USDA interpreted how men farmers enacted masculinity as contrary to the adoption of corporatist agriculture

and wished to make the rural U.S. more hospitable to agricultural industry and mechanization. From the state’s perspective, farmers “begged like dependents for public relief” because they “lack[ed] the masculine self-discipline to run their farms like businesses” (Rosenberg, 16–17). By the early 20th century, the word “dependents” in the U.S. had been redefined as not only an economic relationship but as a pejorative word with sexist and racist connotations; the specter of state support threatened to emasculate and challenge the racial privilege of white male farmers. In this context, 4-H programming began training boys to be farmer-businessmen. For instance, 4-H loan programs gave boys money to practice purchasing and raising an animal and to track their finances to repay the loan. 4-H aimed to teach boys “efficiency, discipline, and precise financial record keeping, all characteristics deemed essential to propertied manhood” (Rosenberg, 56). Similar to 4-H’s push to cultivate farmer-businessmen, tractor advertisements evolved from emphasizing farmer-as-mechanic to farmer-as-businessman.

The notion that U.S. farmers are male is also a social construct pushed by programs like 4-H. This construct stands in stark contrast to women’s long legacy of farming, comprising 43% of the worldwide agricultural labor force – with some estimates being much higher because women’s labor often goes uncounted. Whereas 4-H pitched financial literacy and field work to boys, it encouraged girls to veer away from farm work typically performed by their mothers and grandmothers. As the U.S. industrialized, a new ideal of white male independence was born, based on a single wage that supported a wife and children. This new household division of labor required “female economic dependence,” which gave rise to the “newly invented figure” of the “housewife”. In this context, 4-H taught girls that instead of farming girls learned that their futures depended on their ability to maintain their appearance to attract a husband, perform domestic labor, and care for children. This involved teaching girls to “abandon revenue-producing labor and focus on domestic consumption, nurturing, health, and aesthetics”. In sum, a queer lens on 4-H is one example of how the state contributed to orienting the social relationships of the farm; the family farm was not “natural,” but constructed. This history of the social construction of gender and sexual relations on U.S. farms provides context for the barriers women and queer farmers face but also reminds us of the possibilities for how they may re-orient the family farm.

#### Women Farmers: Re-Orienting Gender Relations on Farms

The socialization of gendered farm roles is so strong that even today when women live on farms, do farm work, and make decisions about the farm, they often still see themselves as the farmer’s wife, not as a farmer themselves. In addition, the label is infused with masculine connotations to the extent that women who call themselves farmers report higher self-perceptions of masculinity than women on farms who see themselves primarily as homemakers. Strikingly, the U.S. Census of Agriculture did not include gender in their survey until 1978, when it found that 5% of farms were operated by women. By 2007, women farmers constituted 14% of primary operators and 30% of primary and secondary operators. These numbers, however, likely underrepresent the actual number of women farmers, as they do not account for the multiple roles women play on farms. For instance, when the USDA collects data on farm production, farmers might not submit data about labor usually done by women – raising poultry, livestock chores, self-provisioning, and household labor – if they do not consider it farm work. While the USDA statistics may still underrepresent the actual number of women farming, the apparent increase in women farming may be due to a combination of better reporting, women increasingly claiming the title of farmer, and more women actually farming.

Farmers’ biggest economic challenge is land access, which continues to be heavily shaped by unequal gender relations. Historically, married white women gained the right to own land as states passed Married Women’s Property Acts from the 1830s through the 1870s. However, these laws did little to change women’s actual experiences; the laws’ true intent was to keep a wife’s land free from creditors when

her farming husband went into debt and therefore maintain his middle-class lifestyle. Twentieth-century legal changes such as women’s suffrage and the 1969 gender-neutral Uniform Probate Code have not eliminated gender inequities in access and inheritance. Women are still less likely to have sufficient capital to purchase land or farmland inheritance in the same way as men. Today, women farm operators typically access land through one of three routes. First, they marry into land. Second, they draw on their husband’s income from a non-farming career to purchase their own land. Finally, they acquire their own land later in life after saving enough money or through a divorce settlement. Those who do not have a partner, family, or another source of capital are at a disadvantage. Women own 46% of the nation’s rented farmland and its estimated that women own or co-own about half of all farmland. However, social expectations of women landowners often pressure them to maintain conventional land use practices and to defer decision-making to men.

Many farmers rely on U.S. agricultural subsidies to manage the economic challenges of farming, but women are more likely to engage in less subsidized forms of agriculture: smaller farms and fruit and vegetable production. These patterns may be due to the fact that commodity crops typically require more mechanization, land, and capital. Men have long excluded women from spaces where farmers learn mechanical skills and machine operation, contributing to the coding of tractors and machinery as masculine realms. In addition, women have long experienced discrimination in land access and capital acquisition, especially through inheritance, contributing to women-operated farms’ being smaller on average size than those operated by men. These dynamics are exacerbated for women of color.

When women farmers seek loans to expand their operations, they may encounter gender-based discrimination. In 2001, women farmers filed a lawsuit against the USDA, alleging discrimination by the Farm Service Agency in the agricultural loan process (*Love v. Johannes*, later *Love v. Vilsack*). The plaintiffs argued that they had been denied “equal and fair access to farm loans and loan servicing” because of their gender. Loan officers “did not ‘read’ women and racial minorities as farmers.” Allegations included unfairly denying loans, giving smaller loans than needed, or giving them late. The 2008 Farm Bill ordered the resolution of these claims against the USDA allocating \$1.33 billion for women and Hispanic farmers however, only 3,200 of the 54,000 submitted claims were approved, totaling \$207 million in awards, leaving many who were harmed without compensation.

Women farmers encountered tokenism and performed gender by assuming responsibility for feminized “carework,” like agricultural education, customer support, and feeding others. While carework could expand agricultural space for women, it also risks reproducing traditional gender ideas, which can further subjugate women into subservient roles. Re-orienting gender relations on farms involves a careful balance between revaluing work and perspectives that have been historically socially constructed as feminine, while simultaneously creating space for redefining gender roles and the division of labor.

#### Re-Orienting Gender Relations for Developing Sustainable Practices

The rise of sustainable agriculture may provide inroads for women farmers, but gender-based barriers persist. Women account for a greater portion of sustainable and organic farm operators than industrial farm operators. In comparison to men, women within sustainable agriculture sometimes hold different values – namely quality of family life and spirituality – and definitions of quality of life derived from their gender-based roles and responsibilities in the home, community, and on the farm. The sustainable agriculture movement was slow to recognize women’s unique contributions, women are also changing these relations. Women farmer networks are a central way women farmers resist patriarchal relations in agriculture. Women landowners who make significant changes on the land – such as tran-

(continued on B-10)





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(Relational Ag - from B-8)

sitioning to sustainable agriculture – challenge social expectations and often rely on alternative farming networks like women farming groups to make those changes. Through these networks, women landowners in Iowa gained mentorship, support, and information sources, contributing to their ability to act as “changemakers” who advocated for sustainable practices and conservation in their communities. Women farmer networks demonstrate women’s ways of knowing and working in agriculture, emphasizing collaboration and peer-to-peer education. Wisconsin women farmers in 1999 used local and regional networks to share new and useful sustainable practices. Black women farmers in Detroit in 2011 organized to revitalize vacant land into community farms, leading a movement to achieve food security in their local community. There are many more.

#### Relational Agriculture and Food Justice

Who can afford to farm? The U.S. agricultural and political-economic system is guided by neoliberal policies and ideologies that put small-scale and sustainable farmers at an economic disadvantage. Accessing land is a beginning farmers’ most significant barrier. Farmers compete for land within a capitalist market, bidding against non-farmers. People who desire the land for non-agricultural uses – such as condos or commerce – can derive higher profits and therefore drive up land prices. Consequently, farmers rarely can pay off the land just by farming it. To succeed in this context, farmers must have one sort of “subsidy” or another: either institutional or “personal”. Since women have been systematically excluded from accessing government subsidies and familial-based land inheritance, which women can afford to farm? If they cannot rely on family wealth to support the business, they often turn to a male partner or may rely on migration to navigate these harsh economic realities. In the process, those who bring economic privilege from their previous, often urban, lives contribute to rural gentrification, a topic rarely discussed. Sustainable farming may have opened up a space for women to farm, but it’s a space for a very particular kind of woman: white, well-educated, heterosexual, and married.

It is not possible to understand gender and sexual relations in agriculture without seeing them through the lens of race. Racial oppression in U.S. agricultural history and today operates independently of – and not just through – class disparities. Food justice scholars have done important work documenting racism and resistance in areas critical to farmers’ success, such as (to name just a few): land access, agricultural loans, U.S. Farm Bill allocations, land-grant universities, farm worker health and working conditions. These dynamics, not exclusive to industrial agricultural, also pervade sustainable food systems.

An important critique of much of the existing literature on gender and sexuality in agriculture is its disproportionate focus on white farmers and framing of gender relations as if they apply uniformly across races. Unfortunately, we reproduce this pattern to an extent because all papers draw from predominantly white samples. When researchers end up with predominantly white samples, we must at a minimum critically interrogate the historical and contemporary conditions that reproduce such racialized agricultural geographies.

Some of the most severe gender discrimination on U.S. farms occurs at the intersections of racism and legal status in the form of sexual violence against women immigrant farmers. Twenty-two percent of immigrant farmers are women, at least 60% of whom are undocumented. Eighty percent of these women have reported being victims of sexual violence while working in agriculture. These women are especially vulnerable due to a number of factors structural to the U.S. agricultural industry, including being female in a male-dominated industry, living in poverty, having language barriers, being an immigrant and frequently lacking official work authorization. The vast majority of these women do not report the assaults for fear of workplace retaliation, job loss, and deportation. Agricultural workers are exempt from most labor law protections in general, and there are insufficient legal protections and programs

to prevent widespread sexual violence on farms. Agriculture analyses can make human rights abuses even more invisible when they do not critically interrogate the very language used to define the object of study: who is a farmer? This question is central to appreciating the relationality of agriculture. We reject the common use of the word “farmer” as a title to be saved for owners and operators of capital, which excludes the racial and gender minorities who have long been the backbone of the food system yet denied access to land ownership. It is thus important for us to be transparent that much of this article focuses on farm owners and operators (whose land may be wholly or in part rented) and farm workers who have legal status.

Similarly, a relational agriculture lens appreciates the social justice work of sustainable food movements but also recognizes that people of color’s historical and contemporary contributions to sustainable food systems are still often neglected. This erasure is exemplified by how scholars often fail to credit African-American soil scientist George Washington Carver as one of the earliest intellectual promoters of organic agriculture or to learn from African-American farmer Fannie Lou Hamer’s organizational and political strategies to liberate workers and build community-based food systems.

A third lesson to take from food justice work is that the oppression and resistance farmers face is connected to the disparities experienced by consumers on the other end of the food system. The inequalities people of color encounter in accessing healthy, culturally appropriate, affordable food are vast. However, these analyses rarely consider how sexuality intersects with race to exacerbate food insecurity. The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law found that whereas 13% of heterosexual and cisgender white people have reported not having enough money for food at some point in the last year, the figure jumps to 21% for white LGBTQ+ people. Food insecurity rates for heterosexual and cisgender Hispanic people are 24% compared to 33% for LGBTQ+ Hispanic people, and 28% for heterosexual and cisgender Black people compared to 42% of LGBTQ+ Black people.

