



**JUNE 2023**



# **Up From The Roots**

**Centering racial justice to  
build transformative  
agroforestry**



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## **Centering racial justice to build transformative agroforestry**

**By Ruth Tyson and Rafter Ferguson**

**Produced by Interlace Commons with funding from the Edwards Mother Earth Foundation**

Interlace Commons is an agroforestry education and research group founded by Meghan Giroux to address the barriers preventing the broad adoption of agroforestry in the Northeastern United States.

Interlace Commons aims to connect people with information about the functionality and implementation strategies of ancient and modern forms of agroforestry. We achieve this by exploring the intersection between agriculture and forestry - through programming and farm-driven research initiatives supported by academic and community partners.

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# Executive Summary

Agroforestry has the potential to make a transformative impact on US agriculture: helping farmers mitigate and adapt to climate change, increasing profitability, and providing numerous additional benefits. However, agroforestry is a complex and capital-intensive undertaking and farmers require more support to meaningfully expand adoption. Institutions across sectors are scaling up funding and programmatic support for agroforestry, but there is a danger that without focused effort, this wave of support could perpetuate the systemic exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) farmers. Failure to address these issues would limit the transformative potential of agroforestry, by leaving it without the deep perspective, broad coalition, and accessible pathways to participation that it needs to flourish.

Barriers to adoption for all farmers include the ongoing farmland access crisis, the need for new kinds of credit and payment programs, and a scarcity of knowledgeable and trustworthy technical support. BIPOC farmers face additional, compounding barriers due to a history of exclusion and discriminatory treatment that continues to this day. The history of agriculture in the US is a story of extending benefits to white farmers that are denied to BIPOC farmers. As a result, BIPOC farmers today own less than 2% of farmland, tend to have less secure tenure and smaller farms compared to white farmers, and continue to face discrimination in accessing credit, technical services, and other kinds of support. Providing broad support to all farmers while simultaneously targeting aid for BIPOC farmers can help agroforestry reach its transformative potential, while also acting as an engine for the repair of the harm done by racial discrimination.

This report synthesizes and contextualizes the findings from interviews with BIPOC farmers and organizational staff in the northeast, midwest, and southeast. Our discussion, findings, and recommendations are organized around themes of land, financing, access to information, reclaiming traditions, and shifting culture within the funding sector. Our recommendations describe strategies by which funders (and others) can center the perspectives and priorities of BIPOC farmers, by...

- Promoting land access and tenure, including encouraging land trusts and alternative land holding institutions to prioritize transfer of land to BIPOC farmers, tailoring new grants and support programs, and supporting heirs property rights organizations.
- Expanding funding and support, including direct technical support for agroforestry adoption, streamlining application processes, and providing upfront funding for implementation.
- Investing in the leadership and expertise of BIPOC farmers, including farmer-to-farmer networks, providing area-specific support for new and transitioning farmers, and funding sustained support programs.
- Supporting the reclamation of long histories of stewardship that were interrupted by colonization and slavery, including by intentionally integrating traditional ecological knowledge and cultural reclamation projects into agroforestry practices.
- Recognizing and addressing the legacy of institutional exclusion and erasure, responding to the leadership of BIPOC farmers and organizations in decision-making and program design, increasing transparency, and building trust through clear communication and documentation.

**To realize the transformative promise of agroforestry will require pathways to participation for all farmers, and thoughtful and strategic effort to overcome a history of unjust and discriminatory treatment.**

# Introduction

## A new era for agroforestry

Agroforestry has a crucial role to play in mitigating and adapting to climate change. And after many decades on the margins of US agriculture, people have begun to take notice. A rising tide of farmers are taking an interest in all the ways that the integration of trees into farming can help fight climate change, adapt to the changes that are already here, and provide diverse additional benefits in the process. For all of these reasons, widespread adoption of agroforestry has the potential to be a transformative influence on US agriculture. Adoption of agroforestry, however, is a complex undertaking, and farmers require more and new kinds of support in order to meaningfully expand the implementation of these practices. Accordingly, institutions across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors are scaling up funding and programmatic support for agroforestry.

The groundswell of interest in agroforestry is a welcome development, but is not without its dangers. Rapid growth is often not strategic or sustainable. Without focused effort, this wave of funding and support could easily perpetuate the same race problem that many critics have identified in the recent surge of interest in regenerative agriculture. That present-day race problem is itself the consequence of long-running failures to address the systemic exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color, from the support afforded to white farmers, and thereby the continuation of that exclusion into the present day (see Box 2: Legacies of Discrimination in US Agriculture).

Continued failure to address these issues would tragically limit the scope and transformative potential of agroforestry. Farmers in general need innovative and expanded forms of support in order to surmount the various technical and financial barriers to the adoption of agroforestry practices. Farmers who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC) face additional, distinctive, and compounding barriers to adoption, due to the history of exclusion and discriminatory treatment that continues to this day.

In this report, we outline the rationale for prioritizing racial justice and centering the perspectives of BIPOC farmers in efforts to support the expansion of agroforestry. We discuss what we learned through a series of 16 interviews with BIPOC farmers and staff from organizations that support BIPOC farmers over the course of 2022 (together accounting for 13 farmers and 6 organizational staff). We synthesize what we learned from these interviews, along with background research, into a set of recommendations. We organize our discussion into the following topics: Land; Financing; Access to Information; Reclaiming Traditions; and conclude with Culture Shift: Funding Community-Based Agroforestry. Our primary audience for this report is funders, including philanthropists, foundations, and other grant makers. We believe this report will also have value to nonprofits and policymakers with a stake in supporting the growth of agroforestry.

