Trance Blackman – 20 May 2025



Mark Koch – Unsplash

# Lux Colloquii: Back to the Land – A Return to Regenerative Living

In a world increasingly shaped by complexity and speed, there's a quiet pull back to the roots — to the land, the seasons, and the rhythms that once sustained human life with grace and simplicity. This conversation explores not only the logistics of regenerative farming and food forest models but also the deeper philosophical and psychological shifts required to return to a way of living that prioritizes harmony over control.

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In this discourse with ChatGPT, we explored the spectrum of regenerative land practices — from integrating animals based on their natural diets to reimagining farms as ecologically self-sustaining systems. We examined the nuances of domestication, the practicality of tiered animal integration, and the layered resilience of perennial food forests. The conversation touched on pioneers like Mark Shepard and Curtis Stone, offering a roadmap for those drawn to stewarding the land with integrity, intention, and adaptability.

### **Key Points Discussed**

- **Grass-fed vs. pasture-raised**: Distinction between animals that can truly thrive on grass (ruminants like cows, sheep, goats) versus those that need a varied diet (pigs, chickens, rabbits).
- **Domestication impacts**: Modern breeds, selected for productivity, often require supplemental feed to thrive.
- Wild vs. domestic: Animals like bison, elk, and moose remain well-suited to natural forage, unlike many farm animals shaped by human intervention.
- Regenerative farming tiers:
  - *Tier 1*: Chickens, rabbits, goats low-input, multifunctional.
  - *Tier 2*: Pigs, sheep, ducks intermediate scale with more integration.
  - *Tier 3*: Cows, bison, elk large land needs, high impact on soil restoration.
- **Principles of regenerative systems**: Rotational grazing, species stacking, minimal external inputs, soil-first thinking.
- Food forest approach: Inspired by Mark Shepard's "STUN" method, this system mimics natural ecosystems, minimizes inputs, and emphasizes long-term resilience.
- **Blending models**: Combining silvopasture with perennial systems increases ecological and food system resilience.
- **Philosophical lens**: Regenerative living reflects a shift from control to cooperation, from extraction to stewardship.
- **Customization**: Success depends on land, values, climate, and individual or family goals.
- **Resource roundup**: Books, websites, and YouTube channels to explore regenerative farming, food forests, and homesteading.

#### Trance:

If I understand correctly, grass-fed animals are the healthiest — and also the best choices when it comes to eating them. I'm assuming most farm animals can thrive on grass, even if we don't eat all of them. Chickens, geese, rabbits, pigs, goats, sheep, cows, horses... none of them seem to have any special dietary needs.

#### ChatGPT:

You're mostly on the right track, but there are some key nuances worth understanding when it comes to **which animals thrive on grass alone**, and whether **grass-fed** is ideal or even applicable for each one.

#### **Cows and Sheep (Ruminants)**

- Yes, thrive on grass.
- They are **ruminants** animals with a multi-chambered stomach designed to digest fibrous plant material like grass.
- **Grass-fed beef or lamb** is generally healthier (higher in omega-3s, lower in saturated fat) and more ethical/sustainable if properly managed.

#### Goats

- Also ruminants, but **browsers more than grazers**. They prefer leaves, shrubs, and twigs over just grass.
- Can be grass-fed, but thrive best with a mix of forage, brush, and hay.

#### Pigs

- Not ruminants; they're monogastric (like humans).
- Can't thrive on grass alone.
- They can eat some grass and forage, but need a **more diverse**, **protein-rich diet** including grains, vegetables, and sometimes meat.
- "Pastured pork" is the better term they can live on pasture, forage, and root around, but require supplemental feed.

#### **Rabbits**

- Herbivores, and do eat grass and hay, but **require a balanced diet** that includes high-fiber hay (like timothy), some greens, and limited pellets.
- Wild rabbits forage on a wide range of plants. Domestic rabbits need controlled diets.

#### **Chickens and Ducks/Geese**

- **Omnivores.** They **eat some grass**, but they need protein from bugs, worms, seeds, grains, etc.
- Grass is good as a supplement but not a full diet.
- "Pasture-raised" is again the better term here access to outdoors, grass, bugs, and grains.

#### Horses

- Herbivores, can live entirely on grass and hay.
- They're not ruminants, but their digestive systems are well-suited for a high-fiber, forage-based diet.

#### In summary:

- Ideal for grass-only diets: Cows, sheep, goats (with browse), horses.
- Need supplements despite enjoying grass: Pigs, chickens, rabbits, geese.
- Best terms:
  - **Grass-fed** is accurate for ruminants.
  - **Pasture-raised** is more appropriate for omnivores and non-ruminants.

#### Trance:

I guess the domestication of breeds is what then requires supplemental additions to their otherwise natural diet. The cousins of all of these animals lived out in the open and would survive just fine without any intervention.

#### ChatGPT:

You're absolutely right in spirit — but there's a bit of complexity behind that idea. Here's how it breaks down:

#### True:

**Wild ancestors of all domestic animals thrived without human intervention**, living off what they could find in nature — grass, leaves, bugs, roots, etc. Their environments naturally supported diverse diets, and they adapted accordingly.

#### However:

- 1. Domestication changes physiology and behavior
  - Over thousands of years, **selective breeding** prioritized traits *useful to humans*, not necessarily survival traits:
    - Faster growth
    - Larger muscles or udders
    - Docility
    - Egg or milk production year-round
  - These traits often come at the cost of resilience or self-sufficiency.
    - Example: A broiler chicken grows so fast it can't survive long in the wild.

