Agroforestry: Positive for Farms and Nature

Green Fridays

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What is Agroforestry?

Agroforestry '*is the integration of trees into the farming system, while maintaining or enhancing the farm's main agricultural output*' (Gov.uk). Rather than replacing farmland with forests, trees are deliberately integrated into working farms. Trees can be planted in rows or groups, alongside crops or within grazing fields.

The aim is to create a farming system where trees, animals and crops benefit one another, potentially improving farm productivity and profitability while supporting biodiversity.

The land can still be used for farming, while the trees provide additional benefits for biodiversity, soil health, water quality and the climate. Agroforestry can also provide additional products, such as timber, fruit and nuts, depending on the trees planted.



Could Trees Make Farming More Resilient?

Irish farmers are already experiencing the challenges of changing weather patterns, including prolonged wet periods, storms and occasional summer droughts.

Trees can help farms adapt.

- **Shelter for livestock:** Trees provide shade during hot weather and protection from wind and rain, helping improve animal welfare.
- **Healthier soils:** Tree roots help improve soil structure, allowing water to penetrate the ground and reducing erosion.
- **Better water management:** Trees and their roots can slow surface runoff, helping reduce the movement of soil and nutrients into waterways.
- **Additional farm products:** Depending on the species planted, trees can provide timber, fruit or nuts, creating opportunities for additional farm income.



Ireland's Farms Are Important for Wildlife

When we think about protecting nature, we often picture national parks, forests and nature reserves. But much of Ireland's landscape is farmland.

Around **63% of Ireland's land is used for agriculture**, making farmers central to protecting and restoring biodiversity (CSO).

Hedgerows, field margins, ponds, streams and small woodlands provide habitats and connections that wildlife depends on. These features create a network of wildlife corridors across the countryside.

Protecting existing habitats and introducing additional trees in suitable locations can strengthen that network.



Agroforestry: Connecting Trees and Hedgerows

Trees and Hedgerows Are Wildlife Highways

Ireland has an estimated 689,000 km of hedgerows, creating an extensive network of natural corridors across our countryside (Teagasc).

These are much more than field boundaries. Hedgerows provide food, shelter and nesting places for birds, insects and mammals. They also connect habitats, allowing wildlife to move between fields, woodlands and other green spaces.

Bats often use hedgerows as navigation routes when searching for food, while birds and small mammals rely on their protective cover. By protecting existing hedgerows, filling gaps and introducing additional trees in suitable locations, farmers can help reconnect fragmented habitats and support biodiversity.



Making Room for Nature on Irish Farms

Small Corners Can Make a Difference

Not every part of a farm needs to be intensively managed. Field corners, boundaries and less productive areas can offer opportunities to support wildlife without significantly affecting agricultural production.

The Hare's Corner initiative, developed by the Burrenbeo Trust, takes its name from an old farming term for an awkward corner of a field traditionally left to nature. The programme supports farmers and landowners in creating wildlife ponds, mini-woodlands, heritage orchards and native hedges. These small habitats provide food and shelter for wildlife and can help connect existing natural areas.



Since launching in County Clare in 2021, The Hare's Corner has helped create:

- 400+ mini-woodlands
- 500+ heritage orchards
- 150+ wildlife ponds

For more, visit theharescorner.ie

What Financial Supports Are Available for Agroforestry?

Agroforestry is still relatively uncommon in Ireland, but financial supports are available to help farmers integrate trees into working farmland.

- **Republic of Ireland:** Under Ireland's Forestry Programme 2023–2027, eligible farmers establishing agroforestry systems with trees and livestock can receive grants of up to €8,555 per hectare, plus annual premiums of €1,170 per hectare for 10 years (Teagasc).
- **England:** Agroforestry management payments range from £248 to £385 per hectare annually, generally for three years, depending on tree density and scheme eligibility (Gov.uk).
- **Northern Ireland:** The Forest Expansion Scheme offers eligible applicants establishment support and annual premiums of £469 per hectare for 10 years (Daera Northern Ireland)

These schemes have different requirements, so farmers should seek advice before planting.



Scheme eligibility, payment rates and conditions vary. Northern Ireland's Forest Expansion Scheme supports woodland creation rather than dedicated agroforestry.

Thinking About Planting Trees on Your Farm?

Five Things Worth Considering

Introducing trees into a working farm requires planning, but there are practical ways to get started.

1. **Protect what you have.** Existing mature trees, hedgerows and woodland are valuable habitats.
2. **Choose the right locations.** Consider soil conditions, drainage, exposure and existing habitats. Avoid planting on existing valuable habitats, such as species-rich grasslands and wetlands
3. **Select suitable species.** Different trees offer different benefits for livestock, biodiversity and potential farm income.
4. **Plan for livestock.** Young trees may need protection from grazing animals until established.
5. **Explore available grants and supports.** Seek advice on agroforestry schemes, eligibility and long-term commitments.



The right trees, in the right places, can benefit both farming and nature for generations.

Bringing Agroforestry to Irish Farms

Agroforestry is still developing in Ireland, but farmers interested in combining trees with agricultural production don't have to start from scratch.

The Irish Agroforestry Forum promotes agroforestry and helps build awareness of its potential benefits for farming, biodiversity and the environment.

It brings together farmers, researchers and others interested in agroforestry, encouraging knowledge-sharing and providing information on integrating trees into working farms.

For farmers considering agroforestry, it's a useful place to explore the possibilities, learn more about existing projects and connect with others interested in nature-friendly farming.

irish agroforestry forum

Green Fridays Takeaway

Making room for nature doesn't have to mean taking land out of farming. Trees, hedgerows and small woodland areas can work alongside crops and livestock, providing shelter, protecting soil and water, storing carbon and creating habitats for wildlife.

By protecting existing trees, restoring hedgerows and carefully planting new trees, farmers can help strengthen Ireland's natural environment while continuing to produce food.



Learn more, explore the sources and discover practical ways to help at GreenFridays.org/learn.

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THE GREEN ROUTE