### **Box 1: Project Background and Methods**

Between May and November 2022, we conducted 16 interviews with 11 BIPOC farmers and 8 organizational staff who serve BIPOC farmers. Farmers we spoke with were based in the Northeast (4), Midwest (4), and Southeast (3). We sought out farmers who (a) were actively engaged in agroforestry projects, and (b) are working their way toward implementation. In each region, interest in agroforestry was widespread but active agroforestry projects were rare. We believe this reflects several factors: the low level of agroforestry adoption in the general population, the lack of racial diversity in the agroforestry community, and/or the lack of public presence of BIPOC farmers, due either to privacy concerns on the part of farmers, lack of resources for public-facing presentation, or both.

The farmer interviewees all self-identified as Black, Indigenous, and/or a Person of Color (BIPOC). Additional marginalized identities including immigrant, woman, queer, and youth, were represented, and impact the intersectional experiences of participants. We acknowledge the presence of these compounded identities, though they were not the focus of our study. We organize our discussion around racial identity at the broadest level (i.e. BIPOC) to build on the existing documentation of discrimination and exclusion, and provide the widest foundation possible for addressing systemic racism and transformative change. We also acknowledge the limits of the term BIPOC, and the ways in which its generality can obscure the diversity of histories, perspectives, forms of oppression, and strategies for change, across the many groups and cultures included. While we strove to avoid flattening the diversity encompassed in our conversations, we are also confident that we have done so imperfectly.

# What's at Stake: Why Equity is Fundamental for Agroforestry

Our current agricultural system is built to maximize short-term profit, largely at the expense of farmers, the environment, and communities (Heinemann et al. 2009). As extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and other impacts of climate change ramp up, it's increasingly clear that conventional farming is not well suited to adapt to or mitigate climate change (M. K. Hendrickson 2015). Farms make up over half (52%) of the US land base, and farming contributes over 11% of our national carbon footprint. For the sake of the entire food system, we need a way of farming that can both adapt to climate change and help to fight it.

Agroforestry is a powerful and multifunctional tool in this fight. Trees draw down atmospheric carbon into soil and woody biomass and can help limit climate change (Schoeneberger 2009). At the same time agroforestry practices help protect soil, crops, and livestock against the extreme weather that we are already experiencing—and that which is yet to come (Patel-Weynand, Bentrup, and Schoeneberger 2017). In the process, agroforestry produces additional benefits like increased profitability, reduced risk, provision of cleaner air and water, creation of wildlife habitat, and more (Brown et al. 2018).

For all these reasons, agroforestry has the potential to be a transformative influence on US farming. Realizing this potential, however, is not guaranteed. Chief among barriers is the concentration of power among a small number of powerful agribusiness interests (Howard 2021). This lopsided power structure makes agroforestry (like regenerative and organic agriculture before it) vulnerable to capture and diversion into false solutions—like market-based strategies that benefit a small number of powerful institutions and leave behind all but the largest and most highly-capitalized farms with the resources to meet expensive and time-consuming regulations (M. Hendrickson, Howard, and Constance 2017). Under this status quo, the expansion of agroforestry could easily fail to deliver substantial climate benefits while exacerbating the plight of farmers and rural communities (Lengnick 2015).



To avoid this familiar fate and realize agroforestry's transformative potential, the agroforestry community must become deep, broad, and accessible. It needs to be **deep** in the sense that it must include a substantive diversity of backgrounds and perspectives, in order to have the collective insight needed to see through false solutions. The agroforestry community must also be **broad**, as a coalition, in order to have the political voice to advocate for meaningful solutions. And the agroforestry community must be **accessible**, with pathways to entry and participation for all farmers—because climate change is an all-hands-on-deck crisis, and we cannot afford to leave anyone out of this work.

Farmers interested in adopting agroforestry practices face multiple barriers. Agroforestry adoption is capital intensive, and practices can add complexity to nearly every aspect of farm operations, including farm planning, financing, processing, and marketing (Sollen-Norrlin, Ghaley, and Rintoul 2020). Qualified, well-informed technical support is often in short supply for farmers interested in adopting agroforestry. The long-term investment in trees, soil, and the whole farm ecosystem means that secure land tenure is critical, and scaling up agroforestry requires a radical expansion of long-term secure land access. Similarly, planning tools and financing options designed for the short-term payoff of conventional agriculture are not suitable for agroforestry. Accounting for the extended timelines and complex interrelationships demands new kinds of farm business planning and new kinds of credit and direct support.

Building a broad, deep, and accessible agroforestry community means providing the support that all farmers need to adopt agroforestry practices, while providing targeted aid to farmers that have historically been excluded from support. Addressing these barriers in the expansion of agroforestry can be an engine for the repair of harm, by channeling resources toward BIPOC farmers and beginning to undo the long history of marginalization. Conversely, if agroforestry supporters attempt to address these barriers to adoption in a one-size-fits-all and naively race-blind fashion, then the expansion of agroforestry will perpetuate and intensify racial inequality.

## Box 2: Legacies of Discrimination in US Agriculture

Transformative agroforestry will require a level playing field, with pathways to participation for all farmers. For that, we will have to overcome a history of injustice and unequal treatment. The history of agriculture in the US is a story of extending benefits to white farmers that are denied to Black farmers, Indigenous farmers, and other farmers of color. This has been true since colonization and slavery created the foundation for US agriculture. The theft of land from indigenous communities in North America, and the theft of people from indigenous African communities, did catastrophic violence to the people and cultures that were their targets. But the history of racist exclusion and violence did not end there. Agriculture in the US has continued to rely on policies and practices that systematically leave out farmers who aren't white, concentrate power, and deepen racial inequality.

Racial discrimination in the agricultural system must be understood in terms of institutional racism, rather than (or alongside) personal prejudice. Institutional racism refers to the ways in which the systems, policies, and procedures of organizations perpetuate advantages for white people and the oppression of BIPOC communities. As such, it does not depend on personal prejudice in order to continue. The history of institutional racism in agriculture varies across regions, over time, and between targeted groups. What follows are a few examples of this history, and the impact it has had on targeted communities.

