

A NONBINARY FARMER PROFILE

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Featuring

YUN-YUN LI

she-they



FARMER



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Though Yun-Yun Li didn't grow up in a farming family, **connections to the livelihood have deep roots in their identity.**

For one, Yun-Yun recalls that growing up, their parents "liked plants as pets better than animals."

"I always felt connected to plants through my family," Yun-Yun said — a link that they would eventually tie back to ancestral knowledge of farming methods.

It's perhaps unsurprising, then, when Yun-Yun says, "The first thing that made me feel happy was working with plants on farms."

Yun-Yun has now spent almost a decade working on and managing farms in urban and rural areas. Those farms have included a wide range of soil types and spanned from one to 30 acres in size. But Yun-Yun found their way to farming through a winding path that included travel across Asia, nonprofit work in food systems, and "seemingly random circumstances" where they were inspired by other farmers.

Yun-Yun initially set out to study ecology and evolutionary biology, intending to become a researcher. Their first formal exposure to farming came in China, "where it's way more common for farmers to be growing at the small one-to-five acre scale," Yun-Yun said. They later encountered this smaller-scale farming in Thailand as well, but went on to work for The Food Project, a Boston nonprofit focused on relieving food insecurity.

There, Yun-Yun found limited office work available. The nonprofit did, however, have plenty of farm work that needed attending.

"I didn't ever think of myself as a farmer, but they didn't have enough work for me in the office," Yun-Yun said, **"so I started farming."**

BUILDING COMMUNITY, SECURING IDENTITY

While effective, **conservation methods take significant time and effort to successfully implement**, Yun-Yun acknowledges, and can appear particularly daunting to newer farmers. Then, there's disappointment when these farmers realize they can't change the system overnight.

But **farmers can overcome those obstacles by focusing on small changes and gradual progress**, Yun-Yun says.



Even at Roots Farm, which is owned by two engineers, "they're still figuring it out every year," Yun-Yun said. **"So I think young farmers get really excited about creating a perfect system. And what I'm learning is that that doesn't exist, and slow changes are better than discouraging, big changes."**

Yun-Yun highlights **mulching as a good place to start**. It's "a friendly and approachable soil health management technique because you can implement it on a small scale, it's a safe place to experiment, and you can use local materials, so it connects you to your community," they said.

"It's not just [about knowing you need to mulch]," Yun-Yun continued. "It's also about, specifically in my tiny micro region, what mulches are actually available. How do I get them? How much do they cost? When do I call the person who has the mulch? **All those things really matter, particularly because they emphasize strong community connections and teamwork.**"

This sharing of communal knowledge played a central role in Yun-Yun's approach to understanding and implementing soil health practices, as did mentorship and cohort-based learning via a beginning farmer course at Maryland-based nonprofit Future Harvest.

While pursuing academic studies in ecology and evolutionary biology, Yun-Yun also found value in farmer-focused community events like conferences, which helped them find a sense of support even when they still felt discomfort claiming the identity of "farmer."

YUN-YUN LI

FROM THE GROUND UP

Even with their background in ecology, Yun-Yun, like many farmers, didn't start farming with an understanding of soil health. That changed when, Yun-Yun recalls, they "bomb[ed] a job interview" for a farm manager position due to this lack of knowledge. Afterwards, they started **a process of self-education that continues into the present day.**

"Now, [soil health is] the first thing that I think about when I think about what kind of practices I would use at different scales," Yun-Yun says.

Yun-Yun saw firsthand the importance of soil health practices when, in 2021, a historic drought ravaged New England, taking a particularly hard toll on the small strip of Rhode Island where Yun-Yun then farmed. At that farm, the fields were managed with traditional chisel plow and disc tillage and the resulting poor soil health was painfully apparent. **The fields "were like the dust bowl,"** Yun-Yun said. "The impact of that disturbed soil even on us – on our lungs, on animals and plants – was sad and discouraging." But seeing the effects up-close sharpened Yun-Yun's interest in soil health management practices and water conservation.



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Yun-Yun became further immersed in these practices when they moved on to the nearby Roots Farm, which used no-till methods alongside mulching, small-scale cover cropping, and tarps for efficient crop termination on a schedule.

Roots Farm wasn't immune to the 2021 drought, but these practices paid off: While the drought necessitated a lot of irrigation work, to Yun-Yun's surprise, the Roots farmers reported that the season proved "[not] too significantly different from other seasons they had."

In addition to mulching, which helps to build surface organic matter, and reduced or no-till farming, Yun-Yun has also used methods such as crop interplanting and rapid bed transitions to keep living roots in the soil for as much of the growing cycle as possible. At the various farms Yun-Yun has worked on, those practices have helped the operations withstand unprecedented climate events.

YUN-YUN LI

PAST PAVES WAY FOR FUTURE

“FUNDAMENTALLY, SOIL HEALTH IS ABOUT HONORING THE COMMUNITY OF MICROORGANISMS THAT SUSTAIN US AND RECOGNIZING THAT WE ARE SUSTAINED BY THIS INCREDIBLE COMPLEX WEB OF BEINGS THAT WE CAN'T SEE.”

Another way that Yun-Yun builds connection to the land and farming is through growing cultural crops. Farming is **“part of ancestor practice for me, of feeling connected to my people and my family who have grown and definitely eaten these crops,”** Yun-Yun said, “and also being connected back to my ancestors who come from more agrarian backgrounds ... **I think it's really beautiful, for those of us who are from different diaspora cultures, to feel like our plants are in diaspora with us.**”

This deep sense of appreciation also extends to general Asian diaspora crops, Yun-Yun said, noting that “it feels like I'm growing them for people that I'm in diaspora with.”

Those crops include ginger, kai lan, perilla, bitter melon, and Korean chili peppers. A particularly memorable experience for Yun-Yun came when a best friend's mother, who is a Korean immigrant, taught her how to prepare the chili peppers for kimchi.

“If I'm growing a food that's important to anyone for any reason, it is one of the most beautiful ways to connect to another person,” Yun-Yun said, “through learning about what plants are important to them and how they use them.” This theme reverberates throughout Yun-Yun's views on farming, which hold soil health, community connections and building relationships with the land as deeply interconnected.

“The reason that farming is special to me is that it puts me in relationship to other people and to the earth in a very direct and extreme way,” Yun-Yun said, **“where I'm so intimately partnering with other living things and in so many different kinds of relationships,”** whether they're playing the role of a caretaker, beneficiary or antagonist.

A key aspect of Yun-Yun's farming involves “figuring out what my relationship is to things that are detrimental to the farm system and reimagining that antagonism constantly into other kinds of relationships,” they said. “Fundamentally, soil health is about honoring the community of microorganisms that sustain us and recognizing that we are sustained by this incredible complex web of beings that we can't see,” Yun-Yun continued, **“and that's very humbling.”**



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