Dear colleagues in Africa,

I found this article inspiring and encouraging. Does it echo your experience? Please read it – I look forward to reading what you have to say about it: “Burkina Faso’s women farmers reviving the land with fertilizer trees”.

You can read it below, or online here: Burkina Faso’s women farmers reviving the land with fertilizer trees

(The publisher, Mongabay, is an independent, nonprofit media organization with a global network of local journalists dedicated to providing accurate environmental news.)

In another of their excellent articles I read, “Families with trees on their farms had a 3% increase in vegetable consumption compared with those without trees. For every additional tree species a household owned, fruit consumption increased by 5%.” Do you also experience this where you live and work?

With many greetings

Keith Lindsey
Discover e.V.
Email: Keith@discover-src.net
Home-Page: www.discover-src.net
Tel: 0049 1523 439 0386

Burkina Faso’s women farmers reviving the land with fertilizer trees

Yvette Zongo

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- *Land restoration in Burkina Faso’s Centre-Ouest and Kadiogo regions is women’s work.*
- *Here, women have made fertilizer trees their indispensable allies in reviving farmland.*
- *Thanks to these nitrogen-fixing and shade-providing trees, they’re bringing degraded soils back to life.*
- *In Cassou and Bazoulé communes in Centre-Ouest, local women are breathing new life into an ancestral technique that boosts productivity and enriches biodiversity.*

CASSOU, Burkina Faso — With her *daba* in hand, her back bent from decades in the fields, Maan — meaning “grandmother” in the local Nuni language of Burkina Faso’s Centre-Ouest region — isn’t ready to put down her hoe just yet. On this July afternoon, as the sun blazes overhead, the septuagenarian works cheerfully alongside her 8-year-old grandson, weeding her plot near Cassou, a rural commune of some 54,000 inhabitants where she was born.

The 2-hectare (5-acre) plot, which Maan Alima Tagnan inherited from her late husband, sustains her small family. For years, she has cultivated a mix of crops here. What draws the eye, however,

is the unusual layout: carefully spaced rows of young trees alternating with mature ones, thriving among cowpeas, millet and other crops now nearing harvest.

Maan Alima Tagnan under one of the trees she has planted in her field. Image by Yvette Zongo for Mongabay.

This is agroforestry polyculture using “fertilizer trees,” an ancestral technique that the Association for the Promotion of Fertilizer Trees, Agroforestry and Forestry (APAF) has revived and modernized by introducing new varieties of nitrogen-fixing trees.

“We haven’t invented anything — it’s nothing new to plant trees in fields to enrich the soil,” Firmin Hien, deputy executive director of APAF-Burkina Faso, tells Mongabay. “Our parents used to do it too, but people abandoned the practice with the arrival of chemical fertilizers.”

His remarks are echoed by Cheick Zouré, a specialist in the rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems at Joseph Ki-Zerbo University in Burkina Faso. He says research shows these trees can improve soil quality by 30-60% by adding key nutrients, notably nitrogen nodules, potassium and phosphorus.

Maan Tagnan has planted several varieties of fertilizer trees in her field, including *Albizia stipulata*, *Ferruginea* and white acacia (*Faidherbia albida*). The acacia, known locally as *zaanga*, is revered by agroforesters, Zouré says. “It’s an off-season tree that sheds its leaves during the rainy season and provides shade in the dry season, making it essential for maintaining soil fertility in agroforestry systems,” he says.

When Maan Tagnan realized her land was no longer productive, she turned to chemical fertilizers. But the cost is prohibitive. “At my age, where will I get the money to buy such expensive fertilizer?” she asks.

Now, she says, her soil is slowly recovering as the trees she planted take root and grow.

Gliricidia sepium, a tree originally from the Pacific coast of Mexico and South America, enhances the nitrogen, potassium and phosporus content of soil. Image by Yvette Zongo for Mongabay.

According to Hien, Maan Tagnan and other women have received several training sessions on how to properly plant and care for fertilizer trees. They've mastered methods tested in recent years in the communes of Cassou and Bazoulé: trees spaced 10 meters (33 feet) apart and 5 m (16 ft) from rain-fed or market-garden crops; regular watering; periodic weeding; and pruning the tops of young plants once they reach 1-1.5 m (3-5 ft) in height.

Beneficiaries report that thanks to these techniques, they've restored several dozen hectares of land degraded by poor farming practices. The trees' presence has also attracted bees and birds that had long disappeared from the area.

Adjara Diasso, president of Les Marolaines, the local association in Cassou of which Maan Tagnan is a member, says she's also delighted. In her 40s, this mother and passionate farmer once struggled to make ends meet on her infertile land. At one point, she says, she considered abandoning farming altogether to pursue another livelihood. When she first learned about fertilizer trees, she was unsure, but she has embraced the practice. "Today, everything is going wonderfully, as you can see," she says.

In her field of millet intercropped with cowpea, sorghum and other staples, Diasso says she's now spoiled for choice. Whatever she plants alongside the trees seems to thrive.

Edwige Ouédraogo, president of the Bazoulé Women's Cooperative, speaks of the benefits of planting fertilizer trees for land restoration. Image by Yvette Zongo for Mongabay.

Access to land and water holding women back

But all this progress has not come without challenges. For these women, the greatest obstacle in planting fertilizer trees is the availability of water.

"Right now, with rainfall no longer sufficient, it's complicated," Diasso says. "After the rainy season, trees that haven't developed strong roots die if they aren't watered — and we don't have large-diameter boreholes to do the job."

Across Burkina Faso, farmland has been steadily deteriorating. Recent statistics show that an average of 469,090 hectares (1.16 million acres) of land is degraded every year.

Since the women of Cassou adopted this technique, the number of trees in cultivated fields has steadily increased, Firmin Hien says.

But there's another obstacle to these women's ambition to plant fertilizer trees on a larger scale across degraded areas, says Edwige Ouédraogo, president of a women's cooperative in Bazoulé. "As women, we don't own land. We negotiate with the men so they give us a small portion to cultivate each year. But since it doesn't belong to us, we can't plant trees there. For now, we make do with our gardens," she says.

Source: Burkina Faso's women farmers reviving the land with fertilizer trees