Agriculture has always been relational. We just haven’t understood it that way – at least not recently. Heteropatriarchy captured the beast of capitalist agriculture and used it to enforce, and reinforce its power inequalities. Part of that enforcement and reinforcement was envisioning food and agriculture as pure matters of production and consumption, and not as social, economic, and ecologic arrangements that inscribe advantage just as they give us meaning, pleasure, and intimacy in life. By narrowing our understanding of the agricultural act, capitalist heteropatriarchy blinded us to its hierarchies. For to envision relational agriculture is to be mindful that social relations are always power relations, and thus susceptible to the machinations of injustice.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Jane Collins, Steph Tai, and Monica White for their thoughtful feedback and guidance on this paper.

Note: This is an abbreviated version of the article. The full article and citations can be found in *Society & Natural Resources* 32(8):853-74, [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08941920.2019.1610626](https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2019.1610626).

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## Growing Health at Daigle Farm in Brooklyn CT

By Becca Toms



Image provided by author.

As you drive down the long driveway to reach Daigle Farm in Brooklyn, you may see deer pausing by the property’s pond after grazing on tufts of grass. They look up at the oncoming car and pause as if trying to decide if you are intruding or if they are.

Though deer are not a friend of vegetables, their presence is a testament to the method Dillon Daigle has been using to grow on his acre+ of land. One that mimics how nature grows; without sprays or chemicals, with a living soil that moves and breathes, and space for sun, air, and water. Though these all seem idyllic, it’s a lot of hard work: something that Dillon Daigle, owner of the farm, is not a stranger to.

In his teenage years, when other kids were working at the local grocery store, Dillon started his own business delivering eggs to neighbors. It was his flock to care for, his route to deliver (whether by car or bike), and his responsibility to collect and spend his hard-earned dollars. Well, he’s older now, but he’s still caring for a flock of laying hens - and a small herd of pigs, broiler hens, a farm dog and cat, and a ton of veggies. It is no small amount of work to care for it all. Dillon works full time, with his partner Cassidy lending a hand, giving this farm the attention it needs because he wants healthy food.

Dillon says he farms because he looked at what was in the grocery stores, at what people bought for their families, and he knew they needed a better option - something that was better for them and better tasting. Something that was natural. So he quit his job working at a local nursery and went to work, making sure his community was eating food that would strengthen their bodies through their diets.

He uses organic practices to grow this food for the community. The plants are free to grow and battle it out with weeds and pests, but they have Dillon and Cassidy to defend them. The animals aren’t pumped with unnecessary antibiotics or given growth hormones, but they have Dillon and Cassidy to watch over them closely and feed them substantial and diverse diets. Dillon knows that this means his food has more nutrients, does more good for the body, and does more good for the environment too.

Though it’s a small farm now, they have plans to grow on the property. Cassidy imagines integrating other forms of health into the farm by exploring medicinal herbs and practicing reiki at the pond. Dillon hopes for more access to their forested land to give the pigs more foraging opportunities and better crop rotations to rest the soil. They both want to see this farm as a place people come and feel a little more alive because of it. For those who can’t go to the farm, Dillon makes deliveries to homes. They also sell to local restaurants and partner with other farms to make their food a little more accessible.

If you stop by their stand at a farmer’s market, you’ll probably end up laughing and wanting to linger and talk longer. They don’t just know how to care for plants and animals, they care for people, and the lighter heart that you leave with after getting your weekly veggies ensures that you leave with your spirit a little bit healthier.

*Becca is the Communications Coordinator for the Sustainable Foods program at UConn Extension and loves to show the heart behind why CT farmers farm.*



## Cultivemos: Cultivating Farmer Wellbeing

By Jac Wypler

Since living through Covid-19, it's easy to recall times when friends and family sought to relieve stress by tending to houseplants, cuddling with pets, spending time in the fresh air, and traveling to open spaces. The opportunity to connect with plants, animals, fresh air, and nature is often readily available to agriculturalists, yet people in these occupations deal with high levels of stress. Agricultural models driven by capitalism can make it difficult for farmers and farmworkers to reap the restorative benefits of stewarding land and raising food for their communities. In the Northeast, Cultivemos is a network designed to cultivate farmer well-being.

What do we know about the stress farmers and farmworkers face?

In December 2021, Morning Consult conducted a poll on behalf of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) with a sample of 2,000 rural adults ([https://www.fb.org/files/Farmer\\_and\\_Rural\\_Mental\\_Health\\_AFBF.pdf](https://www.fb.org/files/Farmer_and_Rural_Mental_Health_AFBF.pdf)). Farmers and farmworkers in the sample named the following as impacting their mental health: weather or other factors beyond their control (82%), financial issues (80%), the state of the farm economy (80%), farm or business problems (75%), medical issues (75%), and hours of labor (73%). While this survey's results suggest important trends, it did not include non-rural farmers or farmworkers, collect information in languages other than English, or oversample marginalized farming communities.

During the summer of 2021, Cultivemos funded six organizations in the Northeast to conduct listening sessions with farmers and farmworkers in their communities to learn about stressors, supports or coping strategies, and recommendations for ongoing needs. The sessions were held in at least three different languages. The listening sessions included a total of 38 participants who ranged from 24 to 76

years old with one to 20 years of farming experience. 19 of the participants self-identified as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC). Across the listening sessions, the farmers and farmworkers most frequently named the following stressors: feeling overworked or burned out, low pay and wages, unexpected financial crises or pressures, racial issues, weather conditions, and accessing and affording health care.

It's important to note that stressors are often exacerbated for young farmers, farmworkers, and BIPOC farmers. For example, one study found that 71% of young farmers met the criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder and 53% met the criteria for Major Depressive Disorder (Rudolphi et al., 2020). Research shows large numbers of farmworkers with significant stress levels; stressors include the mobile nature of their employment, language barriers, legality and logistics related to immigration status, social isolation, and challenging working conditions. BIPOC farmers have long faced discrimination in accessing USDA programs (as evidenced by the successful Pigford and Keepseagle lawsuits against the USDA), accessing credit, and purchasing and retaining farmland. Farmers of color are more likely to rent land and operate smaller farms with less revenue, both of which can create added stress (USDA, 2018). In addition, BIPOC individuals are affected by COVID-19 at much higher rates than white people.

When stressed, farmers and farmworkers may struggle to seek and receive support. According to the Morning Consult and AFAB poll, 63% of farmers and farmworkers reported a lot or some stigma in the agricultural community around mental health and stress. In addition to stigma, farmers and farmworkers often lack any or sufficient health insurance coverage to be able to afford professional mental health support. Even with coverage or paying out of pocket, farmers and farmworkers face a shortage of providers. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicates that 111.6 million people live in designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). A majority of Mental HPSAs

are in rural areas, with the Northeast region alone accounting for 10% of the national total. Finally, there is no guarantee that available professionals can provide care relevant to a client's agricultural occupation, their various entities, or their cultural backgrounds. For example, Black patients receiving support from Black practitioners find solidarity and a greater ability to be understood, according to a 2016 study in the Journal of Black Psychology. Yet, Black practitioners make up 2% of psychiatrists and 4% of psychologists in the country, according to American Psychiatric Association (APA) data, and white practitioners "often misdiagnose African Americans as having more severe disorders or do not provide the same level of treatment as they do for White clients". In this landscape, farmers and farmworkers need support and care that are accessible and relevant to their occupations, experiences, and identities.

What is the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network?

There are two pathways to Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) funding. The first is through regional funding. The 2018 Farm Bill allocated funds for farmer mental health for the first time. USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) awarded funds to each of their four regions - South, West, North Central, and Northeast- to develop a FRSAN. The regions received nearly \$7.2 million over the three-year period (2020-2023) to help ensure that agricultural communities have increased options for access to supportive services where they live and where they work. NIFA funding supports a suite of services including telephone helplines, a resource clearinghouse, training programs, support groups, and professional behavioral health services.

The second pathway of FRSAN funding is at the state level. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Congress recognized that agriculture producers and supply chain workers were experiencing heightened stressors, so Congress also provided \$28 million in fund

(continued on B-19)



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## Mumbet's Freedom Farm:

A conversation with Sunder Ashni while walking through the herb beds

By Angela Highsmith

AH: What initially comes to mind when you think about mental health on the farm?

AS: When I think about mental health, there's something about slowing down. Yes, the farm is a place where there's a lot of growth and activity, and at the same time, there's this balance of growth and activity and this sense of nourishment that needs to happen for the activity to take place. So when I think about our mental activity and what gives space for that, it is the slowing down, like literally the slowing of our nervous system so that we can actually process some of the things that are happening in our mind. I think about balance - what is the balance between rest and activity? How do we slow down enough to observe what is happening? How do we take the time?



Sunder Ashni. Image provided by author.

The farm is an amazing source of these observations. When I come into the garden and enter the gate, it's like I'm waking into this portal of possibility. I enter a space where there are so many different varieties of life existing, that each need something different, that each brings something different. Even just stepping in and seeing all this variety; all the shapes, colors, sizes, and the different fruits, flavors, smells - they somehow speak to me subconsciously and let me know that all those aspects of my own being; my physical, my mental, my spiritual, and all the dimensions within those, that there is space for them. If I can slow down and observe myself in this way, then I can find ways and means of nourishing myself.

AH: Speaking of variety, I've never seen yarrow with so many colors!

AS: This is Yarrow Colorado. Yarrow is an amazing plant, this is a plant that teaches us boundaries. Another piece of rest & relaxation is boundary. I remember looking at Yarrow one time and seeing it move in the wind. It was kind of doing this (moves hand in a tight spiral) "szzh szzh" - it's a centering force. Sometimes people think about boundaries as keeping things out; boundaries are also a space where we get to exist. So when we are existing in a space of healthy boundaries, there's a sense of centering that I feel like Yarrow really offers. It's really beautiful - the stalk isn't that thick, but it's super sturdy and there's something about this that's centering. It's as though it says 'okay, I understand. What are my needs? What are my needs in this moment?' The Yarrow is a flower essence for boundaries and one of the mantras for Golden Yarrow is similar to, 'I reach out to others from the golden center of myself.' When we are in this centered space, we are able to express or understand what we need in our space and what we don't, what we need to fill a space and what doesn't fit. Yarrow is a wild plant, but it's very clear about its presence. Some plants just spread everywhere and there's no clear distinction between them and others, but with yarrow, there's a clear distinction between it and those around it. This tells me something about it.

AH: You mean that it's staying in its own space?

AS: Yes! So plants - through their gesture, their color, how they grow, how they feel, how they smell - tell us something about the energy of that plant, the medicine of the plant, the gift of the plant and what it has to bring.

AH: You speak about flower essences and I know you make flower essences; how do flower essences tie into mental health?

AS: Flower essences help to bring awareness to our own patterns within the mental and etheric field. Mental health is in our mind; etheric are the things unseen that affect us or affect how we think. I like to say flower essences, as a medicine, are like vitamins for the soul. Basically, they bring awareness to things that are in or out of balance with what it is that we have come here to do. I think about flowers on a plant and their journey from seed to flower. The flower is the ultimate expression of the plan - it's the flowering of the seed. The seed in the ground is taking in so much information and learning what it means to burst through its shell to find the sun and to send its root to find water and nourishment. Each seed has a different journey. So, the essences teach us and invite us to consider ourselves as though we are seeds - to have seeded from something. Each of our experiences, each of the things we encounter in our life, help to shape us and help to shape the flower that we have become. In our lives, as a flower or a human being, we encounter things that challenge our growth. Flowers remind us that the things that challenge us help us grow and shape us. Flowers help us understand and accept ourselves and accept that there's nothing wrong with us but instead that everything is an opportunity for us to take and transform into something that brings growth and healing. Flower essences are compassionate friends and remind us that everything we have experienced can help shape us and help us grow - and not only us, but everything around us. Flower essences help us embrace ourselves and our path more fully, they help us understand how we shape our lives through our actions, how we consciously choose to move, to act and therefore impact our reality.

