

# AMERICAN FARMLAND

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American Farmland Trust supporter Shirley Johnson on her Illinois farm. (Inset) Johnson stands in front of her restored native prairie habitat.

## A Mighty Oak Stands Tall

On her Illinois farm, Shirley Johnson has the foresight to ensure a future for agriculture.

During a recent visit to Shirley Johnson's farm in Peoria, Illinois, she introduced visitors to her "Mighty Oak," a seedling just eight inches high. Johnson has a knack for envisioning the future, when one day the oak will provide beauty and shade for the farmhouse nearby. In another testament to Johnson's forward-thinking, she recently donated her farm to American Farmland Trust in her estate plans.

Johnson grew up on the 176-acre farm with her parents and siblings but spent much of the last four decades in California pursuing a career in biotechnology. When she and her siblings inherited the farm, Johnson felt drawn to return in the summers, and she became actively involved in the farm's management. As a scientist, Johnson embraced the opportunity to research agronomy and soil

health, a knowledge she applied to conservation practices on the farm.

"I just love being at this particular spot on the farm," Johnson said while describing an erosion management strategy. "From this vantage point, I can see an organic cornfield, a prairie strip for pollinators, and a dry dam to prevent erosion. These are examples of how I am taking care of the land."

"Dad, don't worry, I'm taking care of your farm," she added with a smile, looking upward.

Johnson rents the cropland to a beginning farmer who is transitioning the land to organic corn and soy production. She collaborated with a researcher at the University of Illinois to install a bioreactor on the farm, designed to reduce the runoff of soil nutrients. And she established pollinator habitat and strips of native prairie plants with the help of the U.S.

Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"Shirley's soil health practices and commitment to farmland protection are emblematic of what American Farmland Trust's work in the Midwest hopes to achieve," said Kris Reynolds, director of American Farmland Trust's Midwest office, which works with farmers and landowners in Illinois and other states to improve water quality and soil health, adopt conservation practices such as cover crops, and meet the state nutrient-loss reduction goals.

Johnson returns repeatedly to the theme of collaboration when describing her approach to land stewardship. In 2011, she and her sister faced a challenge when an unscrupulous developer sought to buy up farmland in their area. Johnson and her neighbors successfully opposed the developer's request to re-zone the land from agricultural to residential.

"We all worked together," Johnson said. "At times there were 40 neighbors who showed up to a zoning board meeting. We all wore bright green stickers that said, 'Preserve farmland.' When the elected officials saw the community support to keep this as farmland, it worked. It wasn't easy, but we did it. The fact that we stood up for farmland protection here in our township shows that other people can do it. By bringing all our voices together to make one big voice, we can keep farmland as farmland."

"When I look out there now, I see a beautiful field of corn," she added, looking toward the neighboring farm. "I'm so happy to say that is still farmland."

Johnson and her neighbors used research reports from American Farmland Trust to make the case for farmland protection. "When we talked with elected officials, we shared American Farmland Trust's research on

### Protecting At-Risk Midwest Land

The Midwest is a global leader in agricultural production. The region is home to over 200 million acres of cropland and produces billions of dollars in food and agricultural goods every year.

As farmland throughout the region is under threat, so too are the many benefits that farms provide. Midwest states can adopt a suite of tools and policies to better protect farmland. This includes protecting farmland and expanding programs that provide land access to beginning, new, and historically disadvantaged farmers.

American Farmland Trust's Midwest office works to advance permanently protected farmland through agricultural conservation easements and engages with towns and counties throughout the region that are interested in starting their own local farmland protection programs.

Learn more about our work in Illinois and the Midwest at [farmland.org/project/midwest-policy-priorities](https://farmland.org/project/midwest-policy-priorities) or contact Midwest Farmland Protection Manager Angie Doucette at [adoucette@farmland.org](mailto:adoucette@farmland.org) for more information on protecting farmland in your community.



**Mighty Oak**, continued on page 2

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

Now that summer is in full-swing, I hope you have the chance to visit a farmers market and sample all that your local farmers have to offer. Here in Maine, I love to come home from the farmers market with fresh blueberries, newly ripened tomatoes, and bottled milk and homemade cheese from a nearby dairy farm.

Although summer is a time to pause and appreciate longer days, vacation trips, and good friends, here at American Farmland Trust we are also gearing up for the fall and our legislative work around the next Farm Bill. Roughly every five years, Congress renews the Farm Bill, omnibus legislation that shapes federal food and agricultural policy for years to come.

The Farm Bill is not just for farmers. It also funds rural development programs that support vital communities, nutrition assistance for families and schools, renewable energy development, and conservation to protect the nation's land, air, water, and soil.