On the eve of European arrival in North America, the two and half billion acres that would become the United States was under the stewardship of hundreds of distinct indigenous cultures and societies, encompassing millions of people across thousands of settlements and nomadic bands, all across the continent. By 1776, smallpox and other diseases introduced by Europeans, together with colonial wars, enslavement, and hunger, had reduced the native population by 90%. Over the following century, the US would seize 1.5 billion acres from indigenous communities, often through broken treaties and in tandem with forced resettlement onto reservations. Numerous legislative acts over this period provided legal justification for the process. The Homestead Act of 1862 redistributed 270 million acres to white farmers for pennies an acre, in one of the largest redistributions of wealth this country has ever seen. In the same year the Morrill Act parceled off indigenous lands for whites-only educational institutions, while establishing the United States Department of Agriculture to provide technical support and financial assistance to white farmers—many of whom continued to benefit from the exploited labor of enslaved people, sharecroppers, and indentured servants. In 1887, the Dawes Act imposed a complicated and problematic system of land tenure on tribal governments, designed to erode cultural continuity and speed assimilation, and which continues to complicate and undermine native land stewardship today. Systematic discrimination by the USDA against Native American farmers, including through delay and denial of critical timely farm loans, was recently confirmed in the courts through the successful conclusion of the 18 years class action lawsuit Keepseagle vs. Vilsack. The tribal “land grant” colleges—only established in 1994, 132 years after the original land grant institutions—were given no land endowment,

## Box 2: Legacies of Discrimination in US Agriculture

*continued*

and received just a fraction of the funding of the original land grants created to support white farmers.

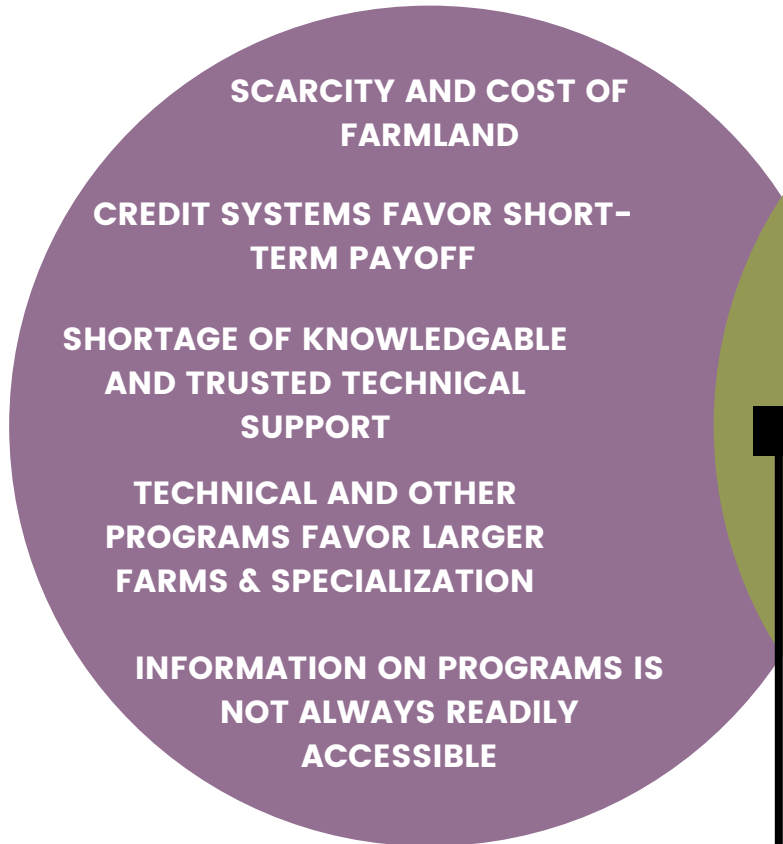
The labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants was one of the original engines of economic prosperity in the US. Enslaved people were deprived of basic opportunities to support themselves through policies such as The Negro Act of 1740, which restricted their movement and education. After the abolition of slavery, Black Codes and Jim Crow laws maintained the suppression of formerly enslaved populations as sharecroppers—in many cases, virtual enslavement by another name. Despite violent opposition and brutal exploitation, newly freed Black farmers managed to accumulate 20 million acres of land by the early 20th century. That would sadly be the historical peak of Black farmland ownership, as the century that followed saw Black farmers stripped of 90% of their land through systematic campaigns that included delaying or denying crucial farm loans, violence, fraud, the exploitation of heirs property laws governing land inherited without a clear title, and other tactics. The value of this loss in today's dollars is estimated at \$326 billion. The “land grant” institutions founded in 1890 specifically to serve Black communities, received no land endowment (like the tribal colleges above, though much earlier), are thereby dependent on Federal and state appropriations, and to this day receive much less funding than the first and originally whites-only land grants. Meanwhile, systematic discrimination against Black farmers by the USDA through the 1980s and 1990s was confirmed by the courts through the Pigford vs. Glickman and Pigford II class action lawsuits.

Black and Native communities are not the only groups to experience discrimination. In the early 20th century, California led the way for many states to enact Alien Land Laws, driven by white farmers' fears of competition, that prevented Asian immigrants from owning or even obtaining long-term leases on land. The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II resulted in an estimated loss of \$400 million in property, including the confiscation or forced transfer of 200,000 acres of farmland to white farms. Restrictive immigration laws and abuse-prone guestworker schemes—from the mid-century Bracero Program to modern H2-A visas—help to maintain a state of plantation economics, keeping the farm labor force undervalued, marginalized, and vulnerable to exploitation. Today, three quarters of farmworkers are BIPOC, perform two thirds of all agricultural labor in the US, typically work for less than minimum wage, and do so without the workplace protections afforded workers in other sectors (Ferguson, Dahl, and DeLonge 2019).

