

# A WOMAN FARMER PROFILE

A MASSACHUSETTS FARMER PROFILE SERIES

SPRING 2025

Featuring

MARGARET GICHUKI

she-her-hers



PHOTO CREDIT  
NEW ENTRY SUSTAINABLE FARMING PROJECT

MARGARET FAMILY FARM



[MGICHUKIFARM@GMAIL.COM](mailto:MGICHUKIFARM@GMAIL.COM)



[FARMER FEATURE VIDEO](#)

When Margaret Gichuki first arrived in the United States from Kenya, she recalls feeling a need to integrate into American society.

There was a sense that “when you come here, you have to do what others are doing,” Margaret says. As such, she went to school to become a nursing assistant, and assistant and continues to work in this profession today.

But while completing her training, Margaret found that nursing work was “not what came from my heart,” she said. The work that did spark a sense of passion was farming, which had served as a cornerstone of Margaret’s day-to-day life and responsibilities before she immigrated to Lowell.

“Apart from working in hospitals, **you need something that makes you feel connected to nature and what you love best,**” Margaret said.

It’s easy to see that farming serves this purpose for Margaret — in fact, just a glance at her feet as she tends to crops gets the message across.

“When I’m in the farm, I don’t even wear shoes,” Margaret said. “That’s how connected I am.”

Just as she values this relationship with the soil, Margaret also highlights connections she’s forged with fellow farmers, and the ability to feed her family.

Ultimately, she couldn’t stay away from the livelihood for long: For six years, Margaret has now leased and farmed land at the Dracut Land Trust’s Smith Healy Farm, where she finds ways to integrate her own culture into a unique style of farming.

Margaret hasn’t looked back on her decision to pursue agriculture in Massachusetts, and Massachusetts and constantly looks for **opportunities to innovate and expand her farm work while integrating the cultural knowledge and traditional practices** she’s known since childhood.

# FOUNDATIONS IN SOIL HEALTH SPAN CONTINENTS



While many area farmers start out with a shallow understanding of soil health, Margaret’s family raised her with a deep understanding of soil health management practices. On her family’s farm, which her mother owned, Margaret played a hands-on role in cultivating coffee and livestock. Speaking on this firsthand experience, **“we didn’t have a choice (but to learn) growing up,”** Margaret said, with family members emphasizing soil health practices as essential to financial security. “When you sell the coffee, that’s how you get your (money for) school fees,” Margaret said. “You are self-employed.”

In Dracut, Margaret found herself working with soil and an overall environment that significantly differed from her experiences in Kenya. Area rainfall in particular posed an early challenge, she noted. Even on a different continent, however, Margaret’s farming practices from Kenya serve her well. She continues to draw upon **fertility trenches, for instance — deep trenches that are dug in rows and filled with organic matter residue such as leaves, compost, and manure.**

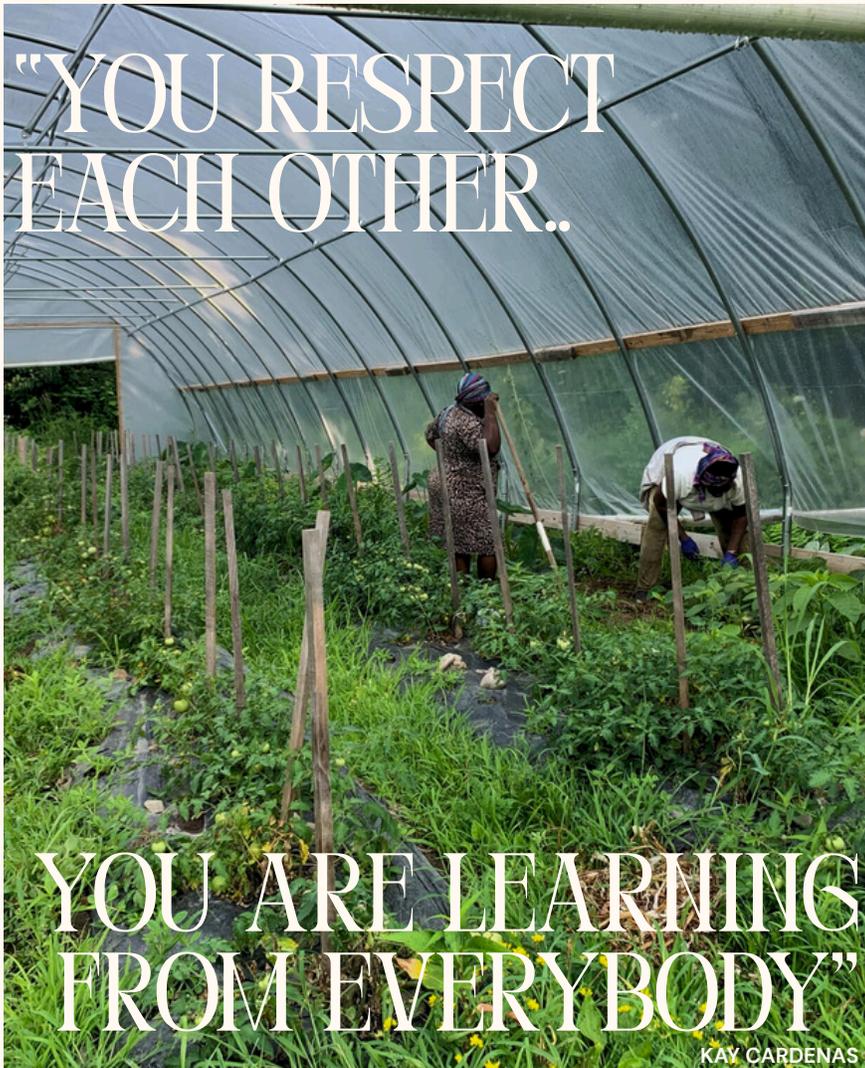
In addition to fostering long-lasting soil fertility, the practice loosens soil and improves drainage and aeration. To combat erosion, Margaret also uses trenches and small bags of gravel to divert and direct water on hilly landscapes. Additionally, she utilizes living plant roots to hold soil in place, as well as mulching practices and intercropping.