Since our founding in 1980, American Farmland Trust has worked to transform federal farm policy so that it works for farmers and ranchers, the environment, and for all of America. Our focus in the next Farm Bill is on policies that protect our threatened agricultural land base, increase the adoption

of conservation practices and Smart Solar,<sup>™</sup> and help farmers to access land and build viable businesses.

In the days and months ahead, American Farmland Trust will be leading the effort to secure bipartisan support for a number of beneficial policies for America, including:

- Increased funding and a streamlined process for the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), which helps landowners permanently protect their farmland and rangeland from development.
- Help for more farmers to adopt soil health practices and cover crops while accessing technical assistance.
- A strengthened Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA), which minimizes the extent to which federal programs unnecessarily convert farmland to nonagricultural uses.
- Support for American Farmland Trust's Smart Solar principles, which promote renewable energy and farm profitability while minimizing the extent to which solar



panels take productive land out of farming.

- An office to support small farms. While small farms are eligible for U.S. Department of Agriculture programs, many such programs are designed with a one-size-fits-all approach that can disadvantage smaller operations.

These are just a few of the many priorities that American Farmland Trust is working on. You can read more at [farmland.org/2023-farm-bill](https://farmland.org/2023-farm-bill). As the legislative process unfolds, we'll keep you informed about what is happening and how you can make a difference.

Thank you for your vital support and enjoy the rest of your summer!

John Piotti  
President & CEO  
American Farmland Trust

### Mighty Oak, *continued from page 1*

farmland loss and 'cost of community services' studies to back up our points," she said. "I donate to American Farmland Trust because I think AFT has the right vision for farmland, and that is to keep it in the hands of farmers."

Johnson's foresight enabled her to see that if her neighbor's farm was lost to development, her farm and the other farms nearby would be at greater risk.

"When I was a kid, I saw the development start to happen," Johnson said. "As people retired or passed away, these farms were being sold to developers. The county built a road that runs diagonally through what used to be

my dad's very best field. Now it's much harder for my renting farmer to plant and harvest the field."

"The traffic has increased," she added. "I said to myself, 'We can't keep developing farmland.' First of all, we've got to feed the world. And second of all, we need to maintain the livelihood of Illinois. This is an agricultural area. How are we going to keep jobs in agriculture if we give away all the land?"

Johnson made the decision to leave her family farm to American Farmland Trust in her will, under the condition that American Farmland Trust will permanently protect the land.

"Shirley understands how important it is to pay it forward by protecting her land for future generations and supporting American Farmland Trust's work, now and into the future," said Jerry Cosgrove, director of American Farmland Trust's Farm Legacy program, which works to keep land in farming as it transitions to the next generation.

"I've decided that this farm is the line where development stops. We need farms. We need agricultural production," Johnson said. "I want to put this farm in an agricultural conservation easement in perpetuity, and by donating my farm to American Farmland Trust, I am making sure the easement will be in place. I understand that American Farmland Trust may sell the land to another farmer in the future, but whoever buys it will know they can't subdivide it for development, and that's what is important to me."

Like the seedling oak tree that will someday grow tall, Johnson's legacy will last for generations to come.

"There have been quite a few changes in this area since my childhood," Johnson said. "But when I stand here next to my Mighty Oak, I see the things that have not changed. I look at the barn and the chicken house and the farmhouse and think, 'This is the farm where I grew up.' It has the feeling of my childhood. It's the same special place. And it gives me peace of mind that I'm partnering with American Farmland Trust to ensure that this farm will always stay a farm."

**i** For more information about leaving a gift of land or other options for your farm or ranch, please contact Jerry Cosgrove, American Farmland Trust's farm legacy director at (518) 281-5074 or [jcosgrove@farmland.org](mailto:jcosgrove@farmland.org).

## Is Your Favorite Farmers Market One of America's Best?

America's Farmers Market Celebration, now in its 15th year, is the pre-eminent ranking of the nation's favorite farmers markets.

This summer, help us shine a light on the farmers markets across the country that feed their communities. **Cast your vote before September 18** and help your favorite markets compete for \$15,000 in cash prizes and more!



SCAN  
TO LEARN  
MORE.



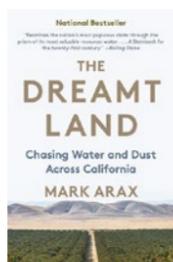
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AND FARMERS MARKET COALITION

Visit [markets.farmland.org](https://markets.farmland.org) to learn more.

# Summer Reading

American Farmland Trust Staff  
Recommend Books  
About Farms and Food

This summer, why not curl up with a good book on a beach or in a backyard hammock? Even better, make it a book about farms or food! Below, staff members at American Farmland Trust offer suggestions for their favorite books relating to farms, conservation, and local food. Happy reading!