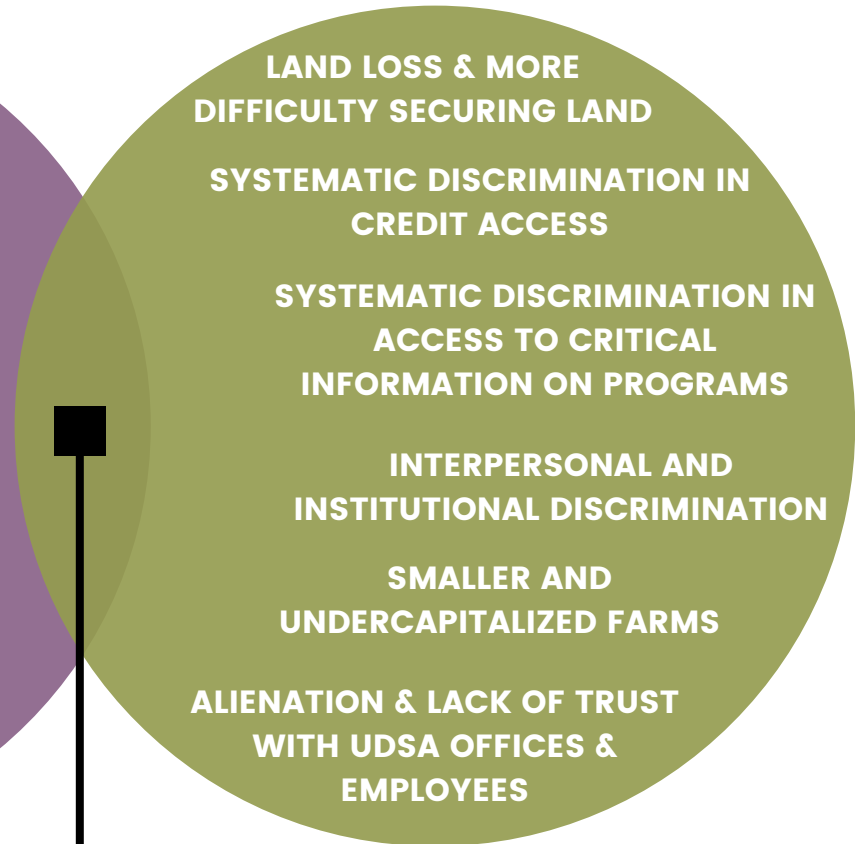
This overview cannot give more than a sense of the scope and impact of racial discrimination in US agriculture. BIPOC farmers have never received the kind or quantity of support that has consistently been offered to white farmers. This has both limited the opportunity of affected communities to build and sustain wealth, and has produced an overwhelmingly white-dominated agricultural sector. While many of the challenges of agroforestry—like farming more broadly—are universal, the long history of discrimination against BIPOC farmers means that they deserve targeted support.



## **Barriers to Agroforestry Adoption**



## **Legacies of Discrimination against BIPOC farmers**



**BIPOC farmers face additional distinctive challenges that compound the widely experienced barriers to agroforestry adoption**

# Findings and Recommendations

## Land

The farmland access crisis is the elephant in the room—and perhaps the single most critical barrier—when discussing agroforestry adoption. Before even considering the particular challenges of agroforestry, land access is already one of the greatest challenges for new farmers. Consolidation of farmland among fewer and larger farms is exacerbated by the loss of farmland to development (Ferguson 2021). This creates a bottleneck that threatens to exclude most of the next generation of farmers, regardless of farm practices and farmer identities. For many farmers, renting farmland is the only option—enough that fully forty percent of farmland is rented (Bigelow, Borchers, and Hubbs 2016). But the uncertainty of tenure associated with renting discourages the adoption of practices with a longer payoff time—including many regenerative soil-building practices, and especially agroforestry (Ranjan et al. 2019). Even when farmers who rent have proven their efficiency and productivity, implementation of new practices is limited by landowners resistant to the change (Calo et al. 2021).

The crisis is even more severe for BIPOC farmers, who own less than 2% of US farmland, tend to have smaller farms, have less secure tenure, and often face discrimination from lenders and sellers (Horst and Marion 2018).



### From the Field

Perspectives on land are complex, varied, and often emotionally fraught. Land means home, family, spirit, and sustenance for many in rural communities. For people whose shared history includes being uprooted, dispossessed, forced to migrate (by violence or economic desperation), and whose land or labor have been stolen, the issue of land access and security brings all that painful history into the present. Bold and creative action is needed to address the farmland access crisis—action that is coordinated across sectors and responsive to the leadership of BIPOC farmers.

Farmers turn to the various land access programs that have aim to try and fill the gaps created by the farmland crisis. But these programs struggle to ameliorate a complex structural problem, and may not be able to offer the secure land tenure needed for agroforestry adoption.

“We signed up for another project [...] to create a Black commons.. We’re experienced livestock producers and started acquiring sheep. But the organization didn’t show up and support the project the ways they said they would. [...] Then two weeks ago, [the property owner] let us know we needed to vacate the farm... [The land trust] needs to have a rating for these landowners. People should know if there are similar stories from the same property. As a community of land stewards, we owe it to farmers who are investing their time and resources into these properties.”

– Farmer, Northeast

For BIPOC farmers who do own land, the security of tenure needed for agroforestry may still be lacking. This is especially the case for Black farmers, who are disproportionately impacted by antiquated heirs’ property laws that apply to land that was inherited without a clear title. These laws may affect more than 40% of Black landowners, leaving them vulnerable to involuntary sale or seizure of their property (Ferguson 2021). Heirs’ property also directly affects farmers ability to access the credit and services needed for agroforestry adoption.