AH: What flower essences do you recommend for the challenges common during the farming season: early hours, hot sun, physical exhaustion, etc?

AS: Oh my gosh, there are so many! Sunflower for strength of spirit. It's a really beautiful plant, and you can tell by its shape (a sturdy stalk, able to withstand wind) that it has deep roots. There's a solitary stalk in the center that gives the base for the center flower and other flowers come around it. Sunflower is a positive sense of self - it turns towards the sun, orienting to its own light. Especially for a gardener or farmer who is solitary or feeling isolated, sunflower is a good one to work with because it shows you how to be strong and confident, yet also reminds you that you have other little buds you're shining your light on. So, a positive sense of self, that's Sunflower.

Olive flower essences for exhaustion. Another one that's really good for overworking and that 'Ah, ah, ah! Too many things to do!' feeling is Indian Pink. This is a flower from the Flower Essences Society (FES), an organization in California. Indian Pink helps us find our focus, amidst many different activities.

Spreading Phlox, which grows earlier in the season, is for community and socialization. This is one for finding your tribe, finding your people, and finding who works for you.

I'm getting to know *Lavender Cloud Nicotiana*. *Nicotiana* is related to the Tobacco family, a family that is really connected to the Earth, that loves the Earth. You have these purple 'lavender' flowers. I need to sit with this plant a little bit more and learn. And this white flower, 'cloud'. A white flower is usually about connecting to the spirit, these are also really healing for root issues like trauma. A flower like Holly or Star of Bethlehem (also white flowers) are for healing deep wounds.

Ah, there's so much in the garden that can bring rest and relief. Rest for me, as a fiery person, might be different than for somebody else. Rest for me is this (sitting with the plants), rest for me is walking in the garden every morning and just breathing and noticing. Rest is letting my mental activity rest and opening up my senses. Opening up my sense of smell, of touch, of sight and just noticing - this green leaf versus this one, this shape versus this one - gives my mind space to rest. That's what the garden is - it's a portal into the sensual world that provides deep rest for me.

AH: Ase.

Learn more:

Mumbets Freedom Farm is a Black and Brown-led cooperative farm and community sanctuary for connection, creativity, education, and wellness, in Sheffield MA, [mumbetsfreedomfarm.com/](http://mumbetsfreedomfarm.com/) IG @mumbetsfreedomfarm

*Angela (she/her) has practiced herbalism for over 20 years and is in the process of getting her Permaculture Design Certificate. She loves to cultivate weeds, forage and use what's naturally growing around her for food, medicine and crafts. Angela is a member of TNF Advisory Committee.*

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Gathering at Mumbet's Freedom Farm. Image provided by author.



## I Am the Farmer: Farming and Mothering

By Megan Browning

Abbie Corse, an owner and operator of the Corse Farm Dairy, in Whitingham, Vermont, has been learning to juggle mothering and farming for ten years, and it has not always been easy. Mother of Eli, 10, and Niko, 7, and stepmama to Grey, 14, Abbie is finally becoming clear-headed about what pressure points exist at the intersection of farming and parenting. “I’m an unusual dairy farmer,” shared Abbie in a recent interview, “because I don’t farm with my partner. This has literally defined how I am able to farm; needing to be the primary caregiver and farmer all at once.”

Before becoming a mother, Abbie had no idea what a challenge it was going to be. “My expectations of myself, brought on by a societal and cultural expectation,” she shared, “was that I would be able to become a mother and still farm, just like I had before.” In fact, after having her first son, struggling through a difficult labor and trouble breastfeeding, difficulties finding childcare, and working hard to keep the family farm going, Abbie felt more alone than she ever had in her life. “I don’t want any other farm mother to experience the pain, heartbreak and despair that I did,” she said.

Abbie described the unique challenges of farming and caregiving, emphasizing the reality that carrying out the responsibilities of your job and childcare simultaneously is not expected in any other profession. Somehow, however, in the farming world, this is expected and accepted. “If that is what you want to do, I bow to you,” Abbie shared, “but it shouldn’t be the standing expectation.”

After suffering a nervous breakdown in August 2008 while living and working away from the family farm, Abbie and her husband moved back because that was where they felt she could be most whole and

supported. With access to her family and the medical support she needed to navigate her mental illness, she apprenticed with her father to take over the family dairy business. She felt privileged to have housing and basic needs met, but money was tight, and when she had her first child in 2010, childcare was a financial burden.

Although she was able to figure out a childcare solution within their family budget, this was a seriously challenging time for Abbie and her family. Imagine the dead of July, in 90-degree weather, urgently needing to get hay dry and then having to stop in the middle to pump and drive 20 minutes to bring milk to her child in childcare. This was not sustainable.

When Abbie started thinking about having another child, she couldn’t fathom how it would be possible. “I agonized over it so long quietly,” Abbie said. “I cannot have another child and do this work that I love because I’m almost losing my mind with one.” She ultimately confided in her father who assured her that they would all find a way to make it work if she wanted to prioritize growing her family. Abbie worked with her family to ensure that her compensation on the farm would include the cost of childcare, and when her second child was only 8 weeks old, with the support of a friend, they found a spot available in childcare in the next town over where he could be safe and nurtured while Abbie continued her work on the farm.

They managed to make it through those early years until the kids were old enough to go to school. And then the COVID-19 pandemic came and everything was upended all over again.



Corse Farm Cows. Image provided by author.

While Abbie and I spoke, her two kiddos were working on remote school and Abbie was juggling a variety of meetings while feeding them lunch and making sure they were supported. She said they have been able to make it through this time because of the support of their labor force on the farm, including a reliance on the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program which has been critical for their farm’s survival. While she admits that being both a farmer and a mother are her greatest challenges, they are, ironically, also her greatest joys. “It was only after becoming a mother that I settled into how I could be a farmer as well. The work informs the work. I don’t know that I could be the dairy farmer that I am if I hadn’t become a mother.”

When I asked Abbie about the impact of the pandemic on her farm and family, she was brutally honest. “My experience,” Abbie reflected, “is that it was the same as everything else related to farming. There is an expectation from farmers themselves, farming culture more broadly and from the public at large that farmers and farmworkers will be good soldiers. That we’ll just figure it out.” This experience has not been any different. “In far rural communities or marginalized communities, you just know that nobody is coming to help you.”

Abbie readily acknowledges all of the supports and privileges she has that have helped her to make it through, putting one foot in front of the other. But she is adamant that it should not have to be such a challenge. “I don’t have any magical answers for how a new mother right now who is also farming is supposed to make it. We have to come together and insist that what we need to thrive as whole people (farmers and caregivers) in rural communities - that we’re something valuable. This is something this state needs to pay attention to and invest in. Otherwise, the farms and young people are going to continue to disappear.”

Abbie is quite clear that our young people are, in part, leaving the state, “because there is not a robust enough infrastructure here to raise your family rurally.” Farmers need what every other person needs to live a life of dignity: schools, childcare, healthcare, and community. We must continue to advocate for these things on the policy level, and in the meantime, we’re going to have to build these systems of support together.

Resources:  
Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Program,  
[dga-national.org/](http://dga-national.org/)  
The Corse Family Dairy, [thecorsefarmdairy.com](http://thecorsefarmdairy.com)

Megan is the Farmer Services Program Facilitator at NOFA-VT. She is a farmer, communicator, and community organizer whose interests, knowledge and passion center the continued viability of small-scale farming, and the redistribution of land, wealth and power to achieve a just and sustainable food system.

This article was originally published on March 19, 2021 by NOFA-VT



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(Cultivemos - from B-11)

ing for State Departments of Agriculture to expand and sustain stress assistance programs for folks in the agriculture workforce. This funding was for one year and 50 states or territories are actively engaged in alleviating stress for agriculturalists.

What is Cultivemos?

A collaborative group of organizations in the Northeast received FRSA funds, delivering the grant under the name Cultivemos. Cultivemos “envisions a future where diverse farming and ranching communities in the Northeast are seamlessly connected to accessible, culturally-competent, timely, and effective mental behavioral health care and stress assistance programs.” Cultivemos’ values include: honoring multiple perspectives, structural change, evidence and effectiveness, inclusion, farmer and farmworker informed, racial equity, sustainability (stable and resilient), transparency, and collaboration. Cultivemos’ approach to cultivating wellness includes 1) addressing structural root causes, 2) prioritizing BIPOC farmers, farmworkers, and young farmers, and 3) regranting funds.

A structural approach to farmer stress involves addressing larger systematic issues that can lead to stress such as forever chemical contamination (highly toxic fluorinated chemicals that build up in the body and never break down in the environment (See the article in on A-7), land access, and systematic racism. The grant focuses on communities disproportionately disempowered by these structural issues, namely farmers who identify as BIPOC, farmworkers, and young farmers. For example, BIPOC farmers and farmworkers lack opportunities to access land given that 98% of all farmland is owned by white landowners. Black farmers in particular have been dispossessed of land and systematically discriminated against by the USDA. Additionally, the Department of Labor states that “farmworkers [with a primary language other than English] ... are disproportionately likely to experience workplace violations such as wage theft,” and therefore lack opportunities to access capital. Equity is central to the structural approach at Cultivemos in order to ensure that aspiring, new, and beginning farmers have the opportunity to farm; their engagement is core to a sustainable farm future.

Cultivemos aims to address structural root causes of stress – especially for BIPOC farmers, farmworkers, and young farmers – by regranting funds. Over the last two years, Cultivemos has regranting \$675,000 to service providers, \$117,000 to language justice, \$220,000 to farmworkers and farmers, and \$550,000 to grassroots projects and organizations.

A major pathway of funding to service providers and grassroots projects is through the Network’s cohorts. Within the Network, various cohorts have

formed as communities of practice to connect and identify areas for collaboration. Cohorts convene service providers within 1) a geographic area within the region, 2) a community of practice, 3) a thematic agricultural area, or 4) an affinity group. Cohorts meet regularly and may propose a project to increase the capacity of service providers to address stress and mental health needs among Northeast farming communities. These funds may be used to bring speakers to the Network, work with facilitators, hire contractors, develop training, or other projects that improve mental health and wellness or address the root causes of stress in our farming communities.

What is Cultivating Resilience?

Cultivemos’ Farm Communication Cohort produces a podcast – Cultivating Resilience – this is just one example of the Network’s regranting efforts.

Farming is an amazing way of life, one that is rewarding in so many ways. Farming can also be stressful. Often, agricultural workers prioritize everything on the farm before the most important asset: themselves. Sometimes hearing stories of others who have shared this life and these struggles can be a great way to find support. Recognizing that others are also challenged – and may have found strategies to meet those challenges – often makes the burden less onerous. Cultivating Resilience uplifts stories from farmers facing challenges on many platforms including Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

On the Cultivating Resilience podcast, farm care starts with self-care. Join Network Members Hans Hageman and Dr. Kay Megan Washington as they dive into the stories of real, independent farmers and the struggles they face every day, and how they are overcoming them—things like family farm succession, economic burdens, and rural isolation. Please support your fellow farmers and the network and join the community by listening, following and liking Cultivating Resilience on your favorite platform.

Resources:

Cultivemos, [linktr.ee/cultivemos](http://linktr.ee/cultivemos)

*Daughter of the Tree: Walking in the Woods with Sojourner Truth*, Cultivemos Farmer Advisory Board Member Rev Dele opens our spiritual imagination to young Sojourner Truth’s life in nature and how those thoughts can continue to liberate us in this new children’s book, [revdelestore.com](http://revdelestore.com).

