STEWARDSHIP IN THE HIGH DESERT

Forestdale Farm grows more than food

WORDS BY KATE O'NEILL | PHOTOS BY KELBY FOUTZ

Wind howls through the ponderosa pines. You hear it before you feel it—gusts building in the distance as the mountain air is forced through gullies that feed into Walnut Canyon just southeast of Flagstaff. It hits you with the scent of toasted vanilla and butterscotch, released from the ponderosas' bark by the high desert sun.

Amidst Flagstaff's wildland–urban interface sits the neighborhood of Forestdale, a residential "county island" which permits agricultural activity and livestock ownership. This is not the kind of place most people imagine as productive agricultural land. Dry winds and extreme weather continually erode and limit the formation of soil on young volcanic rock. Localized bursts of late-spring weather bring damaging frosts and hail with little notice.

Rylan Morton-Starner, who was raised in Flagstaff, saw a place rich with possibility. In 2014, he and his partner, Jamie Fredricks, launched Forestdale Farm. Despite the limitations of this landscape, the two have built a highly productive small family farm that turns constraint into opportunity, regenerating the land while nourishing the Flagstaff community.

Their appreciation for the ties between land, livelihood, and resilience was first cultivated during the couple's time in Ecuador, where they worked alongside Indigenous family farmers and food security organizations. Originally, Morton-Starner set out to pursue travel writing, but Ecuador shifted his path toward hands-on agriculture, and he never turned back.

"I was exposed to the family-farm style, where farmers were producing food using sustainable practices," Morton-Starner says. "It went right into the community, and that was just part of their livelihood. They're growing on a smaller scale, but they're providing for extended families or neighbors. Things like that were really influential."

BUILDING SOIL, SHARING GROWTH

Forestdale Farm was built from the ground up. "There is no way you can start growing right away in Flagstaff on a commercial scale because there are only a few inches of topsoil. There are no nutrients," he says. Early beds were dug and slowly filled with compost—which quickly became central to the farm's operation, and expanded into a broader system of local inputs and outputs.

"We started with a few restaurants, like Shift, where we delivered produce and could pick up organic waste," he says. "And then we started taking Mother Road Brewery's liquid waste and using that for compost. That was a great resource because we were breaking down wood products from AP Sawmill, something that would take forever to break down in Arizona."

Chickens were added for both their eggs and compost. "We kept diversifying our compost as much as we could, and then it expanded and got to a point where we could sell it," says Morton-Starner. Every spring, Forestdale Farm offers its signature bulk compost sale, where community and backyard gardeners stock up on nutrient-dense soil, cultivating even more abundance across local gardens.



No well. No municipal water. No room for waste. On this high desert farm, every drop is hauled, stored, reused, and carefully accounted for—turning water scarcity into a model of resilience. The fish production pond seen at bottom extends that efficiency even further, supplying nutrient-rich water to fertilize the farm's highly productive raised beds.



For farmer Rylan Morton-Starner, garden starts are one of the most accessible entry points into local food production. "To be a successful backyard gardener, plant starts make a huge difference," he says. "Most people don't have the infrastructure to grow from seed indoors, and it's really hard to get going. But strong, locally grown plant starts can give you a real head start."

STEWARDSHIP OF PLACE AND COMMUNITY

Rows of raised beds line the center of the farm, many sheltered by protective high tunnels. Ponds and tanks for raising fish are scattered throughout, feeding a system that irrigates and fertilizes bio-intensive beds of starter plants and cut-and-come-again greens. Year after year, Morton-Starner has followed the land's lead while building systems that connect different parts of the farm, transforming outputs from one process into inputs for another.

"We're more stewards of the land than anything," he says. "Going from what our property was to what it is now, there is so much biological diversity here. The soil has improved. We have all kinds of animals, birds, and bats. Improving the land instead of just taking from it, that's what makes the business thrive."

Forestdale's stewardship ethic extends beyond the farm, embracing the belief that the well-being of the land and the community are intertwined. This is evident in the many ways the farm invests in local food security and resilience. Their mountain-adapted seedlings and premium compost support many local gardeners in Flagstaff, while their commitment to food access ensures fresh greens and eggs reach local food banks and distribution sites.

"It's the whole picture—family, community, place, and improving the area, really working with the land, and building community," reflects Morton-Starner.

WORKING WITH WATER, NOT AGAINST IT

Forestdale Farm is not tapped into municipal or well water. "In my mind, it's nice because it really makes us focus and be aware of our water usage," he says. He harvests rainwater from high tunnels and reduces evaporation through intensive bed production.

"Water is the reason we plant so densely. The worst thing is bare soil. If your plants are spaced out or there is any bare soil, you use so much water. But having a continuous bed just full of greens and interplanting before those are done so that the next crop can fill out the soil space is key for reducing water usage," says Morton-Starner.

This bio-intensive approach allows Forestdale to turn over beds multiple times each season, but it requires significant nutrients—that's where the fish come in. Native species and catfish ponds irrigate and fertilize the continually producing raised beds.

"Having that constant nutrient input into those systems makes them really efficient," Morton-Starner says, "which results in more yields and healthier plants. The crops you cut recover faster. There's a lot more biological activity in the soil than if we were just watering from a tank or even city water."

Morton-Starner sees the benefits of his approach to stewardship every day. "The systems just feel more alive and abundant when you work with them," he says. In many ways, that abundance is the point: healthier soil produces healthier food, and the benefits ripple outward from the farm to the community beyond.

Visit @forestdalefarmflagstaff on Instagram for up-to-date farmers market information.

Kate O'Neill is a longtime food systems strategist whose work includes building stronger local networks and expanding access to affordable, healthy food for everyone. She writes best at the intersection of food, place, and community, honoring the producers and living systems that sustain us. Kate embodies curiosity, collaboration, and a love for learning, whether at work, tending a shared garden, or exploring the forests with her family in Flagstaff.

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