

## #FridaysOnTheFarm: Sharing the Magic of Conservation

Each Friday, visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Meet farmers, producers, and landowners who are working to improve their operations with USDA programs.

This Friday meet Paul and Ingrid West of Misty Dawn Farm in Stoughton, Wisconsin. The couple purchased 50 acres of land in Vernon County over 20 years ago as a getaway space with the hope of creating more biodiversity, improving the watershed, offering water quality protection, and creating habitat and food for wildlife.

"When we bought the land, we wanted to live closer to the land and be part of it," Ingrid said. "It gives us an outlet and an opportunity to work with the land and conserve it."

### Peas in a Pod

To Paul and Ingrid, shiitake mushrooms and logs are two peas in a pod. The Wests care for their harvested logs that grow shiitake mushrooms and are willing to share the magic of growing the nutritious fungus.

The Wests signed up for the [Managed Forest Law](#) program, through the [Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources](#), planning how to actively manage their forest to be regenerative. "We have 35 forested acres and 15 acres of pasture. We enrolled in the program and planted 9,000 trees on the property right after we bought it," Ingrid explained.

When Ingrid and Paul were scheduled to do their first planned forest thinning, they found out that many times, loggers leave the tops of trees behind because they hold little market value. "We knew we had a lot of red maple tops that were going to be a waste product," said Paul.

The Wests didn't want to have much forest waste, so they started researching how they could use the wood and found out about the various benefits of growing shiitakes.

"Our family farm grows shiitakes because we wanted to do something meaningful with our trees and growing mushrooms was a wonderful way to diversify our forest," added Ingrid.

### Collaborative Conservation

The Wests knew that forest thinning could take a toll on their acres if not done properly. Ingrid and Paul worked with USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) to plan conservation practices to assist with their active forest management.

With the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#), the Wests installed 1,000 feet of forest trails and landings to better access their property, protect well-traveled areas, and select trees for harvest. They also worked with NRCS to install an 1,800-foot stone ford, a surfaced stream crossing to stabilize the stream while allowing for equipment to cross with minimal disturbance to the stream ecosystem.

"It's very rewarding to see the changes and it makes us feel like we are making a difference locally, and in the watershed," Paul said.

The Wests continue to conduct maintenance on all their conservation practices with technical assistance from NRCS.

"The work the Wests continue to do to improve their woodland and protect the watershed is a great example of how landowners can benefit from multiple land uses through our EQIP program," said Sam Skemp, NRCS district conservationist in Vernon County.

With conservation practices successfully installed, the Wests look forward to implementing more conservation practices, including furthering their timber stand improvement efforts and continue to work on promoting diverse regeneration in their forest.

"Conservation is really important to me. I am a first generation American," Ingrid said. "My parents are from Germany, where there are many long-time intensively managed forests. I did a lot of mushroom foraging with my grandfather and my father wanted to be a forester, so the love for conservation has been in my family for a long time."

### **Growing with Research**

Once their property was successfully thinned, the Wests received a [Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Grant](#) to grow shiitake mushrooms on different species of wood harvested from their forested acres. They collected growing rate data on different substrates, enabling them to find out which species and processes were best for growing shiitakes locally.

"We wanted a premium product that was value-added," said Ingrid. "We're growing log grown shiitakes and it's an interesting niche market that restaurants and consumers want and like."

Ingrid and Paul have 500 logs in production during the growing season, from March through November. Grown outside, each log produces about a half pound of mushrooms during a fruiting and may fruit up to three times over the course of the season.

### **Educating to Improve the Land**

The Wests are also working to share education and information about conservation practices and growing shiitakes with others.

The Wests are members of the Shiitake Growers Association, helping new shiitake mushroom growers by providing workshops and hosting field days on how to care for and fruit shiitake mushroom logs. They also provide logs and growing kits to new growers.

Additionally, Ingrid volunteers to sit on the Wisconsin NRCS State Technical Committee and the Forestry Sub-Committee. She is interested in education and sharing the great things NRCS can do to help forest landowners.

The Wests realize they wouldn't be able to grow their shiitakes without taking care of their forested acres to produce healthy logs.

"We're really trying to improve our land," said Ingrid. "Making it more sustainable and biodiverse, nurturing it to a point where it's a more sustainable ecosystem with biodiversity of wildlife thriving."

## More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States. [Learn about additional programs.](#)

For more information about USDA programs and services, [contact your local USDA service center.](#)

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