“I have heirs’ property land. In order to get support, I need to get a signature from every heir adjacent to my property. I do some forest farming there, trying to establish an easement so it can’t be sold.”

– Farmer, Southeast

In the universe of programs attempting to address the farmland access crisis, land trusts occupy a special position as one of the few models that could offer long-term security, potentially accessing large amounts of farmland and removing it from the profit-maximizing incentives of the market. Land trusts suffer from the same cultural inertia and institutional roadblocks as the rest of the white-dominated conservation sector, and there is work to be done inside and outside these institutions to build the culture and the connections needed for land trusts to make a contribution to land security for BIPOC farmers.



“There’s this question of what role will land trusts play in all of this? How could agroforestry appeal to land trusts and their interest in easements and conservation? Knowing land trusts are well positioned among actors who have lots of land, they are one of the players that could be brought to the table and have pressure put on them to live up to equity statements, and facilitate transfer to Black farmers.”

– Organizational Staff, Northeast



## Recommendations

- Agroforestry funders and programs should proactively seek out opportunities for partnership with organizations already working on land acquisition and retention—especially those prioritizing BIPOC farmers.
- Encourage land trusts and other alternative land holding institutions to prioritize the transfer of land to BIPOC farmers.
- In consultation with BIPOC farmers and organizations, tailor new grants and other programmatic support, including education and legal clinics, to support BIPOC farmers in purchasing land and retaining land, or otherwise securing tenure, especially through cooperative ownership and stewardship agreements.
- Promote and financially support heirs property rights organizations that promote sustainability of BIPOC land tenure. Organizations like Black Family Land Trust, Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, Land Loss Prevention Project, Center for Heirs Property Preservation, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Family Agriculture Resource Management Services, and Indian Land Tenure Foundation, are a few of the organizations that have committed time, resources, and expertise to breaking the pattern of land loss. Provide information about opportunities for promotion of agroforestry as a pathway to sustainable stewardship of family land.

- Advocate for and invest in collectively (including publicly) owned and/or managed land for agroforestry use. The Agrarian Commons model and long-term incubator farm projects suggest avenues of development for shared land operations. Canada's federal and provincial community pasture systems may also be useful models for conserving natural resources while sustaining the livelihoods of farmers.
- Incorporate farmer feedback and intentional vetting processes for landowners who participate in farmland exchange programs. Provide decision-making models and accountability methods in land share programs that empower practitioners on rented land.



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Sheep grazing vineyards

### **Box 3: Everyday Racism and the Need for Community**

Many of the participants we spoke with described deep feelings of isolation in their communities regardless of ownership status. This affects their ability to connect with neighbors and with like minded farmers and community members, and also impacts their basic needs for safety and psychological wellbeing. On top of the debilitating effects of isolation, interactions with neighbors who make their prejudice apparent with threatening flags, glances, words, or open hostility, make it harder to persist in the difficult work of farming, and raise the cost of attracting attention by pioneering new practices. Social discomfort and messages of unwelcome can persist just as much in the USDA offices and institutions intended to serve them, as much as on the street.

The lived experience of the farmers we spoke with tells us that not only is land needed, but people are just as imperative. Sustained, trusting human networks, and a context that supports them, are a key element in advancing agroforestry amongst BIPOC farmers. In addition to capital and land itself, zoning laws can make building social communities difficult for isolated farmers. With closer proximity, exchanging resources (ie. tools, equipment) and information about best practices becomes feasible. More representation in neighborhoods, in offices, and in the field of experts is needed to increase safety, comfort, and opportunity.

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**“We have real life meetings with our rural farmers about their physical safety in going to the polls, being the only brown person going to the polls. It’s a visceral experience to be in farm culture, in our state at least... I live on a lake and walk early in the morning, and this man pulls up to the end of his driveway, he pulls up right alongside me and rolls down his window and says “What are you doing?”**

**- Farmer, Midwest**



# Findings and Recommendations

## Financing

Adopting agroforestry is capital intensive—even if farmers have already cleared the most significant financial obstacle of securing land. Covering the time and material cost of research and planning, plant materials, infrastructure, and implementation, presents a formidable challenge for established and beginning farmers alike. Several governmental support programs exist that are sometimes applicable to agroforestry, at the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Services, Rural Development, and the Risk Management Agency. These are important sources of support, but loans, grants, and conservation payments all present limitations and challenges for agroforestry in general and underserved, marginalized communities in particular. Complex bureaucratic hurdles, programs favoring simple enterprises with short-term payoff, and the requirements of cost-share and partial reimbursement, often place these programs out of reach of underserved, undercapitalized, and marginalized farmers. Similar challenges apply to the limited sources of non-USDA funding, including grants, loans, and private investment.

BIPOC farmers face additional hurdles, including long legacies of discrimination and the resulting mistrust that many BIPOC farmers hold towards the USDA. Exclusion from timely access to loans and cost-share programs has been one of the most well-documented and far-reaching instruments of racial discrimination.



### From the Field

The farmers and organizational staff we spoke with made it clear that existing sources of financial support for agroforestry adoption are complex, frustrating, and uncertain. This was a consistent message regardless of whether the farmer had successfully received funding. It's clear that the bottlenecks and barriers in agroforestry funding—whether due to explicit racial antagonism or the impersonally disparate impact of policies and practices—are amplified for BIPOC farmers.

New farmers, first generation farmers, and farmers on smaller plots of land, face multiple challenges in accessing cost-share programs, even those that specifically target underserved farmers, as they often require upfront payment of some or all of the costs of adoption.

“The underserved farmers [grants] give you 50% advance to pay to get the work started, but that leaves the other 50% to reimbursement. You still have to get equipment and labor and all sort[s] of other things. Most first generation farmers don’t have that kind of money out of pocket. [...] A lot of times the people who are building your fences and other labor are not looking for 50%, they want to be paid right away.”