Using these techniques, Margaret supports a diverse range of crops, including Kenyan staples such as Amaranth, Managu, Loofa, and Jute Mallow. She also grows a diversity of popular local vegetables, including peppers, onions, tomatoes, butternut squash, and kale.

But even with this mix of American and Kenyan farming techniques, climate impacts sow anxiety and uncertainty. For this reason, Margaret has held onto her nursing job, rather than relying solely on farming. “You have to have a backup,” she said.

## MARGARET FAMILY FARM

# MAKING SHIFTS, FINDING COMMUNITY



While Margaret has easily transitioned some of her practices from Kenya into her leased Dracut farmland, other long-held farming techniques have met new challenges in the U.S.

Growing up, Margaret's family taught her how to develop and use manure as a fertilizer — a complex process that required mixing the manure with other organic materials, and materials and could require months of aging. With these practices, Margaret **developed deep knowledge as to what types of animal manure to use on different crops**, and how long the fertilizer could last before it needed replacing.

Since moving to Massachusetts, Margaret has found that implementing this knowledge requires navigating strict legal regulations. As a result, Margaret turns to compost more frequently than she would have in Kenya, though this practice comes with extra expenses.

But while navigating these challenges, Margaret has found a strong support network among local farmers and nonprofits: Margaret re-entered the farming community in Massachusetts after a conversation with her friend and fellow farmer Seona Ban Ngufor, and took a class through Beverly-based New Entry Sustainable Farming Project that she says served as a valuable resource in launching her Dracut farming operations.

In Kenya, much of this support and knowledge-sharing came from family members, though it also extended into the broader community.

**"It's a family thing (in Kenya), living together,"** Margaret said, **"and you know people for miles and miles, and you go to school together, so you respect each other ... You are learning from everybody."**

When needed, Margaret could also turn to the country's Ministry of Agriculture for additional farming support.

## MARGARET FAMILY FARM

# CONTINUING A TRADITION OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Margaret hopes to eventually buy her own farmland, and to continue breaking new ground as a farmer — for instance, by adding a beekeeping operation. **"My dream is (that) one of these days, I'm going to own my own farm,"** Margaret says, "so that I can do whatever I want."

In this way, Margaret would follow in her mother's footsteps: Her mother not only taught Margaret how to farm, but owned the family growing operation.

It wasn't just Margaret's mother who modeled farming leadership: In Kenya, women typically work on and run the farms, Margaret said, while men more commonly head into the cities for work.

## "THIS WORK CAME WITH RESPECT"

"The women are left behind to farm, so it's like farming was for women," Margaret said. This work came with respect, she noted. "I liked it, because my mother owned the plantation," Margaret said of farm work. "My father never used to ask ... what he's getting from the coffee plantation."

In the U.S., access to land ownership stands as an obstacle to many farm workers, Margaret acknowledges — a barrier she wants broken down not only for herself, but for all. Particularly, Margaret would like to see more opportunities for young women interested in entering the profession. **"So many people want to come out and do farming, like young women, but there's no land,"** Margaret said. With land access reform, "so many people would be doing farming," she added.



NEW ENTRY SUSTAINABLE FARMING PROJECT



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Written by Jacquelyn Voghel – Designed by Charline Xu 夏临

Photography by Kay Cardenas and New Entry Sustainable Farming Project

*Supported by funding from Mass Humanities, USDA's NRCS MA, MDAR, and an anonymous donor.*