

FEATURED

## North Fork Farms expands upon silvopasture efforts

By Laura Cole  
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Pictured with Emily Buehler O'Leary are her husband, Andy O'Leary, and their son, Jackson.

Photo submitted by Emily Buehler O'Leary



Mazeppa, Minn. – From a corner of the hobby farm she grew up on, Emily Buehler O'Leary operates North Fork Farms, raising pastured beef and pork, as well as selling registered breeding stock. “Nothing really could compare with where I had grown up,” she stated of returning to her

roots.

Steeper slopes on the main 45 acres combined with increasingly larger farm equipment over the years resulted in the establishment of numerous oak trees. “It was too steep to farm, so they’ve been there, which is really beautiful,” Buehler O’Leary stated. The livestock is now raised on this silvopasture through the middle of November each year, sometimes later.

Last year, Buehler O’Leary received funding through two programs supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to plant an additional 600 trees on the land in her efforts to establish a more climate resilient pasture.

The planting of the trees within a caging structure was funded by EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) through NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service). A SARE grant (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) provided funds to support the project by means of installing polywire, mulching, as well as upcoming testing of the leaf fodder.

With a goal to add tree cover to the pasture and also utilize species that can provide potential leaf fodder sources and a fruit or nut drop as a feed supplement, Buehler O’Leary listed other benefits from trees – storing carbon, filtering water, and stabilizing the soil.

Two-thirds of the new additions planted are red mulberry. Buehler O’Leary stated mulberries are a high protein berry and chicken and hogs have historically done well under mulberry trees. “The red mulberry is still native up here in this southeastern Minnesota corner,” she noted, also adding her understanding that in today’s nurseries there may be some hybridization with white mulberry.

Other trees planted include chestnut, Northern pecan, hickory, hazelnut, serviceberry, persimmon, apple, and pear. As Buehler O’Leary stated these will not be pampered orchard trees, harvesting produce for human consumption is not a top priority. Though she added, “We’re not against having a really beautiful, incredible seedling come up that produces something for humans.”

The rainfall received over the last two years has been excellent for establishment, Buehler O’Leary stated. Watering has only been required so far in one section when planting first occurred because they didn’t get rain soon enough. They are also mulching the trees in an attempt to help maintain some moisture and keep weed growth down.

The trees were planted in a line, 60-90 feet off of the exterior fence of the pasture. They utilized wire cages for protection from rabbits and other critters. Three-strand polywire runs on one side and one-strand on the other to deter browsing off the tops of trees.

Notably successful has been the growth of the mulberry and apple trees. And in addition to the newest trees, implemented rotational grazing has allowed for seedling regeneration with the oaks and black walnuts, which they also add protection to.

Of the various species planted, only two have presented concerns – Northern pecan and persimmon.

Buehler O’Leary noted the Northern pecan should survive well in the zone 4 climate, however they had a bit more trouble than expected. Once established, she stated nut fill will depend on climate conditions. “If we get long, hot summers, we’ll get nut fill. And if we don’t, we’ll just have a beautiful tree out in the pasture.”

The persimmon trees did not leaf out this year. “We will be looking at replanting. I think we’re going to try one more round of persimmon from a different nursery and see. These are American persimmon – zone 4 is kind of pushing it with those,” she stated.

“In the fall, we’re going to test all the different species’ nutritional values – so protein content and overall feed value – and see which ones would truly support some feed supplementation for our livestock,” she stated.

Also this fall, she will return to her nine-month contracted position at the University of Minnesota, teaching first-year writing. “I get the summers to fix fences and run animals to the processor and that kind of stuff,” she noted. Her husband, Andy O’Leary, does consulting work for nonprofit fundraising.

Buehler O’Leary shared the value of receiving the support from NRCS and SARE as North Fork Farms is a small operation. About ten Milking Devon calves are raised each year at the farm and a few registered breeding stock animals are sold.

This breed is listed at a critical status on The Livestock Conservancy's Conservation Priority List. "They're triple purpose – draft, beef, and dairy," Buehler O'Leary stated. A future goal is to also incorporate milking into the operation.

Beef production is the main focus, and Buehler O'Leary also raises pigs, selecting breeds that do well on pasture, typically Idaho Pasture Pigs or Berkshires. The cattle are not fed any grain; the pigs do receive a portion in their diet.

Noting heritage breeds grow slower, especially when incorporating grass-fed practices, Buehler O'Leary discussed the slow food movement. "Sometimes, not always, but sometimes what is best for the land and what is best for the animals and what is best for human health takes more time."

Along with the support received from NRCS and SARE, Buehler O'Leary also credited the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, Land Stewardship Project, Savanna Institute, and the annual Marbleseed Conference for provided resources.

To learn more about the farm, product offerings, and to view a video on the planting process, visit [northforkfarmsmn.com](http://northforkfarmsmn.com). You can also find them at [facebook.com/northforkmn](https://facebook.com/northforkmn).

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