*Jac (she/they) is the Farmer Mental Director at National Young Farmers Coalition and the Project Director for Cultivemos. Jac has worked in agriculture for a decade, most recently receiving a Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their research on queer farmers in the Midwest.*

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## It’s Not All Bad News: Farmers and Loggers are Happier Than Most Workers

By Richard Robinson

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, farmers and loggers are among the happiest workers in the United States, with the least stress and finding the most meaning in their jobs. A reasonable conclusion might be: Farming may be stressful, but at least it’s not finance and insurance.

Every year, the BLS conducts the American Time Use Survey, in which thousands of people record what they are doing at intervals throughout the day. Several times over the past decade, respondents were also asked to rate their work experience in terms of happiness, meaningfulness, and stress, among other parameters. Each on a six-point scale.

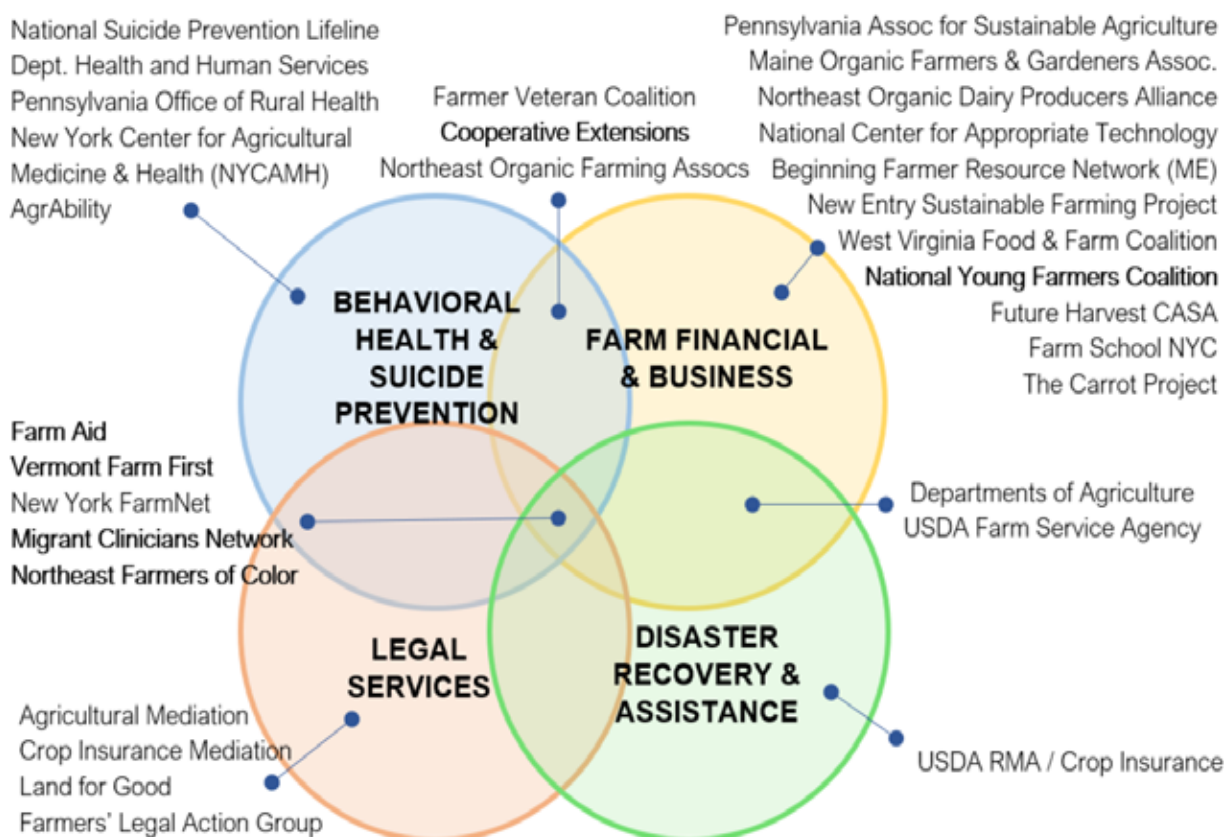
Data analyzed by Andrew Van Dam of the Washington Post indicates that workers in agriculture, logging, and forestry rated their happiness as 4.4, meaningfulness as 5.2, and stress as 1.9. Those compare favorably to every other work category, including health and social assistance (4.0, 4.9, 2.6), educational services (3.9, 4.7, 2.9), and finance and insurance (3.6, 4.1, 2.9).

Looking even more deeply at the data, Van Dam concluded that “while your workplace looms as the single most stressful place in the universe, the great outdoors ranks in the top three for both happiness and meaning — only your place of worship consistently rates higher.” And for those of us whose farm work is integral with our sense of spirituality—whose fields are indeed our places of worship—there can be no better job.

The happiest, least stressful, most meaningful jobs in America, by Andrew Van Dam. [www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/01/06/happiest-jobs-on-earth/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/01/06/happiest-jobs-on-earth/)

Richard Robinson farms at Hopestill Farm in Sherborn, MA. [Hopestill.com](http://Hopestill.com)

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## Your Approach to Decision-Making Can Alleviate Stress

By Erica Frenay

What causes you to feel stressed out? Major sources of stress in my life include, in no particular order: money, kids, livestock, off-farm job, my farm business, and the general overwhelm of having taken on too much. You may of course experience many other sources of stress. As if that wasn't enough, the stress of our individual experiences is compounded by the miasma of collective anxiety that comes from local and global events: acts of racism, natural disasters, dire economic predictions, the national political circus, war... so much suffering at home and around the world. It's a challenge to protect your mental health while remaining a reasonably informed citizen. These pressures - among many others - are sources of chronic stress.

Acute stress can come in the form of major shocks that occasionally rock our lives, like illness or accidents, or they can be a one-time hit when all of our markets, kids' schools, and life as we knew it altered because of Covid in the Spring of 2020.

The most challenging period of chronic stress for my husband Craig and me was the 3 years that we were building our home on the farm. We had a newborn infant - who was cool with about 4 hours of sleep in 30-min increments each night - and a 4-year-old. I worked 3 days a week at my office job and my husband ran a construction business full-time, all the while we were also building our farm's physical infrastructure, building our home, developing markets, and managing livestock.

The most life-altering acute stressor we've experienced at Shelterbelt Farm was a major fire in Fall of 2021. The "barn" that contained our friends' home on the second floor, our farm store, workshop, and farm storage space burned down in the middle of the night while we watched in horror.



Shelterbelt Farm barn on fire. Image provided by author.

As different as these two stressful moments were, the primary tool that helped us move through them both was the same: Holistic Management™ (HM). For over 20 years, HM has been improving our well-being by helping my husband and I feel clear on how we want our life together to be and giving us tools to make decisions that move us toward that vision. Ultimately, this has given us a sense of control over our lives, which is a useful illusion that can alleviate stress. I say 'illusion' because there is so much in life that we can't control - like pandemics or fires - but HM helps you take control of what you can: your values and behavior, including the choices you make and where you focus your energy.

Maybe you've heard of Holistic Management as a grazing or financial planning tool, and it is helpful for both of those things, but the core of it is about decision-making. Not exactly sexy, but considering the hundreds of decisions we make every day, harnessing their power can have sexy results, like increased profitability, joy, and stronger relationships.

Practicing HM begins with identifying your fellow decision-makers in whatever you're managing, whether it's a family, a farm business, an organization, or even just yourself. Who gets to decide what happens within that entity? In our case, my husband Craig and I are the decision-makers, though once our kids reached the age of 7 or 8 we started including them in decisions too.

The decision-makers sit down together and have some deep conversations about how they want their lives or their work together to be: Harmonious? Financially lucrative? We also ask 'what does each decision-maker need in order to feel content?' Statements usually cover time, money, relationships, creativity, spirituality, health, and ecological impact, but can include any themes important to the decision-makers. Responses to these questions form the very beginning of a "Holistic Context" or "Holistic Goal".

Craig and I wrote our first Holistic Goal in 2002 - long before we had children or a farm - and fully revised it at least 5 times in the first decade, usually after realizing that we were failing to use it for decision-making because it was too basic, too poetic, or paraphrased too much from the HM textbook (because we wanted it to be "perfect" - ha!). Our Holistic Goal needed to be in our own words and straightforward enough to easily use to guide our decisions. Our most recent draft describes our successful farm, a loving family, a strong sense of community, a cozy home, good health, and enough time and money to travel and learn. We also describe living in a place where the people thrive and feel a strong sense of community, where farming is valued, biodiversity and soil health are strong, and all people feel welcomed and supported regardless of their identity.

Of course, not all of this has been realized yet, but the power of a Holistic Goal is in stating your intentions and desires in the present tense, and then investing everything you have within your power - your time, energy, and money - to make it happen.

There's much more to the whole process of writing a Holistic Goal; I only described the first part. And while writing it is a helpful exercise, it's only when you actually use your Holistic Goal to make decisions that it comes to life. There's a series of questions from HM to guide that process too. Because it's better learned from practicing with help during a course, as opposed to simply reading about it, I encourage you to take an Intro to HM course if you're curious - [www.holisticmanagement.org](http://www.holisticmanagement.org) is the best place to look.

So how did any of this help Craig and me survive the periods of both chronic and acute stress in our lives? During those early years of building our home, family, and business all at the same time, we could look at our Holistic Goal and see that even though our lives felt exhausting and hard in the moment, we still had (or were moving toward) the life we had described in our goal. We were building that cozy home to nurture our growing family. We were creating that farm that would nourish our family and community, and we were surrounded by loved ones who enriched our lives with good food and laughter. We could also see that at some point it would get a little easier (the baby would eventually learn to sleep more than 30 minutes at a time, right??) Having this shared perspective on our life helped us operate as a team, and support each other through that long challenging period, rather than taking out our frustrations and exhaustion on each other.

When the fire took away the heart of our farm in 2021, our 10 years of intentionally investing in the nebulous concept of "building community" paid off in ways we never could have imagined. Eighty people showed up to 7 work parties to clear the mess left by the fire. Their presence - a direct result of intentions set in our Holistic Goal - reminded us to look to the HM decision-making process that had served us so well. Despite the haze of our trauma, having a familiar framework to guide us meant that we were able to quickly assess our available resources, consult our Holistic Goal, and use the decision-making process to figure out what to do next. We are now well into rebuilding the structure, and its next iteration will


include an improved farm store and apartment, as well as a community gathering space and a commercial kitchen, both of which will allow new possibilities to emerge for the future of our farm and family. There's a lot we don't have control over, and stressful things happen almost every day. But we can control how much we allow this stress to affect our health. HM helps you remember that you have control over your focus, time, and money. It helps you plan how you want your life to be and harness your decisions to move you toward that. And when the worst happens, it still offers a framework to recover and keep yourself moving toward your vision. In short, it helps you to be resilient, which is a life skill that seems increasingly critical in these uncertain times.

Erica Frenay owns and operates Shelterbelt Farm in Brooktondale, NY and works for the Cornell Small Farms Program.




The Shelterbelt Barn rebuilt after a fire. Image provided by the author.

