Dear Aggie, how can I use the mulberry trees growing on the farm?

Mulberry trees, though often underappreciated, offer ecological and economic value in a temperate region like New York State. These hardy, fast-growing trees are adaptable to various soil types and climates, making them well-suited to the variable weather and terrain. In an agricultural setting, both the mulberry tree and its fruit present several benefits, from livestock feed and soil conservation to niche market opportunities and ecosystem support.

One of the most practical advantages of mulberry trees lies in their potential as forage for livestock. The leaves of certain species, like white mulberry (*Morus alba*), are rich in protein and can be a sustainable supplement to traditional feed for animals like goats, sheep, and even poultry. In New York, where dairy and livestock farming are significant components of the agricultural economy, integrating mulberry trees into silvopasture systems could enhance farm productivity while reducing feed costs. Additionally, because mulberries are drought-resistant and require minimal chemical inputs, they contribute to more sustainable and resilient farming operations.

Beyond livestock use, mulberry trees provide valuable fruit with respectable market appeal. Mulberries are nutrient-dense, high in antioxidants, vitamins C and K, and fiber, making them attractive in the health food market. While the fruit is highly perishable, it can be processed into jams, wines, dried snacks, and baked goods, offering value-added opportunities for small farms. With the increasing interest in local, specialty, and organic produce across New York State, especially in farmers' markets and farm-to-table restaurants, mulberries can fill a niche for unique, high-margin crops.

In terms of ecological value, mulberry trees contribute to soil stabilization and biodiversity. Their deep root systems help prevent erosion, a key concern for sloped and flood-prone areas. Mulberries also support a variety of wildlife, attracting pollinators and providing food for birds, which can contribute to natural pest control. In addition, their rapid growth and dense foliage make them effective windbreaks and shade providers, useful for creating microclimates beneficial to other crops.

In the 19th century, mulberry trees were planted widely as part of early American sericulture (silk farming) efforts, due to the exclusive diet of silkworms on mulberry leaves. While commercial silk production in New York never took off, the trees remained and adapted well to local environments. Today, there is renewed interest in their potential for regenerative agriculture and heritage crop revival. Mulberry trees represent an underutilized but highly versatile resource for New York State agriculture. Their role in animal feed, niche fruit production, ecological resilience, and historical continuity positions them as a valuable addition to diversified, sustainable farm systems.

By: Isaac Matlock, *Ag & Natural Resources Program Manager*