– Farmer, Northeast

Farmers seeking loans or grants programs come up against the skew of these programs towards highly specialized farms and against the complexity of agroforestry practices.

“USDA requirements for managerial experience to access loan programs – they put up more hoops if you’re trying to do something complex. Really incentivizes simple systems, makes it hard to invest in integrated systems.”

– Organizational Staff, Southeast

BIPOC farmers continue to face racist hostility and discriminatory treatment when they attempt to access USDA programs.

“[Where I am] is 95% white but surrounded by tribal territory... It was a big deal when I found land to secure it. I applied for a USDA loan and the lady asked what was I doing here. ‘Why do you think you can do this?’ I was denied the loan. [...] It’s a much bigger problem than me, and requires much bigger response than my micro loan application.

– Farmer, Midwest

USDA loan programs have requirements that are opaque to many farmers. In the absence of technical support specific to these programs, only farmers with the resources for years of careful and strategic advance planning are in a position to access the programs.

“When I started farming I had not understood the system really well, but I was ambitious. First thing I went to FSA office and I let them know what I was planning to do... Then they told me what they expect. And the next 4 or 5 years, I worked on what I knew they were looking for. Then when I went back, I was able to get a loan.”

– Farmer, Midwest

The difficulty of applying for funding is not limited to USDA programs. Particularly for new farmers, the time commitment and skills required for grant applications are often heavy burdens for farmers.

“It’s like... Can I get you to write a grant for me to get the \$10k? Grant writing is not my skillset and I don’t have the time and capacity to do that. [...] There are two of us in this whole operation and I’m looking for a job so I’ll have even less time.”

– Farmer, Northeast



## Recommendations

- Expand funding for programs that directly support BIPOC farmers and their networks, including direct support for agroforestry adoption as well as for community-level capacity building, and target resources to support participation by newer and undercapitalized farms.
- Streamline application processes and provide one-on-one technical support to applicants.
- Provide unrestricted funding that can be applied across an agroforestry project to any project-related expense.
- Provide upfront funding for implementation and eliminate reimbursement and matching requirements for newer, smaller, and undercapitalized farms.



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Sprout in willow silvopasture

# Findings and Recommendations

## Access to Information

Farmers adopting new practices require knowledgeable advisors, tangible models and demonstrations, and competent planning services. Trusted sources of information are especially critical to adopting informationally-intensive long-term practices like agroforestry. Currently the demand for technical support providers (TSPs) that understand agroforestry far outstrips the supply.

We learned from our interviews that the disruption of intergenerational land management means that knowledge transfer and social networks are also disrupted. BIPOC farmers are often in the position of needing to reconstruct farmer social networks to access vital information about everything from how to access support programs, sources for plant material, reliable contractors, and so on. Even those with an intergenerational connection to the land they steward must often seek external assistance for how to care for it.



### From the Field

Interview participants detailed the challenges of accessing appropriate information and services. When competent assistance is available, it is typically limited to conventional agriculture and forestry due to the gaps in specialized knowledge of TSPs. With limited capacity, TSPs may offer support at the start of projects but not for follow through, completion, and management. Farmers we spoke with have had to travel long distances, halt their projects in search of expert advice, or figure it out as they went—making sometimes costly mistakes. Basic information about variety selection, incorporating trees into crop and business plans, protecting seedlings and managing maturing trees, and landscape conversion for grazing, were all significant themes.

Farmers who have had success accessing programs, information, and support, have had to be especially persistent and diligent in their own research about available opportunities for support.



“I was really proactive, I wouldn’t say they found me. Programs I learned about were from conferences, and I really asked questions and followed up. It wasn’t like they were sitting somewhere sending things out to BIPOC farmers. I have walked into FSA offices and asked about things I found online... funds for underserved farmers... They told me funding for [existing programs] didn’t exist. I also try to share info with other people... Black farmers and other underserved farmers. Otherwise, I don’t think they’re getting it.”

– Farmer, Southeast

When technical assistance is accessible, the type of services offered may not match the needs of the farmer. Knowledge specific to agroforestry operations simply was not an option for some participants.

“We’ve gotten a bunch of technical assistance. But [...] there hasn’t been much tied to agroforestry or silvopasture because folks don’t know much about that. [...] In 10 years, I would love for us to be in a position to provide that tech assistance to others, and show what we’ve been able to do with our property. But there aren’t a lot of people who have done that to be referred to.”

– Farmers, Northeast

Beginning farmers may find it difficult to access social networks that grant access to needed information and resources. BIPOC farmers face additional challenges in bridging cultural barriers in white-dominated areas.

“In terms of procurement, I know these established generational farmers are plugged into where to get stuff the cheapest. But when I spent almost \$1,000 on grass seeds, I found nothing. [...] I care about cultural relevance and using native grasses. But I need a minimum of 50 lbs [...] every time. When we talk about integrated operations, I’m ordering from the big boys. But who is doing that work at a scale that is accessible for us for the quantities we need?”

– Farmer, Northeast

When technical support is available, it often goes first to larger farms. The limited capacity of TSPs means that small and mid-sized farms are overlooked – though they are the most numerous farms and their combined acreage could be a powerful leverage point.

“They [technical service providers] are working with larger landowners... Not the ones we’re looking at... which tends to be those 30-40 acre landowners. There are no service providers out there to address those issues really because financially it’s not feasible. That’s where the opportunity is, supporting that system that supports these small [...] landowners.”