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## Solidarity & Organizing Could Mean a Food System that Supports Workers' and Farmers' Wellbeing

By Jon Magee

*"We have to break with the professional doctrine that ascribes virtually all of the problems that clients experience to defects in personality development and family relationships...This is a political ideology as much as an explanation of human behavior. It is an ideology that directs clients to blame themselves for their travails rather than the economic and social institutions that produce many of them."*

-Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, "Notes Toward a Radical Social Work" in *Radical Social Work*, ed. Bailey and Brake, 1975

*"Things are really terrifying and enraging right now, and feeling more rage, fear, sadness, grief, and despair may be appropriate. Those feelings may help us be less appeased by false solutions, and stir us to pursue ongoing collective action for change."*

-Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And The Next)*, 2020.

You would have to be completely checked out not to have difficult feelings right now. In our society farmworkers and farmers already get the short end of the stick, and mounting large-scale crises only make the situation worse. Farmworkers earn low wages, enjoy few protections from harm and abuse, and have limited ability to improve their working conditions without leaving farming altogether. Community-scale farms struggle with high costs, low prices, difficult marketing conditions, and the increasingly harsh vagaries of the weather. Add to all this the physical and mental strain of overwork.

Calling this situation a mental health crisis is only partly correct. It's more accurate to say that farmworkers and farmers are struggling through an ongoing political crisis that has devastating implications for our health and well-being, including our very survival. Don't get me wrong—it's absolutely necessary to offer timely mental health interventions that support people to cope with acute, difficult circumstances and support healthy relationships. We also must honor the strategies that individuals find helpful in navigating difficult times. My question is, how do we also honor the root causes of people's suffering and work to transform the larger-scale conditions of our well-being? We already have compelling visions for how to farm in ways that nourish the people working the land—agroecology and food sovereignty—but we will never achieve those visions without collective political action.

Collective action is a deep and necessary resource for building our mental health. It is a force that will transform us and the world. When we join together for mutual aid, help and care for each other, and work towards addressing the causes of our shared suffering, we build the infrastructure to deal with our immediate needs and the power to take on much bigger problems. By connecting with others, we help transform despair and grief into anger, defiance, and action. That group connection also becomes a basis for shared joy, camaraderie, and courage. In the words of Dean Spade, those feelings can "enliven us."

Social movements for mutual aid and power-building are not a new concept, in agriculture or anywhere else, but they are not familiar strategies for many farmers, especially white farmers and those with class privilege. There are two great lineages of mutual aid organizing in and around US agriculture: Black freedom movements, Indigenous and Latin American movements, and allied movements of immigrant farmworkers.

For Black farmers and Black communities in general,



*Families of evicted sharecroppers of the Dibble plantation near Parkin, Arkansas, who were legally evicted during the week of January 12, 1936. The court found in favor of the landowner, who charged that by membership in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union they were engaging in a conspiracy to retain their homes. The photograph was taken just after the evictions — at gunpoint — before the families were moved into a tent colony. January 1936. Image source, Wikimedia.*

mutual aid has long been a strategy to resist oppression, displacement, and state-sponsored violence, as Monica White documents in her excellent book *Freedom Farmers*. White describes the long tradition of self-help and cooperation among Black farmers, farm laborers, civil rights organizers, and scholars, from the Tuskegee cooperative extension to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. Some of the most transformative, movement-building work of the Black Panthers took place through their free breakfast program and other community survival programs. Today a whole host of movement groups, many sprung out of the Movement for Black Lives, continue to do important mutual aid work in Black communities across the US, often with a strong and clearly stated goal of building collective power.

Mutual aid has long been a strategy for community survival in Latin America in the face of state violence and ongoing extraction and underdevelopment led by corporations from the Global North. One well-known example of this tradition is the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil, who has long organized schools for teaching farming methods to members, who then seize underutilized industrial farmland for their own use as subsistence farmers. Another inspiring contemporary example is the Argentinian movement Ciudad Futura, which started out as a movement to resist land grabs by developers in the settlements on the outskirts of Santa Fe. They later started a cooperative dairy farm to help feed their members, as well as a host of businesses to create jobs and provide services and an electoral party to push through more progressive policies. Across Latin America, numerous organizations together form a "social and solidarity economy" based on mutual aid, self-help, and provision of basic needs through shared effort. Mutual aid has also been a key part of farm worker organizing in the US, not least because of cultural and personal ties to organizing traditions in Latin America.

What's different about these traditions of organizing, as opposed to the landscape of small farmer advocacy in the US? Politicization, solidarity, and connection to an organizing tradition.

First of all, at a time when grassroots movements are claiming wins across the US and around the world, the farming world is surprisingly disconnected from much of this political organizing. I recall a talk that Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson gave in 2018, when he told the crowd at UMass (and I paraphrase), *Don't look to Cooperation Jackson to learn about how to build cooperative organizations. We come up here to learn how to do that. Look to us because we have a political analysis and a political program that grounds our work. That's what you all need and what you should learn from us.*

There are many overlapping causes for the depoliticization of small/family farmer movements. Government policies displaced and depopulated rural communities by directly targeting and driving out farmer and worker organizers. Much like

other movements in the '80s and '90s, the fledgling organic movement retreated from its earlier political ambitions. Many in the movement shifted towards sharing gardening and farming know-how and establishing local markets, which later morphed into consumption-based, "vote with your dollar" strategies aimed at affluent customers. The non-profit industrial complex now dominates the sustainable farming movement, and that leaves us susceptible to the political pressures that come with foundation and government funding and creates fewer openings for grassroots mobilization. Labor law and financial pressures pit owners against workers, and a strong culture of rugged individualism and self-striving diverts our energies away from collective projects. However we got to this point, our movements will never be able to offer systemic solutions for our personal struggles unless we develop a clear political analysis, strong community connections, and a grassroots vision for how we take power.

Solidarity is the next missing ingredient. As Dean Spade says, "Solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements...Solidarity across issues and populations is what makes movements big and powerful." Successful movements are built by people who view themselves as equals working towards shared goals, and we have a long way to go before farm owners and farm workers can legitimately view themselves as equals, even among organic and community-scale farms. Each group has its own struggles—owners regularly face extreme financial pressures trying to keep a farm business afloat, and workers struggle under difficult working and living conditions that are partly dictated by the owners and partly a result of much bigger systems of oppression and exploitation. A small portion of farms do live their values and offer better working conditions, but they still struggle to earn revenues that can sustain the farm. Mutual aid, driven by a deep commitment to solidarity, is a method to bridge divides by foregrounding politics and acknowledging each other's circumstances, we see how our struggles come from the same root and learn how to meet our needs together. This kind of solidarity is urgent and essential.

The third missing ingredient is a connection to an organizing lineage. Despite setbacks and cycles of mobilization and demobilization, Black freedom struggles and Indigenous and Latin American movements have weathered severe repression for centuries. White and multi-racial farmer movements in the US largely did not survive the double blow of state/vigilante violence (Red Scare, Jim Crow, COINTELPRO) and government farm policies of industrialization and depopulation. Even the hippie back-to-the-landers eventually sorted themselves out into those who wanted to focus on political action and those who wanted to focus on growing food, not least because of the general crisis of Left movements after the '70s. Organic farmers today have very few connections to the farmer justice networks of the '70s and '80s, who organized food strikes, dumped

(continued on B-22)



## Just Breathe: Coping Skills on the Farm

By Valerie Woodhouse

Self-care as we usually imagine it doesn't have a place on my farm. I'd love to say that my clinical social work training taught me how to maintain a healthy work-life balance. During the farm season, all bets are off. During peak season I'm lucky if I get more than 4 hours of sleep, eat lunch, or have a single thought outside of farming on a given day. In this state of survival, my emotional capacities are drained. A snarky comment from a customer or a simple obstacle in production can make it feel like my heart is swelling into my throat, and suddenly I'm holding back tears, anger or bitterness. I feel isolated and overwhelmed. In these moments it's easy to spiral, play the role of victim or even worse, the role of martyr - digging in and deciding to forge ahead at any cost.

From my social work background, I've learned that it's easier to calm frayed nerves and take the edge off of suffering by tapping into the body rather than trying to control the mind. Our bodies are programmed to respond to messages through our nervous systems. Stress automatically triggers our body into fight, flight or freeze. Chronic stress keeps our nervous system in a perpetual state of hypervigilance, always assessing possible threats, unable to find rest or relief. This can result in high blood pressure, inflammation and heart disease, not to mention strained relationships, low-self esteem, depression and burnout.

Luckily, our bodies respond nearly as quickly to cues that trigger our calming parasympathetic nervous system, releasing dopamine, and serotonin and helping our bodies find a restorative state of peace. We'll never be able to rid ourselves of stress, uncertainty and challenges on the farm, and we live in a society that devalues food and the system supporting it. But, there are ways to support our bodies and minds within the farming lifestyle. Here are some simple strategies that I use to help mitigate stress and make life a little easier on the farm, even for just a few fleeting moments.

The first step to relieving stress is to make sure our basic needs are being met. Are we getting enough sleep? Are we eating food that will sustain and energize us for long, physical days? Are we drinking water and addressing injury or illness? When we're overly tired, hungry, dehydrated or in pain, we can't think straight, let alone cope with stress. At the same time, it's unrealistic and overwhelming to try to live a perfectly balanced life. When in survival mode, try picking just one or two areas of your physical health that are most out of balance and set tangible goals to slowly get back on track, like getting to bed before 11 pm, going to physical therapy or making sure to eat breakfast.

When we talk about covering our basic needs, money is also a factor. Financial instability is one of the most widespread and daunting forms of stress that farmers face. I've farmed through grief, droughts, disaster and a global pandemic, and nothing twists my stomach into knots like financial stress. There have been many times my partner and I have asked ourselves, "Can we keep farming?" It's a particularly painful form of dread when that question stems from financial insecurity. Talk to a business advisor, connect with other farmers, communicate with your lenders, and find out if there are grants, financial assistance, or other resources available to you. There is no shame in accessing the support you need to survive or acknowledging that you need a flexible payment plan.

The constant change and uncertainty of farming can be part of the thrill, and it can also bring unforeseen challenges. After 5 years of searching for land, we launched our farm in March 2020 just two weeks before the state went on lockdown for COVID. Like many, my mental health took a hit. Not only did we have to throw out our plans, navigate changing guidelines, and respond to unprecedented events, but we were suddenly isolated, unable to share our

new farm with family and friends, and dealing with a parent whose health was rapidly declining. My partner and I took turns breaking down in empty greenhouses, questioning our decisions and damning the universe for such horrible timing. Weekly deliveries became like ticking time bombs to see if I could make it to the next stop before unraveling. Giving into intrusive thoughts, I'd fantasize about running the van off of the road, imagining it must be easier than dealing with the mess we were in. I share this to destigmatize and name the pervasive struggle that farmers have faced with active and passive suicidality throughout history and across the world. As farmers, everything is riding on factors outside our control. A lost crop, an extreme weather event, or an injured animal can mean a bill goes unpaid. It's normal to feel helpless, hopeless or like there's no way out.

Pause. Breathe.

When we step back we can often find that we have more options than we thought. There are coping mechanisms that can help find clarity during this level of panic. The key during a crisis is to trigger the body to relax rather than convince your mind to do so. My favorite strategy to jump-start the parasympathetic system on a hot, chaotic day is to simulate the 'dive effect'. This technique makes your body believe you just dove into a deep, cold pool of water so the heart rate slows and stress hormones lower in order to keep you alive underwater. To simulate this effect, take a deep breath, lower your head below your waist, hold it under cold water or place ice packs over your cheeks and eyes. Hold your breath in this position as long as you comfortably can before slowly rising and returning to breathing as normal. Notice changes in your body. I highly recommend sticking your head under a cold hose or taking a nourishing dip in the river when you feel like everything's falling apart.

