

Trees on Organic Farms

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The multiple benefits of agroforestry systems - including diversification of income sources, pest control, and soil protection and enhancement - may be particularly valuable to organic farmers. To find out whether they are taking advantage of these benefits, we surveyed organic farmers about trees on their farms, including perceived benefits and drawbacks.

The survey was conducted for the first author's master's project in the Department of Forestry at North Carolina State University. During the summer of 2000, 170 farmers were contacted by email or at the local farmers market. These included farmers from throughout the United States who were members of ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas). Thirty percent of the contacted farmers responded to the survey, giving us a sample size of 51. Follow-up calls to a random sample of non-respondents indicated that they did not differ significantly from respondents. Most farms are small (97 acres on average) and have limited acreage in marketable production (36 acres on average). The majority (59%) of the farmers are over 40 years of age, and 98% have some college education. Their most common marketing strategies are farmers markets (63%) and community supported agriculture (55%).

All of the farmers who responded to the survey have at least one "tree component" on their farms. These include natural tree corridors through the farm (67% of farms), orchards (57%), natural tree lines along farm boundaries (51%), unmanaged plantations (25%), agroforestry (24%), and managed plantations (22%). Farmers reported an average of 2.4 tree components. The survey defined agroforestry as "growing agricultural and timber crops together." Many of the farmers (75%) who currently have agroforestry systems planned to expand them in the future. About a third of the farmers also reported plans to expand or add new orchards to their farms. In sum, our survey confirmed that trees are commonly found on organic farms, most often as orchards or natural boundaries. The more interesting question is how farmers perceive these tree components.

The survey asked farmers to identify the benefits and drawbacks of the trees on their farms. All respondents identified benefits, with the most frequently reported being aesthetics (90%). Other benefits commonly perceived by farmers are windbreaks (75%), beneficial insects (69%), wildlife (69%), privacy (69%), and shade (65%). While recognizing these benefits, the majority of farmers indicated that the tree components on their farms are not integral to cash crop production. The most common cash crops harvested directly from trees, as reported in the survey, are fruits and nuts (14% of farms) and timber (13%). The primary drawback reported by farmers is that trees support pests (especially deer). However, only a quarter of farmers reported this problem. Other drawbacks

reported by even fewer farmers are shade (14%) and labor drain (10%). Many farmers wrote into the survey that there are no drawbacks to the trees on their farms. Thus, farmers generally perceive trees to be beneficial components of their farms, with few recognized drawbacks.

To summarize, among our sample of organic farmers who are members of ATTRA, all have tree components on their farms and recognize at least some benefits from those trees. However, our findings also suggest that many of these farmers do not actively manage their trees, as natural tree corridors across farms or along property boundaries are two of the most common tree components, and the most commonly reported benefit is aesthetics rather than any product or productive input. Most of our respondents said that they would like to learn more about the potential benefits of trees, suggesting that organic farmers are an important audience for any outreach efforts designed to promote the integration of trees into farming systems across the US.