LIVING LOCAL: SMALL-SCALE, LARGE IMPACT



LIVING LOCAL

ASSATEAGUE FARM

Written by Chandler Joiner

When driving down Assateague Road, it is difficult to miss the Assateague Farm roadside stand stocked full of produce, flowers, firewood, and handmade crafts. The stand is situated between a massive pile of firewood and plethora of Airstream trailers at the front of the twelve-acre farm in Berlin, Maryland. Residents and visitors alike regularly stop to purchase firewood for weekends on the beach, or to participate in the farm's ever-growing "U-Pick" opportunities. However, many supporters do not realize the vast diversity of growth and bustling activity that occurs just beyond the stand. I spent a February afternoon learning from Farmer Lindsey Buckman about her and her family's commitment to the growth of sustainable products for the benefit of the community and the land. Throughout our conversation I gained a deeper understanding of the methods this fixture of the Berlin community implements literally just down the street from my very own front door.



FARMER LINDSEY BUCKMAN Co-Founder of Assateague Farm

When the Buckman family, Steve, Kelly, and their two daughters,

Lindsey and Lauren, first started growing in 2012, they immediately began the process of reversing the impacts of the previous monoculture enterprise. After the soybeans and corn died off, they tilled over the property to reset it and began adding to the land. "The soil is something we had to instantly add to, we added a lot of organic matter and wood chips. Probably three times throughout the year we will mulch our beds with organic matter, most of our beds thrive with organic matter," said Lindsey. Throughout my conversation with her, I came to understand the vital role organic matter and wood chips have on their farm.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many problems with compost piles can be solved by adjusting carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) inputs. The fastest way to produce fertile compost is to maintain a C:N ratio somewhere around 30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen (30:1). Having a strong compost – which is simply organic matter that has been decomposed – system is important to any successful organic farming operation. Lindsey has her own compost recipe consisting of "pine needles, leaves, thicker wood chops, food scrapes, and a variety of other things." Lindsey realized early on that a compost pile will take a long time to decompose unless enough nitrogen is added, which helps a compost pile heat up more rapidly. All organic matter has a ratio of carbon to nitrogen in their tissues and the decomposition of organic matter in a compost pile is greatly increased when the proper balance is found. If there is excess carbon in the pile, the decomposition process slows down, but if there is excess nitrogen the pile will rot quickly. Lindsey uses food scrapes and green leaves as nitrogen sources to speed up the decomposition process, other sources can include fresh lawn clippings and coffee grounds.

While compost is traditionally started in a pile away from the plants and then transported to garden beds, Lindsey occasionally adds the compost directly onto the beds. "Add it directly instead of in the piles and let the rain drip through it. That way the soil is building up beneficial bacteria and microorganisms. Moving it does help, it helps aerate it and break it

down, but if it can just stay in one spot, it is like a slow release fertilizer." The microscopic organisms Lindsey references, such as bacteria, actinomycetes, fungi, protozoa, worms, etc., are found in compost and help aerate the soil, break down organic materials for plant use, and ward off plant disease. Whether you are beginning your compost as a separate pile or adding it directly, compost should always be started on bare earth. The benefit of this is so worms and other beneficial organisms can help aerate the compost and be transported with the compost if it was started in a separate pile.

According to Lindsey, not all plants do well with the addition of organic matter. "You do not want to put too much organic matter on top of plants like raspberries or blackberries, because once they are past their first year it will create a fugus environment and rot." However, her vegetable plots and blueberries thrive with the addition of organic



matter and wood chips. "Wood chips are awesome; wood chips do it all. They help with moisture control, whether we are getting too much rain or not enough rain. Wood chips act as an insulator of sorts that will regulate almost any extreme weather condition." She also informed me about how great wood chips are for weed control. "The key is to put a thick layer of wood chips on, and while they are not going to totally stop the weeds, they will definitely suppress them because the weeds will have to try and make it through a whole layer of wood chips in order to come up. If it is a perennial weed that has the energy underground, it is going to come up regardless, but the wood chips make it a lot slower. It is much easier for us to maintain weeds on our end because the wood chips make the growth more gradual."