The breath is our greatest ally when it comes to stress reduction. When we are anxious, upset or running on adrenaline, our breathing is short and shallow. If we can slow down and deepen our breath, it tells our nervous system that the coast is clear and we must be safe from danger. There are thousands of breathing techniques but the basic recipe is to inhale deeply into the belly and breathe out fully, extending the exhale longer than the inhale. This could mean inhaling to the count of 4 and exhaling to the count of 6. I use my breath to find ease and reduce stress almost every day. On the farm, I pair breathing with my motions, counting out breaths as I water in the greenhouse or lift harvest bins into the truck. Sometimes I silently say affirmations or mantras as I breathe. Last season a friend shared a rose glycerite she made. During moments of intense panic, I take a few drops of the sweet, fragrant glycerite as I breathe deeply and affirm, "I am safe in this moment". Although practices like these don't take away the stressful realities of life on the farm or the systemic inequalities, market pressures and climate chaos that will remain stressful, they help me find a little stability, clarity and relief from overwhelming emotions.

Finally, gratitude is a great antidote for despair. Why continue farming when it's such a uniquely stressful, unpredictable and uncontrollable career? For me, it's because there's so much to be thankful for. After years of working in community mental health, I've come to realize stress follows you down any walk of life. Gratitude has the power to transform feelings of hopelessness into feelings of abundance. During particularly difficult times my partner and I will ask ourselves what we would do if we weren't farming. Despite the hardships, farming always wins. Feeling gratitude for the land, the fruits of our labor, the hard-working team that helps us, the community that supports us, and the autonomy and independence, all help us find perspective.

We choose to keep farming each season, so we must keep growing our own resilience too.

Valerie Woodhouse is a licensed clinical social worker who runs Honey Field Farm with her partner in Norwich, VT. She can be reached at [valerie@honeyfieldfarmvt.com](mailto:valerie@honeyfieldfarmvt.com)

(Solidarity - from B-21)

milk rather than sell at rock bottom prices, and ran volunteer crisis lines. How often do we talk about the tractorcade of 1979, when hundreds of tractors and thousands of farmers occupied Washington, D.C., to stop farm foreclosures and return US farm policy to "Parity, Not Charity"? Without strong connections to the past, it's no surprise that many farmers today, especially white people, have trouble seeing what role they can play in building movements. But we cannot just be spectators, hanging back in the wings, offering little more than admiration and monetary donations. We must grapple with the directive from Subcomandante Marcos: "*haces el Zapatismo donde vives*"—be a Zapatista where you are. In a spirit of deep humility and learning from elders, we must connect to living lineages of organizing, build solidarity every day, and claim power.

Farmers, workers, and everyone on this planet all need the same things: good food and clean water, community, livelihood, dignity and purpose, and a connection to the land. Entrenched power structures make it hard to satisfy these needs. When we come together to figure out how to build our collective power, we bring our actions in harmony with our spirit. We lay the foundations for well-being even amidst struggle and find the energy and courage to carry on. We do this not just for ourselves but for everyone and for future generations.

In the words of Assata Shakur:

*It is our duty to fight for our freedom.*

*It is our duty to win.*

*We must love each other and support each other.*

*We have nothing to lose but our chains.*

Jon Magee is a community organizer based in the Connecticut River valley of Massachusetts. He also provides technical assistance to farmers through the Agricultural Justice Project, which offers practical tools for building solidarity, cooperation, and fairness on your farm, including through their extensive Farmer Toolkit (available at no cost). For more information email [jon@agriculturaljusticeproject.org](mailto:jon@agriculturaljusticeproject.org). \*

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## Growing From Labor to Leisure

By Quincy Gray McMichael

I was trudging across the pasture, tripping over the miniature Appalachian hills that rolled under my feet: thick clods of turf and earth, uprooted by my pigs and stippled with their manure. I had yoked myself to a wood-and-wire structure large enough to shelter several mature pigs from wind or sleet or unrelenting sun. I was pulling with all my power to move it. My pigs were always on the go, rotating across pasture year-round, so their shelters traveled with them. After a few days - or one rainy, muddy hour - they would have chomped and churned all the forage in their paddock.

Nothin' like pigs to ruin a good pasture, I heard a local old-timer intone in my head as I strained, thick ratchet straps wound around my waist like an ungainly yellow belt. My right foot slid on an overturned clump of pasture grass. I almost lost my balance, impossibly postured as I was: pulling the heft of the shelter ahead but also, somehow, lifting the leading edge into the air enough to surf the soil that rose and dipped like the mountains that surround my West Virginia farm. Almost there—just 20 feet to go, I thought as I bore down, using my body like the machine I knew it was. Only three more shelters to move after this one. And then I just need to carry the watering troughs, fix the fence, and clean the chicken trailer before dark.

I am not the first farmer to suffer a breaking back - or wrist, or hip, or spirit. Farmers have been rising at dawn on creaking knees, working through excruciating pain, and pressing on to dress in layers and slog through snow to check on lambs or calves or seedlings for generations.

On that muddy spring day in 2015, as I hauled that pig shelter across scarred pasture, I would have laughed at the idea that leisure has any place on a farm. I shunned the carbon footprint of mechanized equipment, instead relying on my body as my primary tool. I found pleasure in decimating my to-do list and falling into bed, dead-tired when I could no longer drag myself through just one last job.

I could not yet see the ridiculous irrationality of denying my own needs while striving for ecological balance on what was supposed to be a sustainable farm. I carried my farm on my own breaking back, oblivious to consequence and fallibility, muffling my humanity by denying myself the pleasure of leisure. I saw my injuries and limitations as weakness until my faltering body compelled me to get honest with myself. Later, as I began to share my story with other farmers, I realized that their experiences often matched mine.

In 2018, the first infestation of basal cell carcinoma bloomed along my nose - skin cancer born from years of incautious outdoor work. A year later, I underwent surgery on both wrists to remove painful ganglion cysts, inflamed by season after season of hauling thousands of 5-gallon water buckets to pigs. A decade of digging, lifting and pulling resulted not only in well-defined muscles but in an agonizing labral tear that still hampers my right hip, and in damage to my lumbar spine, the searing ache of which prevents me from working as I would like.

Although I am strong and active and capable, farming has taught me that my body is a nonrenewable resource. As I have confronted the shocking and unanticipated decline of my own health and capacity, beginning in my early 30s, my body has forced me to recognize that my farm—no matter how groovy and “beyond organic”—was not, after all, sustainable.

### Recovering Health—and Joy

“I started getting more pleasure from the work than from recreation,” says Jenna Brownell, who grows organic produce at Whippoorwill Farm in Rappahannock County, Virginia. “The usual ‘fun’ activities no longer mattered - I couldn’t enjoy those without thinking about work, so I just worked.” At 35, Brownell, too, feels the excruciation of heed-

less labor. She has been farming for much of three decades, beginning on her family’s dairy farm, where she internalized the “culture of daily work, every day, no matter what.” In years past, Brownell dedicated herself to work above all else, managing farms and gardens for others to the detriment of her own health. “Work comes first,” she deadpans.

In a world where only a few grow the food that everyone eats, romanticizing farm life is all too easy: We imagine cuddling barn kittens, clean overalls flying on the line, apron pockets piled with fresh eggs, sunsets on the front porch. Even for those who should know better - the farm-curious, or dedicated farmers’ market shoppers - the image of a smiling farmer bearing her basket of bounty through tidy rows of collards and peas as ducks graze nearby can be intoxicating enough to obscure the reality of hard, messy, dangerous work.

Brownell was in her late 20s when the first “sign to slow down or change” arrived - an inguinal hernia, requiring surgical repair. The next year: wrist surgery for carpal tunnel and tendonitis. Then, a torn labrum and hip surgery. “Amid all the pain and turmoil, I was still worrying about work [with] no real comprehension about how I worked, how I take care of myself,” she says. “The idea of changing meant I would have to change my way of farming, my identity.”

“The pleasure I got out of attention and being super strong and capable - I’m that badass farmer chick - ended up shaping my own identity...” Brownell admits. Then, she herniated a disc shoveling manure. This final injury grasped her attention.

After enduring spinal surgery, Brownell is still healing, still dealing with daily pain. Yet, she knows that leisure is an essential part of her recovery, so she practices by walking with her dogs every day. “I don’t know what pleasure looks like anymore... My pleasure came from jobs I haven’t been able to do for years.”

“I’m starting at square one now, after making farming my priority... Asking, what makes me feel good?”

Aaren Ross Riddle, of Well Fed Farm in Floyd County, Virginia, tells a similar story with different details. After the distressing premature birth of her second son, farming seemed like the healthiest solution. As she recalls: “The father of my boys and I began with the goal of raising the most nutrient-dense food possible for ourselves.”

At first, hard work was a balm: “Learning to stretch fence and hauling water, feed, and sour milk to hogs helped me feel strong and capable again. Hard work helped me get to sleep at night,” she says. But on a farm, the work never stops. “At one point I was milking three goats and a cow every morning, running on just a cup of coffee. ... Eventually, it all became too much, unsustainable.”

Ross Riddle’s first consequences, though, were personal. Her marriage ended, thanks in part to the stress of keeping pace with the demands of farming, forcing her to take a long look at her small farm and sell off some of the livestock: “a decision made after a few good, hard cries.” After a year, Ross Riddle says, “I felt I could breathe again. My body had gotten physically stronger. ... I [realized I] just had to think smart and remain calm and positive.”

Despite the lighter load, Ross Riddle’s hands remained full with milking, cooking, and preserving - all jobs she loves. So, when an on-farm rotator cuff injury sidelined her dominant arm, coinciding with a torn ACL that required surgery, “it was a brutal wake-up call,” she says. It forced her to pare back, to slow down even more. Healing took two years and involved “therapy, a lot of working out to build the muscles of [my shoulder and] leg back,” and, “copious amounts of [homemade, pastured] bone broth.”

Recovery - from both heartbreak and physical injury - helped Ross Riddle to tune into gratitude for her daily routine of work and pleasure. Now, she finds satisfaction with her “hands in the soil, not just when all the potato tuber seed has been planted.” She notices the contentment she feels “while I am

milking with my face pressed into the fuzzy warm flank of my cow, not just when I get back inside and strip off all my winter layers to process the milk. Enjoying the right now... the I am in it. The methodical plugging along.” “I now find much more pleasure in the process of the task,” Ross Riddle says. “Sure, crossing something finished off the list will momentarily feel good. But, with farming, the lists literally never end.”

### A New Focus: Mindfulness

In my first decade on the farm, I too prioritized work above all else. Like Ross Riddle and Brownell, I neglected the need to nurture myself. When I awoke to this reality, my health was so far gone that only drastic action would suffice: I sold my pigs. I stopped selling at markets. I also started telling on myself—talking and writing about overwork, forcing myself to become vulnerable. I instituted a practice of radical leisure: I decided to make time for leisure each day—whether I wanted to or not, whether I felt like I had time or not.

Observation has become essential to the way I farm: The more I rest, the more aware I become, the more I learn—from the land, from the livestock, from each season. The hens conserve energy by laying fewer eggs as daylight wanes. The trees drop their leaves and plants wither, storing reserves in their roots, resting as they wait to regrow. Even the ever-ready livestock guardian dogs spend hours sprawled in the sun each day. The farm continues to be my steadfast teacher.

Easing into a gentler way of farming introduced me to two distinct types of pleasure: mindful work and pure leisure. Neither felt natural at first. Pure leisure is just that—reading, lying in the grass with my dogs and taking a walk. Once I get past the discomfort of doing nothing, pleasure rushes in. Staying mindful while working, though, requires focus.

