

Dear Aggie, what is forest farming, and will it work in northern New York?

Forest farming is a form of agroforestry that integrates the cultivation of high-value specialty crops beneath the canopy of an established forest. Unlike clear-cutting or traditional row cropping, forest farming does not seek to replace the forest but rather to work within it, managing the understory in ways that produce marketable goods while maintaining ecological health. At its core, forest farming is about stewardship, using the forest as a productive resource without reducing its long-term viability.

It is important to clarify what forest farming is not. It is not the same as wild foraging, though the crops may be similar. Wild harvesting relies on naturally occurring plants, which can quickly lead to overexploitation. Forest farming involves intentional planting, cultivation, and management of crops within the forest environment. It is also distinct from commercial timber operations. While some forest farmers may generate income from selective timber harvests, the focus is typically on non-timber forest products. Finally, it is not a “plantation model,” where monocultures dominate the land. Instead, forest farming values diversity and the preservation of natural ecosystems.

For small farmers in northern New York, forest farming offers opportunities to diversify revenue streams in ways that complement existing agricultural practices. The region, with its mix of woodlots, farmland, and proximity to markets in Watertown, Syracuse, and the Canadian border, is well-positioned to benefit from this approach. Many small farms already have unused or underutilized woodland. Rather than leaving these acres idle, farmers could manage them to grow high-value specialty crops.

Some of the most common crops suited for forest farming in northern New York include ginseng, goldenseal, and other medicinal herbs, which thrive in shaded understory conditions. These products are in demand both domestically and abroad, and their cultivated form avoids the ecological concerns tied to wild harvesting. Edible mushrooms such as shiitake, oyster, or lion’s mane can be grown on logs or in shaded beds, providing quick returns and strong market appeal to local restaurants and farmers’ markets. Other possibilities include maple syrup, nuts, berries, and decorative plants like ferns or woodland flowers.

The benefits of forest farming extend beyond direct income. By cultivating a mix of crops within forested land, small farmers can spread risk. If one crop underperforms due to market fluctuations or pests, others may still provide stable revenue. Additionally, forest farming can align with agritourism, an already growing sector in the region. Visitors may be attracted to tours, workshops, or “pick-your-own” experiences in a managed woodland, providing another income stream. Forest farming also supports environmental sustainability by maintaining healthy soils, protecting biodiversity, and sequestering carbon.

Of course, challenges exist. Forest farming requires upfront investment in knowledge, time, and sometimes certification. Markets for certain products, especially medicinal herbs, may fluctuate

or require specialized buyers. Farmers must also be cautious not to degrade forest health by overharvesting or introducing invasive species. Cooperative approaches such as shared marketing, co-ops, or extension services from local institutions could help mitigate these barriers.

To conclude, forest farming is neither wild foraging nor traditional agriculture, but rather a hybrid approach that recognizes forests as productive landscapes. For small farmers in northern New York, it represents a realistic and sustainable way to diversify income. By turning woodlots into sites of innovation and cultivation, farmers can strengthen their livelihoods while conserving the natural resources that define the region.

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