## The Dreamt Land: Chasing Water and Dust Across California

BY MARK ARAX

“This is the book for understanding California’s history, water resources, and agriculture. It’s densely researched non-fiction, a mix of personal memoir, expert journalism, and terrific storytelling.”

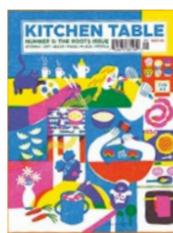
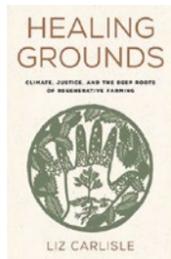
— Teresa O’Connor, California Communications and Outreach Manager

## Healing Grounds

BY LIZ CARLISLE

“Liz Carlisle knows how to tie soil health, climate change, and social justice together in a way that keeps those pages turning. Gabrielle McNally [American Farmland Trust’s Women for the Land Initiative Director] recently hosted a webinar with the author that was very inspiring.”

— Deborah Nares, California Senior Manager



## Kitchen Table Magazine Number 5: The Roots Issue

“I love this magazine, and this issue focuses on our connection to the land. It’s a fun mix of stories, comics, photography, and recipes.”

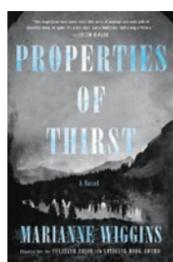
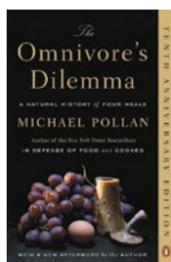
— Emeran Irby, New England Communication & Outreach Coordinator

## The Omnivore’s Dilemma

BY MICHAEL POLLAN

“‘The Omnivore’s Dilemma’ is hugely responsible for my entry into food systems work, and now agriculture. Michael Pollan is a great writer. He weaves story and information beautifully and helps the reader to think about food and land holistically and historically.”

— Haley Fenton, Philanthropy Officer, Pacific Northwest



## The Properties of Thirst

BY MARIANNE WIGGINS

“This new novel by a National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize finalist is a rip-roaring ride through the Owens Valley in the Eastern Sierras, where everything from the Los Angeles water grab, Manzanar, French cuisine, racism, and the Roaring West come to life. I didn’t want this one to end, and I keep telling people to read it. I read this before ‘The Dreamt Land,’ and it put a lot of history into perspective.”

— Teresa O’Connor, California Communications and Outreach Manager

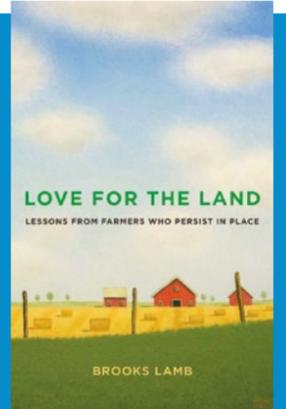
## Love for the Land: Lessons from Farmers Who Persist in Place

BY BROOKS LAMB



“I’d be remiss if I didn’t recommend this book by one of our own. Not only is it heartfelt and well-written, but it touches on some of the core issues that we work on every day at American Farmland Trust. It can help re-inspire us at a time when some of us may be feeling overwhelmed. And since Brooks will be doing author events around the country, we can all come out to support him in-person and get our own signed copy!”

— Amanda Cather, Mid-Atlantic Program Manager



“‘Love for the Land: Lessons from Farmers Who Persist in Place,’ by American Farmland Trust Land Protection and Access Specialist Brooks Lamb, draws from interviews in two changing rural communities to show how the virtues of imagination, affection, and fidelity—concepts promoted by farmer-writer Wendell Berry—motivate farmers to care for the land, even in the face of adversity.

Lamb shares stories from dozens of farmers, local leaders, agricultural service providers, and land conservationists. His rural roots and farming background allow him to cultivate connections with the farmers he engages, yielding insights into

the stewardship virtues that encourage farmers to live and act as caretakers of the land.

Paying particular attention to farmland loss from suburban sprawl, rampant agricultural consolidation, and, for farmers of color, racial injustice, Brooks reckons with the harsh realities that these farmers face. Lamb argues that farmers show rural and urban people alike a way forward, one that serves people, places, and the planet. That path is rooted in love for the land.

Visit [brookslamb.com](http://brookslamb.com) for more information on how to order the book, as well as upcoming author events.

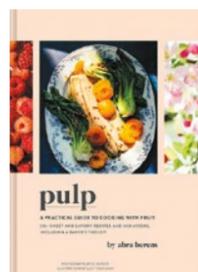
## Pulp: A Practical Guide to Cooking with Fruit

BY ABRA BERENS

“A cookbook all about fruit!