– Organizational Staff, Southeast



## Recommendations

- Listen to BIPOC farmers and learn about their informational needs, resources (including community members), and identify the communication channels that are most relevant for them and their communities.
- Invest in the leadership and expertise of BIPOC farmers. Recruit farmers who are already taking leadership, or who are ready to do so, and connect them with opportunities for training and networking, and bolster their capacity through direct financial support.
- Invest in farmer-to-farmer networks and exchange, through farm field days, mentorship programs, farmer round tables, demonstrations and hands on sessions, work brigades, and farmer-to-farmer advising and consultation.
- Provide area-specific support for new and transitioning farmers. Allow for financial and technical support to follow farmers who have to move to new sites.
- Support programs that offer sustained support through all phases of adoption, from planning and sourcing through maintenance, post-harvest handling, value-adding and marketing.
- Provide business planning and record keeping support specific to incorporating perennials into systems, including support for intermediate income streams while long-lived crops mature. Developed business plans can offer farmers more clarity and bolster their likelihood of receiving further funding with documented revenue streams, identified markets, and sales and labor strategies.

# Findings and Recommendations

## Reclaiming Traditions

Agroforestry is rooted in indigenous land management. Regenerative agriculture, of which agroforestry is an important element, grows out of global traditions of indigenous land management. The sophisticated management of trees, and integration of trees with other forms of agriculture and food provision, has always been commonplace among traditional agrarian and indigenous cultures (Olofson 1983; Rossier and Lake 2014). As with other aspects of land management, agricultural and silvicultural practices arise from long-term co-evolutionary relationships between people and place, and broad patterns of practice arise again and again across cultures and contexts, at the same time demonstrating incredible variety from one watershed to the next (Berkes 2008; Price et al. 2022).

Colonialism and slavery violently interrupted centuries of land stewardship in North America and Africa. These diverse traditions of stewardship typically featured—like most traditional land management systems—the thoughtful integration of trees with annuals and animals, and as such were part of the global foundations of agroforestry. Across North America, research has documented widespread impacts of indigenous stewardship on the concentration of useful, often cropping, tree species, for direct human use as well as for the support of desired game populations (Warren 2016; Anderson 2007; Brehaut 2021; Abrams and Nowacki 2008). Throughout the homelands of the enslaved Africans who were transported to North America, communities had been practicing varieties of sophisticated agroforestry practices, combining trees with understory crops and with livestock grazing (Pacey 2008; Boffa and Nations 1999; Fifanou et al. 2011). And throughout Mesoamerica—today the source of up to three quarters of the labor upon which our food system depends—indigenous communities have long managed extensive and complex agroforestry systems (Cagnato 2019; Harvey et al. 2008; González-Valdivia et al. 2017).

BIPOC farmers deserve the chance to reclaim this heritage. The expansion of agroforestry can help make that happen by supporting BIPOC farmers to recuperate and expand on the traditions of land stewardship that were—and still are—interrupted by displacement and enslavement.



## From the Field

Among the farmers we interviewed, interest in agroforestry is woven together with a sense of collective responsibility. Agroforestry is a part of the duty they owe their community, the natural world, and their descendants. Farmer projects include combating food insecurity, establishing demonstration sites to teach other farmers, sharing land for collective projects, and creating employment through seed collectives and tree nursery production.

Philanthropy often gravitates to flashy technological solutions, from new apps to the technical packages associated with climate-smart agriculture. Technical solutions can help address technical problems, but have little to offer systemic problems of access and inclusion. Sociocultural factors like shared social and environmental values and intergenerational connections are powerful drivers of the decision to adopt and maintain agroforestry systems (Gosnell, Gill, and Voyer 2019). Supporting farmers means meeting them where they are at, and understanding and respecting their motivations.

The farmers we spoke with explicitly link agroforestry with intergenerational viability. Some had inherited land or had it gifted to them, others had purchased their farm or were still seeking secure land tenure. For all of them, agroforestry was a way of building sustainable value, over time, that they could someday pass on.

“The idea when I started out was to slowly reduce the amount of annual production. I recognize that as I get older, I want to work myself out of a job. I want to have mainly things that come back. And also a legacy that I can pass on to the next generation and they don’t have to work as much to produce things.”

– Farmer, Northeast



For some farmers, agroforestry was explicitly connected to restoration and repair of lineage of land stewardship that had been disrupted by racist policies. All participants indicated an interest in soil regeneration and Black and/or Indigenous land stewardship. Some described a goal of healing and restoring their relationship with nonhuman kin and the ecosystem as a whole. These responses point towards what a broad, deep, and accessible agroforestry must look like— in which the complex “why” of farmer motivation is just as important as the “what” of practices.

“In school I was taught that African Americans don’t know anything about herbs, only Native Americans and Europeans know anything about herbal medicine. That’s ridiculous. If enslaved people were caught going in the woods and looking for herbs, they’d be sentenced to death in Virginia. It’s secret knowledge that we had to keep hidden.”

– Farmer, Southeast



## Recommendations

- Uplift and legitimize social and cultural reasons for adoption. Investing in people who are committed to environmental stewardship through deeply-held values will make room for impactful and intergenerational change.
- Recognize the value of traditional ecological knowledge and, through dialogue and consultation with indigenous practitioners, integrate into best practice standards whenever possible.
- Create funding opportunities that support agroforestry practices as components of cultural reclamation projects for BIPOC farmers.

- Understand the history and role of institutions in BIPOC exclusion, erasure and genocide, and how this legacy continues to impact BIPOC farmers today. Provide learning opportunities within your organization for staff to increase knowledge and discuss practical methods of repair in the work you do.
- Bring “land acknowledgements” to life with tangible practices that honor and invest in the original stewards of land.



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Alley Cropping, Walnut trees and maize

# Findings and Recommendations

## Culture Shift: Funding Transformative Agroforestry

The philanthropic sector has a crucial role to play in building a transformative agroforestry community. Many of the challenges described in this report are legacies of the racist treatment of BIPOC farmers by government agencies. Even in settings where explicit racist attitudes have been extinguished from USDA offices, structural racism continues through policies and practices with racially disproportionate effects. Understandably, distrust and bitterness for the USDA and their representatives (along with other government agencies) lingers among BIPOC farmers.