I was kneeling in my garden in June of 2020, weeding by the early-morning light, far before the sun had crested the treetops. The first root released easily. I shook off what little dirt came along and set the greenery aside. The next weed was not such an easy pull, yet the process still enchanted me: I tugged and felt the fibers of the plant begin to give, so I eased my grip, adjusting the placement and pressure of my fingers around the root, digging into the soil for a firmer grasp. Then, it came out! Other weeds did not, so I tried again, with a different tack—or a hand tool.

As I continue to practice this level of engagement, my work delights me; it becomes easier for me to maintain enthusiasm and wonder—whatever the job—when I work mindfully.

This spring, I moved the pig shelters. In the four years since the pigs left, the wireframes have sat in my pasture like shipwrecks - their abandonment another consequence of healing, the passing seasons softening their wood. As rain, earthworms, and microbes ate away at the lumber, injury and intuition adjusted the way I performed my daily chores.

So, when I felt ready to move those shipwreck shelters, I found help: I steered my old Ford up the hill, looped those same yellow ratchet straps from shelter to trailer hitch, and let the truck do the pulling.

The job did not take all day. I resisted the urge to fill those extra hours with other work. Instead, I made myself a nice lunch and took a nap.

As a farmer, making time for leisure sometimes still feels radical to me: How can I justify pleasure when the work is never done? Yet, if I observe and listen, the farm always offers an answer. If plants and animals find ways to regenerate through rest, to permit themselves the pleasure of leisure, ought not a farmer allow herself the same?

Quincy Gray McMichael stewards her farm, Vernal Vibe Rise, on Moneton ancestral land in the mountains of West Virginia.

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# Lessons from the Land & Other Musings

We all face unique challenges and need support systems to get through them. Learning and sharing can help us all move forward into a future that we need to embrace. Writers who shared their contact information welcome hearing from you if you'd like to connect. After all, supporting each other is what the NOFA network is about, right? - Editor

## Dealing with Climate Change

I am writing this letter to talk about some of the challenges I am facing here on our family farm. This farm has been in the family since 1897 and has continuously been farmed by this family since that time. I have been farming here since 1973. The farm is located in Athens, NY on land that was part of Glacial Lake Albany. The soils here are clay. Deep formations of heavy clay. We are also situated in a valley with a fair-sized watershed that sends lots of water our way.

In the distant past, the farmers in this area created drainage systems to move the excess water downstream to the Hudson River. The many springs and seeps were drained with hand-dug ditches filled with rocks that moved the water to the streams. We also farmed with horses which had a less substantial impact on the soil. This was very productive farmland where diversified farms worked to grow crops that were sent to New York City to feed its people and horses.

Fast forward to the present time, and we no longer farm with horses or in most cases grow diversified crops. In fact, the vast majority of the farms are now sitting abandoned and many are slated to become solar installations. The farms that are still in operation all use tractors which seem to grow ever larger with time. Our farm is no exception. We now use two tractors to work the fields and harvest the crops, which in our case is hay.

The land has seen a steady decline in productivity since we made these changes. My biggest observation is the compaction of the soil from using this equipment and the impact it has on the life in the soil and the resulting decline. At one time many years ago they grew and harvested alfalfa on this farm. We have not seen an alfalfa plant here in many years. Today, we are struggling to produce a quality mixed grass hay and to grow productive pastures for our animals.

Enter the accelerating rate of climate that we are seeing with warmer, wetter winters and more extreme weather during the growing season. The past several years have been so wet here that some of the wetter fields have turned to sedges that are able to thrive in these conditions. Trying to restore the diversity of the plant populations in some of these fields is becoming a monumental challenge. With the extreme wetness of the soil and enhanced compaction from the equipment, we are working the land even harder to prepare a seedbed for the crops. All this is in the face of ever-increasing costs for seed and fuel.

The land is suffering from all these changes, but I will admit that I am probably suffering as much as the land. I am a person who is not afraid to work hard and invest in the future. The challenge that I am facing is the crushing blow when after all of the work is done the crop fails to grow and thrive because the rain came and drowned the seedlings! I cannot believe that I am alone in these trying times, but it seems we all live in our own little part of the world and feel as though we are somehow a failure. This is crushing to the spirit and will and has led to severe bouts of depression. This has become my experience in these times of change.

Hopefully, we as stewards of the land can and will find ways to work through this time of change and be able to restore the health of the soil and bring back the health and vitality of the land which we need to support the lives and health of our animals and the people we feed with our labors. For most of my life, I have been an optimist who could see the

future as an opportunity to live and grow. I am now seeing myself as a sad pessimist who is wondering what will be when my grandchildren reach my age.

James S. Taylor, Sunny Acres Farm  
James is a 69-year-old farmer trying to farm using regenerative methods and can be reached at  
jtaylor5172@gmail.com.

## Ten Ways To Practice Simple, Daily Acts of Gratitude

Face the direction of sunrise upon waking and wash it over yourself.

Let the first words out of your mouth be something kind.

Pay full attention to your breathing for at least five minutes a day.

Consciously touch some part of the natural world each day: soil or snow, a plant, water, or wind.

Shape a gentle smile for softness and an open heart. Send a wave of love to two people during a pause in your day—one for whom it is easy to do so; the other, not so much.

Prepare at least one of your meals each day; share food you grow or prepare with family, friends, or those in need.

Know the source of your food and energy and the path of your waste. Change something you do or consume in the direction of reducing your impact on the lives of others and the earth's finite resources. Make or do one thing that involves creativity every day.

Before you sleep, thank whoever or whatever you believe participates in the creation of life, no matter how hard or good your day has been.

Ricky Baruch and Deb Habib,  
Seeds of Solidarity Farm and Education Center in  
Orange MA, where they've cultivated family, community,  
and a loving long-term marriage,  
www.seedsolidarity.org

An excerpt from Making Love While Farming: Field  
Guide to a Life of Passion and Purpose,  
Levellers Press, 2019.

## Tomatoes and Sumac

Something to know about me: I'm a chronically late person. I am always thinking I'll be fine if I leave home at the time I'm meant to arrive. I am baffled by digital clocks, and in my mind, all the weeks of July happen simultaneously. I was recently reading Soul Fire Farm's Work and Learn Day Handout, and was struck by how they describe potato planting time - "We plant potatoes around the time the dandelions start blooming." I felt some freedom reading this. Seeing Soul Fire farmers write so explicitly about relying on earth instead of solely on human-made time-keeping systems lodged deep in my mind.

In July, we started planting tomatoes. It's hot work in direct sun. It's not only about getting tomatoes in the ground; we also stake every 10 feet and run string up and down the 200-foot beds to give structure to the spindly tomato stems to grow toward the sun. We put tomatoes in the ground around the time of the summer solstice when the sun is strong and out for long days. That solstice sun is what gives the plants enough juice to produce the fruiting crops that we love to eat - and that give seeds for next year's generation. Think tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant. At Rock Steady, we plant our fruiting crops in plastic mulch to help keep down the weeds, because these plants stay in the ground for so long. It takes months to grow these veggies, much longer than our leaf crops and a lot of our root crops.

In mid-July, my friend pointed out that the staghorn sumac is now the reddish-pink color that tells us it's ready for making sumac pink lemonade and drinking on a hot day. It's a nice drink to refresh after working in the heat. Sumac pink lemonade after an afternoon of trellising tomatoes just makes sense. I

find comfort in these rhythms that make sense in my body. They remind me of the reciprocity we are in with earth.

We all experience these rhythms, whether we are aware of them or not. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about how goldenrod and aster bloom at the same time and look so beautiful together. Farmers learn the rhythms and we are in a constant dance with them. All of us are experiencing huge shifts in ecological rhythms - and feelings like grief and fear that come with climate change. Our bodies might know before our minds register the dysregulation.

I'm curious what you notice about the earth's rhythms. And what we would create if we all got together to make a clock or a calendar that was rooted in these rhythms. Maybe I wouldn't be so late all the time...

katharine constas (all pronouns),  
Rock Steady Farm Millerton, NY

## Driven by Our Values We Grow Resilient

All too familiar are stories of farmers that are stressed beyond capacity, teetering on the edge of burnout. We are too acquainted with the narratives of how farming is hard, stressful, and requires inhumane work hours. There is truth to these narratives; stress and burnout are a reality for farmers from the largest industrial operation to the most modest market garden. However, when we turn within and look at why we became farmers our reasons are often some of the most profound and universal of human needs- relationship, sensory immersion, and gratitude.

Surrendering ourselves to forces beyond human control- seasonal changes, unpredictable weather, and the inherent complexity of stewarding the health of living beings- allows us to step into an ancient relationship that ties a person to place. Though sacred, this relationship can be stressful in our modern context in which farmers are constantly swimming upstream in an economic paradigm that values quantity and replicability over quality and attention. Yet is this relationship to place not precisely the reason many of us, or our ancestors, became farmers? To look out upon the land that we tend to and genuinely feel that our work is doing good for ourselves, our families, our communities, and the earth is to commune with a most sacred manner of relational living. This requires a care and attention that is only possible through deep observation.

When we take the time to steep ourselves in the sensory experience of a farm- the bubbly call of a goldfinch on a summer afternoon, the beauty of a bright orange carrot, the softness of a lamb's wool- we become a part of our farm's ecosystem. Wherever we are, we are so fortunate to be humans on this planet and perhaps one of the best ways to honor this privilege is to immerse ourselves in the senses and find deep gratitude for the smells, flavors, sights, sounds, and sensations that we are constantly surrounded by.

Cultivating respect for our role as holders of the land-human relationship in our communities, and living in daily sensory awareness lends itself naturally to a state of gratitude. I can think of no medicine more powerful for our mental health than gratitude. Gratitude can overcome crop loss. Gratitude can withstand drought. Gratitude orients us towards a sense of abundance and interdependence that is critical for the generational thriving of a farm. Such an orientation equips us to handle the challenges that come with farming with grace.

We don't choose to farm because it is easy, but this sacred vocation need not be our demise. When we prioritize relational stewardship of the land, daily sensory integration with our surroundings, and a deep gratitude practice, we become resilient to even

(continued on next page)



(Lessons - from B -24)

the biggest challenges we may face. We become stronger, more caring, more observant farmers when our farming is driven by these, amongst others, values and as such are able to live with joy.

*Noah Poulos is a farmer, writer, and educator in Western North Carolina*

Finding Home in Farming



MD Alam. Image provided by author.

MD Alam is Providence Farm Collective's newest incubator farmer. Providence Farm Collective (PFC) is a nonprofit organization located at 5701 Burton Road in Orchard Park, NY that provides access to food and farmland to under-resourced people. Alam originally comes from Bangladesh which is an agricultural country. When he immigrated to the United States, Alam had a sense of homesickness and missed the foods he used to eat. It was very difficult to find long squash, bitter melon, amaranth, or taro from back home.

After finding out about PFC Alam was able to grow long squash, ginger, specialty squash, and green chiles on the 1/4 acre he was provided. He also receives technical training and shared farm tools that would be otherwise inaccessible.

Alam emphasizes how farming is a full-time com-

mitment. It requires a great deal of time, patience, and physical labor. The climate and weather are other layers of hurdles that create uncertainty about the success of your efforts. This year's unusually dry weather hindered the growth of his crops which he intended to sell at the farmers' market.

Despite this, he finds there is a therapeutic aspect to the work. He is comforted by the quiet, solitary moments where he can self-reflect. Being alone in nature yet among a larger community of support, growing the foods he used to eat at home, gives him peace. Alam shares, "At the end of it all, harvesting what you sowed with your hands gives you a sense of pride that is unmatched."