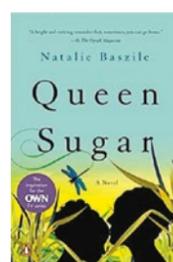
Abra interviews farmers, chefs, and many other people and shares recipes that focus on putting fruit front and center. My favorite recipe is a sugar cube cantaloupe with a scoop of vanilla ice cream in the center, drizzled with olive oil, salt, and pepper.”

— Emeran Irby, New England Communication & Outreach Coordinator



conversations, and first-person stories to examine Black people’s connection to the American land from Emancipation to today.”

— Nicole Gwishiri, Women for the Land Southeast Program Manager

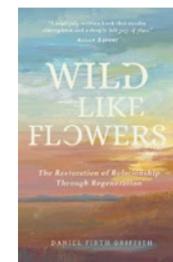


## Queen Sugar

BY NATALIE BASZILE

“Set in contemporary Louisiana, this fiction book tells the story of Charley Bordelon, a young African-American divorcee from Los Angeles who moves to a rural town to manage a sugarcane farm she unexpectedly inherited from her father.”

— Nicole Gwishiri, Women for the Land Southeast Program Manager



## Wild Like Flowers: The Restoration of Relationship Through Regeneration

BY DANIEL FIRTH GRIFFITH

“I thoroughly enjoyed reading this prose because of how the author delves so precisely into his family’s relationship and connection to their land. We could all benefit from more intentional dialing-in to sense of place, and this book reminded me how fundamentally rewarding that can be.”

— Rachel Newcomb, Marketing Events & Outreach Coordinator

## We Are Each Other’s Harvest

BY NATALIE BASZILE

“In this impressive anthology, Natalie Baszile brings together essays, poems, quotes,

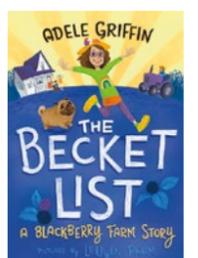


## The Becket List: A Blackberry Farm Story

BY ADELE GRIFFIN

“My daughter liked this one! It’s an ideal middle-grade book for second graders, and it’s the first in a new series.”

— Phoebe Silag, Vice-President of Communications





REBECCA DROBIS

Visit [aftgiving.org](http://aftgiving.org)

## Make a Gift for Generations

As a member of American Farmland Trust, you make an invaluable impact on our mission to protect farmland and the future of farming. Here are a few ways to leave a gift that endures for generations:

- Include American Farmland Trust in your will or trust.
- Consider naming American Farmland Trust as a beneficiary of a life insurance policy or your IRA.
- Establish a charitable gift annuity, in which you make a gift of cash, securities, or property in exchange for regular income payments for life.
- Make a gift of your farm or ranch, allowing American Farmland Trust to protect it while supporting farming long into the future.

With a legacy gift, you'll join our Farmland Forever Society, a special group that supports our mission.

For more information, contact Paul Caspersen, director of planned giving, at [pcaspersen@farmland.org](mailto:pcaspersen@farmland.org) or (352) 727-0454.



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Pilot and American Farmland Trust supporter Richard Norris in a glider (above left); view from the air of farm landscapes in Oxnard, California (above right); Madison County, Ohio (right); and Loudon County, Virginia (below).

### SUPPORTER PROFILE

## Richard Norris

A Pilot Gains a Birds-Eye View of Farmland— And the Need to Protect It

Richard Norris, a supporter of American Farmland Trust for over three decades, first became concerned about farmland loss through his work as a commercial airline pilot.

“I care about urban planning and farmland protection because I spent 23 years watching urban sprawl happen in real time from the air,” said Norris of Pecatonica, Illinois. “From the cockpit of a plane, you can really see the changes that are happening on the ground.”

Norris served in the Navy at Whidbey Island and then flew in and out of the Denver airport for 23 years as a pilot.

“When I first moved to Denver, it was mostly open space between Denver and Boulder,” he said. “With the expansion of Denver east, north, and south, the two cities have almost merged. There is also urban expansion along the foothills to the Rockies. It reminds me of southern California, how San Diego and Los Angeles have merged.”

Norris now lives with his family in Illinois. In addition to supporting American Farmland Trust, he also hopes to make a difference by serving as a member of the Village of Pecatonica Planning and Zoning Commission.

“I really like how American Farmland Trust works with farmers and landowners, not against them. I like how AFT helps them enjoy the equity in their farms without having to sell out to a developer,” he said.



ROB CRANDALL/ALAMY





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