

USDA Paying Farmers to Plant Trees

DAN SULLIVAN

dsullivan@lancasterfarming.com

BALLY, Pa. — Rick Hartlieb is a forester with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

He's also a farmer, silvopasturing sheep — integrating trees and livestock — on a home farm in Robesonia and cultivating chestnuts on two other farms, one in Berks County and another on land leased in Delaware.

"We operate Castanea Farms," Hartlieb said while mingling with more than 60 farmers, forestry professionals and policymakers at the start of a Pasa Sustainable Agriculture workshop highlighting an agroforestry project at Wild Fox Farm in Berks County that took place in September.

"We have about 50 acres of chestnuts, after this fall, we'll have in the ground," he said. "And out of those, about 25 acres are in production."

Hartlieb and his wife, Jen, market the chestnuts locally at their farmstand and online.

"Last year we sold to 32 different states," he said.

"We do the fresh culinary nuts. We do seedlings. They're a little bit more restrictive in where we can sell seedlings because of the state ag quarantines. But we're shipping seedlings as well. And this year we're going to be tinkering with chestnut flour with our B-grade nuts."

Money Growing On Trees

There's money in trees, a growing number of farmers are finding out, and there are substantial USDA funds available for the ecosystem services they provide.

In September 2022, the federal agency awarded Pasa and other organizations a \$55 million USDA Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities grant.

One of the goals is to utilize trees on farms to increase profits and combat climate change through mechanisms such as carbon seques-



Photos by Dan Sullivan

Participants at a Pasa Sustainable Agriculture workshop walk past a planting of black locust trees at Wild Fox Farm in Bally, Pa.

tration. Farmers are finding that trees have other benefits, such as shade, and sometimes fodder, for grazing animals.

"I think people are just really interested in the potential that trees can offer in terms of climate resilience," said Lindsey Shapiro, Pasa's Farm Bill point person who also runs a mixed vegetable farm with her husband next to Wild Fox Farm.

That, she said, coupled with a viable revenue stream, offered good reason Pasa and Wild Fox Farm were playing that day to a sold-out crowd.

"There was more interest than we had capacity," Shapiro said.

The Project

With funding from a combination of grants and assistance from a variety of partners, Wild Fox Farm was able to plant 1,500 hazelnut trees and about 500 black locusts at a total cost to the farm of \$1,500.

The farm itself began in 2012 when Ben and Karah Davies purchased 41 acres in the Butter Valley. Aiming to use sustainable practices from Day One, Wild Fox Farm currently sells at local farmers markets and through online sales with curbside pickup available at the farm.

Offerings include mixed vegetables, small grains, meat (beef, poultry and pork), eggs, maple syrup, honey, hemp and CBD products.

"We also have riparian buffers, plantings specifically that are going in this fall," Ben Davies told the crowd that included project partners.

"The plantings that went in earlier this spring are more silvopasture, agricultural-type crops ... We will be grazing these areas around the trees with our cattle in the future."

The farm plans to market the hazelnuts for culinary use and harvest the locust trees for fence posts, in about 15 years.

"We've worked with restaurants in the past," Davies said. "We obviously sell food. That's what our whole business is. We sell at four regional farmers markets."

While Davies said he doesn't expect to sell many hazelnuts to walk-up customers, he has some other ideas.

"We do work with a chocolate company in Philadelphia for our CBD chocolates, and I know that they would love hazelnuts. And we also have a friend who has an oil mill, so hazelnut oil is a great way for us to just utilize a lot of the crop."

That "friend" is the Keystone Tree Crops Cooperative,

a group launched to unite Mid-Atlantic tree crops growers, gatherers, processors, distributors and consumers for mutual benefit.

The 1,500 hazelnuts planted at Wild Fox Farm are not your run-of-the-mill nuts, explained Austin Unruh, CEO of Trees for Graziers, based in Morgantown, Pennsylvania.

"Most European hazelnuts, which are the ones that are selected for large nuts, the ones that go into making Nutella and all the yummy food that we get off of hazelnuts ... they're larger nuts than our native ones," Unruh said.

European hazelnuts don't perform well in the U.S. because of the fungal disease eastern filbert blight.

"The planting here is a result of work at Rutgers to select for hardy resistant European hazelnuts that can do well in production here in our conditions," he said.

Davies admitted to being on a constant learning curve. Spring turned out to be extremely dry, and the farm almost lost the entire tree crop, save for farmer ingenuity and perseverance.

"Since it was not raining at all, I was like, 'There's no way I'm letting these trees die,'" Davies said.

He converted a 300-gallon boom sprayer used for hemp production to a water rig that could be driven down each row and — with help from both his son and his father — deliver a 2 1/2-gallon soak to each tree when needed.

Not shy to admit he doesn't have all the answers — nor to share the mic with partners including Stroud Water Research Center, Propagate, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the state Department of Agriculture — Davies expressed and encouraged a philosophy of "learn by doing."

"You're going to find out throughout this whole day that I don't really have a solid plan for all of this, but it was an opportunity and it takes a long time," he said at the start of a field walk.

The time trees take to grow is an opportunity to plan, he said.

"We have a lot of irons in the fire, so I haven't got it all figured out," he said. "But hopefully that is maybe encouraging for you guys, that you don't have to have it all figured out and you can kind of take the leap and just trust in yourself that you're going to figure it out!"



A chestnut tree on Wild Fox Farm.

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