There is much work already underway to shift culture, policy, and practices at the USDA. Much work remains to be done, including the repair of harm and building positive relationships with BIPOC farming communities. In the meantime, that leaves a tremendous gap in services and a crucial role for philanthropists, foundations, other grant-makers, and the nonprofits that they fund. The philanthropic sector has its own work to do in order to effectively step into this gap. Supporting the scaling-up of agroforestry entails not only an expansion of funding, but a shift in the culture of funding. Solidarity with BIPOC farmers meeting the challenges of agroforestry adoption means placing farmers and the communities that sustain them at the center of the process.



### From the Field

Racism from institutions that ostensibly exist to serve BIPOC farmers is a persistent threat. Some of the distrust that BIPOC farmers experience is communicated through stories and warnings from older generations who were harmed by discriminatory practices. Many of the farmers we spoke with noted that they see their local USDA offices as existing to support "the same people they've been supporting for generations", i.e. older white farmers, and leaving everyone else to figure it out on their own.

“I think USDA should hand technical support over to community groups that have invested in relationships with the farmers. The lack of trust with USDA agencies – especially farmers of color – is a real concern. Creating barriers that are hard to get over. Especially with Black farmers excluded from farm programs for so many years and now they want to help us out with our trees. Old school farmers are like, ‘Forget it, we’re not interested in any conversation with them now about trees.’ Until that relationship is repaired we want to work with organizations that are more trusted. More successful in reaching people.”

– Farmer, Midwest

The USDA is one of many institutions that is part way through a complicated, long-term, and uneven evolution away from racist culture, policies, and practices. This legacy creates challenges even in areas where individual personnel may be committed to supporting BIPOC farmers.

“There’s also the historical baggage. Older farmers all said ‘don’t go to USDA’ when I got started... When I started going there it was like I was the first Black person that walked into that office. They were looking for somebody to give that money to. My rep... at NRCS was sort of overcompensating. I became a sort of poster child. [...] Everybody is farming now it seems like. But then it was like Black farmers were just turned away and weren’t going there at all. And still now there is a stigma.”

– Farmer, Northeast

Beyond individual uneasiness, tension in values and resource competition persists between service providers. Organizations with trusting relationships and staff from neglected communities have the knowledge of how to reach marginalized farmers but often lack the capacity to effectively do so, while more financially resourced groups, equipped with grant writers, powerful social connections, and staff time, race to collect the trending public and private funds being made available for agroforestry services.

“We need new TSP’s. [...] I don’t think you have to tell people within that community how to reach out in their own community. It’s like the saying ‘We’re bringing people that’s already full to the table.’ The same concept of reaching out to large landowners to fulfill a quota or some type of need versus working with smaller landowners. I feel the same way when it comes to TSP’s reaching out to [farmers] with the biggest web pages instead of telling them how to reach out to the people they don’t want to reach. We need to reach out to the people that are in those communities. If they’re not there we need to show them why they should be there.”

– Organizational Staff, Southeast



BIPOC organizations are often treated as an afterthought, or as a means to implement programmatic efforts created without their input. White-dominant organizations without existing relationships in BIPOC communities may, in the process of attempting to build relationships, end up treating community institutions as resources to be tapped rather than partners to be supported and relationships to be cultivated.

*“We’re cautious about sharing what we know on agroforestry because a lot of times the messages are misrepresented. We get calls daily as an organization from organizations that have been funded to help agroforestry or forestry with underserved landowners and received funding but don’t have ties to the community. They reach out to us and ask if we can help implement this because they don’t have ties to the community where those stories have ties to... why weren’t you in conversation with us prior to writing the grant so we could really put it where it needs to be used?”*

*- Organizational Staff, Southeast*



## Recommendations

- Actively seek out and support leadership of BIPOC farmers and organizations early in decision making, grant writing, and program design processes, and compensate them fairly for their involvement.
- Invest in organizations embedded in the communities they serve to ensure community members and organizations have the training they need to reliably advise farmers. Utilize funding criteria that include demonstration of strong community ties. Prioritize the hiring of community representatives and service providers from within the community being served.
- Proactively support BIPOC farmers and leaders for travel to decision making venues, and/or support remote participation. Support your organizational decision makers to travel to BIPOC-centered community spaces when invited.
- Foster capacity building in partner communities by offering multi-year grants for general operations, matching funds for grants that require it, and funds targeted for grassroots organizations.
- Use communication platforms to feature the voice of BIPOC farmers and communities to promote their own work.

- Increase transparency in interactions in order to build trust. When knowledge transfers verbally, there should be accompanied documentation and clear protocol for follow-up.
- Streamline paperwork and offer linguistically and culturally competent technical support for application processes.

## Conclusion

Agroforestry has the potential for transformative impact on the agricultural system. For that potential to be realized, it is essential that the work of expansion be rooted in racial justice--the repair of a legacy of harm rather than its thoughtless perpetuation. The agroforestry community needs this grounding in justice so that it can be deep enough to see through the allure of profit-maximizing false solutions, so that it can be broad enough to mobilize support for authentic solutions, and so that it can be accessible enough to welcome all who want to contribute to the fight against climate change. Philanthropists, foundations, and grant-making organizations have an important role to play in fostering this kind of agroforestry community. Acting on these aspirations requires not only a check-list of new goals for programming, but also a shift in the culture of funding. Along with strategic interventions into the challenges of land, financing, and access to information, this work demands new ways of relating to farmers and farm communities, that places farmers and their relationships at the center. The real challenges of this work are inescapable, essential components of any pathway to realizing the transformative potential of agroforestry.



Alley Cropping with Oak trees and lavender

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