

A WOMAN FARMER PROFILE

A MASSACHUSETTS
FARMER PROFILE SERIES

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Featuring

LINDSAY ALLEN
she-her-hers



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Ten years ago, it seemed to Lindsay Allen that the only way to farm involved a lot of tillage.

"Agroforestry wasn't on my radar as a word or a concept at all," Lindsay recalled. Unlike much of conventional agriculture, agroforestry integrates trees and shrubs into crop and livestock farming systems to maximize environmental, economic, and social benefits.

Now, this once unfamiliar term has become a cornerstone of Lindsay's farming operation and values at Fern Hill Farm in Buckland, Massachusetts, an agroforestry-based operation currently in its fourth growing season.

Lindsay's former lack of familiarity with the practice isn't uncommon: **Though farmers have made strides with conservation methods like no-till farming in recent years, just 1.5% of farms nationwide reported that they had at least one agroforestry operation as of 2017**, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And for Lindsay, the road to adopting this practice took her around the world and involved numerous vital mentorships

Lindsay began her farming career as an intern on an organic farm — a common path for a generation of farmers who, like Lindsay, weren't born into the profession. But she soon found opportunities to farm in far-flung places with wildly different systems of food production, including Tanzania, Panama, and California.

Just before establishing Fern Hill Farm in western Massachusetts, Lindsay worked not so far away geographically, but nevertheless in a very different setting: For five years, she farmed on a 2,658 square-foot rooftop operation in Boston while studying for a master's degree in agroforestry.

FROM ROOFTOP TO RURAL

Though it amounted to a fraction of the farmland Lindsay now oversees, the rooftop operation, situated atop Boston Medical Center's power plant, taught her lessons that continue to serve her well in Buckland, particularly when it comes to relying on her hands as a primary farming tool.

"Rooftop farming, with such a small space, prepped me for being efficient and fast with my hands and my body," Lindsay said — a skill that comes with essential sustainability benefits.



"I definitely think I carried with me that kind of ability or lens of trying to be really efficient, even though I have (about 14 acres) of space" at Fern Hill, she continued. "We could reduce our footprint but still have kind of the same kind of output or yields" as farmers reckon with climate change. Lindsay knows this environmental crisis well: It's what drove her to move across the continent, from Maricopa, California to Massachusetts. **"As farmers, we are at the whim of the environment,"** Lindsay said, "and I didn't want to continue to farm in a place that is either on fire or flooding."

In urban communities like Boston, rooftop farming served, and continues to serve an important role, Lindsay says, **showing how individuals and institutions can grow their own food and enhance health and nutrition in areas with limited space for traditional farming.** But she missed looking out over the fields and the feeling of working her hands through real soil, as she had in her previous farming experiences — on the rooftop farm, Lindsay worked with a growing material known as "media."

"WE COULD REDUCE OUR FOOTPRINT BUT STILL HAVE THE SAME KIND OF OUTPUT OR YIELDS"



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SHARED DREAMS

Meanwhile, Lindsay and her mother pondered their shared dream of buying land together, which would allow Lindsay to continue her farming business full-time while also supporting the family's aging and future generations. After a seven-month search in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, they found and purchased their current land in Buckland.

Now, Lindsay lives and tends the farm with her husband, their child, and her mother, alongside Lindsay's sister, sister-in-law, and their child. The community-centered design of the farm extends beyond the Allen family, and includes neighbors, friends, customers, students, and other farm supporters. Lindsay wouldn't have reached this point in sustainable farming without the knowledge she's gained from her mentors over the years, she said,

"WITH FELLOW WOMEN FARMERS OFTEN PROVIDING THE MOST LASTING IMPACTS."



"I've had some great male mentors in the permaculture world as well, and in farming and in agroforestry," Lindsay said, "but I do feel like I've resonated the most with the female farmers, and that I have been lucky enough to learn from (them). And it's like that, I think, (for) most people who have farmed with female farmers."

Thanks to the global nature of her farming experience, she's also incorporated a diversity of practices and viewpoints.

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THE LIVING SOIL

In California, for instance, she learned from **alley cropping systems**, interplanting with nitrogen fixing trees, and permaculture design concepts. And alongside working with various methods, she's broadened her philosophy behind farming: In Kenya, Lindsay recalls, a farmer's differentiation between soil and dirt continues to stick in her mind: "Soil is the living thing, dirt is under your fingernails," the farmer had told her.

"SOIL IS THE LIVING THING,
DIRT IS UNDER YOUR FINGERNAILS"
KENYAN SAYING



Lindsay hopes to continue this tradition of passing on knowledge.

Part of that effort includes spreading awareness and knowledge on agroforestry, which Lindsay says doesn't have to be so rare — in fact, the practice's potential for broader usage served as a catalyst for her interest in its application.

"In terms of scalability, it could be done on an acre, or it could be done on hundreds or thousands of acres," Allen said of the method. "And that really intrigued me, the versatility of how agroforestry could be applied."



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