*Hamadi Mganga (he/him) is Marketing Coordinator at Providence Farm Collective. He inspires to highlight the stories of farmers in WNY.*



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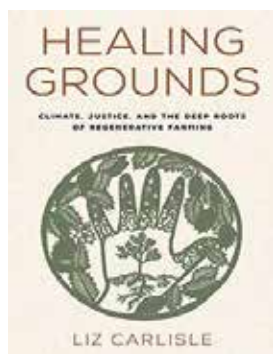


# Book Reviews

## Healing Grounds: Climate, Justice, and the Deep Roots of Regenerative Farming

Author, Liz Carlisle  
Island Press, 200 pages, \$28

Reviewed by Gail Wadsworth



In 2021, Forbes published an article entitled: Regenerative Agriculture: The Next Trend In Food Retailing. The photo published with the article shows a woman standing in a vast field of monocropped corn. The article states that General Mills, Pepsi, Hormel, Danone, Unilever and Target, among others, are committing themselves to purchase “regenerative” agricultural products.

“Regenerative agriculture is poised to move into the mainstream faster than many people expect, in my opinion. It is a classic triple-win situation. Consumers can receive healthier foods, farmers can have a more secure and prosperous future and the planet will benefit because regenerative agriculture provides it a better chance to heal and restore itself. At the confluence of these forces will be the grocer who serves as a conduit among the three.” Jack Ul-drich, Forbes, August 2021.

We have seen the co-optation of “organic,” “sustainable,” “natural” and “fair” by corporate farming interests as these terms have gained the approval of eaters. But “regenerative” has a very specific meaning that is difficult to lie about. Regeneration is an act or a process of restoration. It includes a spiritual revival and the processes necessary to elevate something to a “better, higher or more worthy state.” It is hard to imagine Pepsi and other corporations embracing true regenerative practices which are a counterpoint to industrial, capitalist, and colonialist systems.

In her book, *Healing Grounds*, Liz Carlisle reveals “real deal” regenerative farmers and ranchers speaking in their own words. It is an inspiring and optimistic book. Beyond story sharing, it provides us with a road map for the way ahead in soil health and environmental regeneration.

In *Healing Grounds*, creative land managers demonstrate alternatives to current industrial agricultural paradigms. In their own words Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Asian American farmers and ranchers shine a light on what is sometimes hidden knowledge, uplifting traditional farming methods as examples for us all. The stories recount historical knowledge intertwined with current science. These young farmers and ranchers are reconnecting with their ancestral agricultural knowledge. Rather than focusing on the damage done by industrial agriculture, this forward-looking book shows how farmers of color are melding traditional knowledge and experience with modern scientific understanding. These stories show the power of cultural knowledge to reclaim and rebuild the land, all focused on the importance of soil. They claim the term “regenerative” as a way to restore biodiversity and slow climate change.

Each chapter is organized around a unique land manager or specific practices tied to cultures.

Chapter 1: Return of the Buffalo describes Latrice Tatsey’s (In-niisk-ka-mah-kii – Buffalo Stone Woman) work in NW Montana. Latrice is working on a graduate degree in environmental studies at Montana State University. At the same time, she is working to restore buffalo habitat in the Blackfeet Nation. “Partnering with the buffalo restoration program at Blackfeet, Tatsey and her colleagues are documenting the animals’ interactions with the prairie ecosystem and trying to anticipate how these might shift with the warming climate. How do

buffalo affect the biodiversity of the landscape? How do they impact soil carbon? How do they fare in extreme weather events?” Tatsey is working to gain the answers to these questions from the buffalo.

In Chapter 2: Black Land Matters, Olivia Watkins, an African American woman, tells the story of her family’s forest land in North Carolina. As a student of agriculture and soils, Watkins spent her free time working on farms. When she learned that her family’s forest land was going to be sold, she was not too concerned. However, as she learned more about the hurdles her family faced in the purchase of the land, she became intrigued. When Watkins finally visited the land with her mother and grandmother, she made the decision to embrace the 40 acres and start a farm. She asked herself what it would look like to create farms in the forest. She kept the trees and started to grow mushrooms. Her agroforestry work was underway and it just continued to grow, honoring the environment and her heritage. “For Watkins, stewarding mycelium goes hand in hand with the legacy of cooperative economics throughout the African diaspora. Mycelial modes of economy have a deep history in Black farming communities.” This legacy of cooperation was essential to the survival for millions of Africans before abolition and it remains a viable solution to many of our current agricultural problems.

Aidee Guzman is featured in Chapter 3: Hidden Hotspots of Biodiversity. Aidee is a postdoctoral fellow at UC Irvine, doing agricultural research. She works with small-scale farmers in California’s Central Valley. Comparing monocropped fields to diverse ones, she could see, through lab results and in-field observation, the differences between degraded landscapes and regenerative ones. As Guzman’s work continued, she focused on the small-scale diverse farms often overlooked in the Central Valley. All of the farms “participating in Guzman’s research are managed by immigrants, many of whom are from Mexico and Central America. While there are thousands of such farms in the Central Valley, they typically fly under the radar of official agricultural institutions...” Many of these farms are similar to traditional milpa systems. Their diversity was reflected from the soil up!

Chapter 4: Putting Down Roots shares the importance of Southeast Asian growers to our food system. In Southeast Asia, traditional farmers practice rotational swidden agriculture. To avoid land degradation on the hill slopes, plots of crops are rotated allowing the land to rest between growing cycles – a true fallow system. Farming for subsistence, not the market, these farmers grow extremely diverse crops to feed their communities. These practices transferred well to California when refugees from the Vietnam war were relocated. Biological nitrogen fixation, composting, cover cropping and keeping the soil covered are all practices that have led to the success of small-scale diversified Southeast Asian farmers in the Central Valley. These practices are truly regenerative. Like the other farmers highlighted in this book, Asian farmers have been excluded from owning land. The recovery has been challenging. According to Nikiko Masumoto, an organic fruit grower, “Very few organizations have staff members that are Hmong, or speak Hmong...” She feels that excluding Hmong farmers from regenerative farming initiatives is a missed opportunity. “So many Hmong farms are small-scale...and when we’re talking about the management-intensive realities of a lot of regenerative agricultural practices, small scale becomes an asset.”

There is a broad movement in agriculture today, in the US and abroad, to reconnect with the historical agricultural knowledge shared in cultures that are not reflected in the current practices of industrial farming. This movement is taking the knowledge of long agricultural histories and building on it with scientific knowledge. The acceptance of indigenous knowledge is overlooked among institutions that drive American farming, and the regenerative agriculture movement is working to reverse this trend by practicing methods of farming that grow soil. As the publisher’s website states: “A powerful

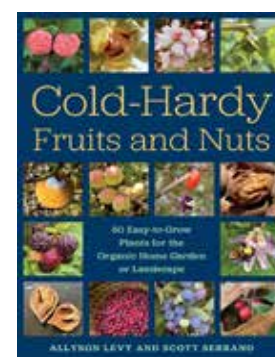
movement is happening in farming today—farmers are reconnecting with their roots to fight climate change.” This statement can be read both figuratively and literally. This book, by Liz Carlisle, is the book I wish I had written.

*Cold-Hardy Fruits & Nuts: 50 Easy-to-Grow Plants for the Home Garden or Landscape*

Authors, Allyson Levy and Scott Serrano  
Chelsea Green Publishing, 384 pages, \$43.95

Reviewed by Angela Highsmith

As a student of permaculture living in the northeast who prefers useful plants that are low maintenance, I was very excited to read *Cold-Hardy Fruits and Nuts: 50 Easy-to-Grow Plants for the Home Garden or Landscape*. What I love about the book is the casual way the knowledge is shared, enriched by the authors’ lived experience - they grow every single plant presented in the book. It’s like having a close farmer friend advising you on how to plan out a kitchen garden over dinner. A farmer with an eye and appreciation for beauty and function.



The book is written by Allyson Levy and Scott Serrano, two visual artists who began their garden as a source of inspiration and raw materials for their art. This grew to an extensive 11-acre collection of cold-hardy plants, focused on the rare and underutilized. Although my pre-sale copy has black & white pictures, I know many of the plants and it’s nice to have a selection of 50 plants that are not only edible and easy to grow, but beautiful as well.

After the introduction, the reason for writing and “How to Use This Book” sections, the book really begins with the “General Considerations” section comprised of: “Choosing a Planting Site,” “Buying a Plant,” “Planting & Care - The First Season,” “Amendments,” “Delaying Planting & Storage Containers,” “Pest Control & Animal Protection” (this one felt a little overwhelming considering the promise that these plants are over 90% pest-free, but I later appreciated all the solutions given for a wide spectrum of possible challenges), and “Winter Protection” (again, this topic seems to contradict the title of “easy-to-grow” in quite a high maintenance way, but after reading through the entire book I realize these measures are not generally required for most of the plants. They’re offering tools to set us up for success, should we want to go that extra mile). This section was very informative and useful, but dry and uninspiring. No matter, the rest of the book came alive for me with inspiration around the cultivation of these often overlooked plants.

The plants are beyond the typical cold-hardy standbys. Many are non-native, but all grow without special efforts in the northeast. There are familiar berries, nut trees and quinces as well as some interesting fruits I’d never heard of like Che, Shipova and Goumi. Their reasons for highlighting this uncommon diverse selection of plants are centered around sustainability in a world of climate change and homogenous landscaping and agriculture. They wisely explain that diversifying what we grow benefits people with more options for food, less pest control needed, and wildlife has a “greater diversity of flower options over an entire growing season”.

In alphabetical order, there is a chapter for each plant, each beginning with a brief history and description followed by: “Growth Difficulty Rating,” “Taste Profile & Uses,” “Plant Description” (more technical than the introduction), “Flowers,” “Pollination Requirements,” “Site & Soil Conditions,” “Hardiness, Fertilization & Growth Comments,”

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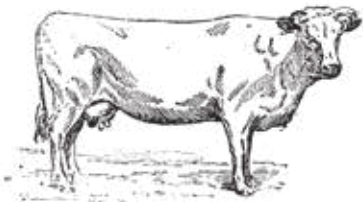


(Book Reviews - from B-26)

“Cultivars,” “Related Species,” “Propagation, Pests & Problems,” with additional notes for some plants. Each of these areas is full of useful information, often with observations and advice based on how the plants have grown in the authors’ garden over time. This is the real meat of the book. I’m using it more each day as a cross-reference to cultivate and add to my plant wish list. The categories create a user-friendly experience where one can quickly look up topics like the taste profile, aesthetic, or growth habits of unfamiliar plants to consider. I appreciate having a handy variety of propagation methods not commonly explained in Google searches, or even other gardening books, that better suit my situation. I’ve had the book just a few weeks and it’s already dog-eared, not something I can say about most of the gardening books I own. A friend who’s a new farmer even learned some possible reasons for the unhappiness of a few plants on her farm after briefly browsing these chapters.

The book closes with the usual references and resource list that I usually mean to look up, but don’t. The useful flow of this handy reference solidified the authors’ credibility, so I feel encouraged to use their resources for my plant orders next spring.

The authors’ experienced advice and instruction are given in a clear, concise, and easy-to-reference way. As a casual gardener who loves weeds as much as cultivated plants, this is a book I will certainly use for years. Why wouldn’t we grow beautiful plants who also feed us? Bonus points that once established, these are set-it-and-forget-it plants that can be fussed with as much or as little as you like.



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