For additional weed maintenance on her end, Lindsey uses a couple of control methods such as organic spray and landscape fabric, as well as good old-fashioned hand pulling. "We sometimes use a vinegar-based home solution. It is a natural form of round-up, meaning that it will kill just the top growth and is not going to mess with the root systems." Weeds can become a major problem, and while many farmers use a variety of techniques, Lindsey states that landscape fabric is one of her favorites. "It is just a black fabric and we plant within it. We burn holes through it for whatever the spacing is that we need and it works very well, especially with tomatoes. Landscape fabric is probably my favorite as far as efficiency goes; that and the wood chips. Wood chips for long-term, and the landscape fabric for the annual vegetable garden when you want to plant a lot in a little space." Lindsey also highly recommends getting weeds out early when you have just planted something new. "It is crucial to maintain the rows right off the bat and give them the space they need so they can grow to a size where they are comfortable and can fend off weeds naturally."

Along with organic weed control and organic matter supplementation, Lindsey also uses interplanting techniques to help protect the soil and her plants. "Interplanting is planting a lot of different plants in one spot to help with root systems. Certain root systems, like asparagus, have really long taproots, so they bring nutrients from a few feet below the actual plant to the surface. So, if we plant something with a shallow root, like lettuce, between the asparagus, then it is also getting the nutrients brought up to it. It all works together." Interplanting helps use space efficiently by minimizing the space where weeds can grow, encouraging the cooperation among different plants, and preventing diseases from spreading. When there is a wide diversity of plant families in just one bed, diseases will have a harder time spreading.

Another sustainable tactic is the utilization of beneficial insects to ward off harmful insects that would otherwise damage plants. "This year, we decided to get lady bugs and they ate the aphids off all our tomato plants!" Aphids are small softbodied insects that feed by sucking the sap from plants. They live in large colonies, meaning they can cause extensive damage to plants. Aphids reproduce rapidly and many generations can occur in one season, which is why it is important to get them under control quickly. The reason why ladybugs (also known as lady beetles) are considered "beneficial" insects











is that they are a natural predator of the aphid and do not harm plants. If you have ordered ladybugs to help with an aphid problem, it is important to release them correctly or they will all fly away. They should be released in the evening in a recently wet garden with an aphid problem. Lindsey also utilizes wasps to help protect the tomatoes. "The wasps will usually show up because they know there is a lot of food in that section. The horn worms lay these little black eggs, they look pieces of black rice, and the wasps will feed on the eggs or directly on the horn worms. It is good for the pollinator [the wasp], and it kills the bugs killing our tomatoes. The wasps and the ladybugs keep our tomatoes incredibly insect free."

All the sustainable methods the Buckman's use are the product of their dedication to providing the community with organic options and protecting their land. Lindsey is passionate about continually experimenting to find the most efficient and healthy ways to grow her plants and protect the earth. "Last year I did an experiment, I planted peppers in our blueberries. And the peppers that were planted within the patch were double the size of the ones that were planted outside of the patch. It is like they create their own mini-ecosystem!" The farm is filled with a wide variety of trees,

produce, flowers, and fruit which are all the product of Lindsey's passion for exploration. "Christmas trees are over there, and then black raspberries, blackberries, and raspberries. Fruit trees are over there, and last year, I did a vegetable garden in the apple trees over there. I also did a lot of experimental plots using a bunch of different methods so that for this year I could pick my favorites and expand them."

While Assateague Farm continues to grow, Lindsey's main goal for the future is to just learn how to grow more efficiently while continuing implementing sustainable practices. "When I first started, I was full of so much energy and I learned to slow down, step back, look at the small problems and figure out a way to replicate the ways nature solves problems. Generally, you can solve anything by not over complicating it. Lindsey Buckman

did not have to think too much about efficiency. As we have grown, I am forced to think about how to do things more efficiently." Lindsey's advice for future growers and farmers is to focus on mimicking nature where you can and be unafraid to make mistakes. "I learned to slow down, step back, look at the small problems, and figure out how to replicate the ways nature solves problems. Generally, you can solve anything by not over complicating it. I learned most things by just making mistakes."

Throughout my afternoon with Lindsey I witnessed firsthand the Buckman family's dedication to sustainable farming practices in their effort to provide the community with healthy and accessible products. Now, more than ever, it is incredibly important for people to be aware of their local food resources. It is important to link farmers and consumers who care about the environment around them and the food they are eating. As we face an unprecedented time in our society, I encourage you all to continue learning about the inspiring farmers in your area and support your neighbors by purchasing local when possible.









Assateague Farm products can be found throughout the year at their farm stand located on Route 611, right between Ocean City, MD and Assateague Island, 11832 Assateague Road, Berlin, Maryland 21811. They also offer seasonal U-pick opportunities for asparagus, raspberries, blueberries, and blackberries from May-September. For further inquires, please visit their website at www.assateaguefarm.com, or contact them via email at info@assateaguefarm.com.

🙆 @assateaguefarm