- Example: **Dairy cows** bred for very high milk production need nutrient-dense diets to avoid metabolic issues.
- 2. Wild cousins had diverse ecosystems
  - Wild pigs, goats, and birds roam wide areas and eat a huge variety of foods: roots, nuts, fruits, insects, even small animals.
  - Grass was **only part** of their diet, not the whole thing.
  - Modern farm environments don't offer that full dietary range unless carefully managed.
- 3. Productivity levels are unnatural
  - A wild hen might lay ~20 eggs per year. A commercial layer lays 250–300.
  - A wild boar grows slowly. A modern pig can reach slaughter weight in 5–6 months.
  - Supporting these high outputs requires **dense and controlled nutrition**, often not available from pasture alone.

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Example	Com	parisons

Species	Wild Ancestor	Modern Issue
Cow	Aurochs	Can overproduce milk, need balanced energy
Pig	Wild boar	Modern pigs can't forage all they need
Chicken	Red junglefowl	Natural diet included bugs, seeds, fruit
Rabbit	European wild rabbit	Domestic breeds often too fragile
Goat	Bezoar ibex	Modern goats are hardy but often overmanaged

So while the instincts remain (chickens pecking, pigs rooting), their bodies and needs have changed. Many could still survive with minimal help — just not thrive or reach the productivity levels we expect without supplementation.

#### Trance:

Where do bison, buffalo, elk, and moose fit in?

#### ChatGPT:

Great question — these animals are **wild ruminants** (or close relatives) and fit interestingly into the bigger picture of natural diets, domestication, and sustainability. Here's how they stack up:

# **Bison and Buffalo**

#### Key facts:

- True ruminants, like cows.
- Thrive on grass and native forage purely herbivorous.
- Have not been heavily domesticated (at least not like cattle), so retain hardiness and natural instincts.
- Bison, in particular, are well-adapted to harsh climates and poor forage.

#### **Diet:**

- Grass, sedges, forbs no supplements needed in the wild.
- Their digestive systems are extremely efficient at extracting nutrients from coarse grasses.

#### **Domestication status:**

• **Partially domesticated** in North America.

- Bison meat is now marketed as a **leaner, often grass-fed alternative** to beef.
- Less intensively farmed, often pasture-raised on native prairie.

#### **Buffalo clarification:**

- **"Buffalo" in North America** usually refers to bison (technically a misnomer).
- **True buffalo** (like African Cape buffalo or Asian water buffalo) are also herbivores but differ in domestication status.

# **Elk and Moose**

#### Key facts:

- Not ruminants in the classic cow sense, but close cousins. They're cervids (deer family).
- Have a **four-chambered stomach**, but a slightly different digestive process from cows.
- Wild animals, not domesticated, and subsist entirely on natural forage.

#### **Diet:**

- **Elk**: grasses, shrubs, tree bark, leaves very adaptable.
- **Moose**: love **woody plants**, aquatic vegetation, and twigs their diet can be surprisingly rough and fibrous.
- Both thrive without any grain, human feed, or pasture management.

#### **Domestication status:**

• Not domesticated in any real sense.

• **Game-farmed elk** do exist (especially for meat and antlers), but they're still closer to wild animals in terms of diet and resilience.

#### Takeaway:

These animals are **nature's original grass-fed livestock**. They show how large herbivores can thrive without grain, supplements, or human breeding — but also why domesticated animals have shifted away from that model in pursuit of yield and docility.

#### Trance:

So if one had a large swath of land, they could have a homestead or farm with domesticated animals while leaving the greater spaces for wild-ish bison, elk, moose — climate or geography depending. But on a more practical level, for a family starting out, or perhaps taking over a farm from a retiring farmer, it could be useful to explore how and what animals would fit into a "modern regenerative" system. I'm thinking that traditionally, everything was regenerative by default — out of necessity and commonly accepted, generational farming practices.

#### ChatGPT:

Exactly — you're thinking in the right direction, and you're touching on a **foundational truth**:

Before industrial agriculture, farming *was* regenerative by default – **because it had to be**. The land, animals, and people all depended on long-term balance, not short-term extraction.

Let's unpack your idea on **modern regenerative farming** and how a family (starting out or inheriting) could design a working, integrated system.

# Traditional Regenerative Systems (Pre-industrial Era)

Historically:

- **Mixed farming** (plants + animals) was the norm.
- Manure was fertility animals fed the soil.
- Pasture rotation and cover crops kept the land productive.
- Local breeds were hardy, seasonal, and well-adapted to the climate.
- There was waste reuse, minimal inputs, and community resilience.

Regenerative agriculture today is often just a return to those principles — now reinforced by ecology and soil science.

# A Regenerative Homestead/Farm Setup — Practical Tiered Approach

Here's a breakdown for a **family-scale**, **regenerative-style operation**, with a mix of animals and a focus on **low-input**, **sustainable systems**.

Animal	Role	Diet Needs	Integration
Chickens	Eggs, meat, pest control	Omnivores, kitchen scraps, bugs, grains	Can follow cows or pigs to clean up
Rabbits	Meat, manure (cold)	Hay, greens, garden waste	Small space, manure goes directly into garden
Goats	Milk, meat, weed control	Browsers, roughage, hay	Clear brush, control invasives

<b>Fier 1: Starter Animals</b>	(Low Overhead, High \	Value)
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Great for small land, build soil fertility fast, low infrastructure needs.

#### **Tier 2: Intermediate Expansion**

Animal	Role	Diet	Integration
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Pigs	Meat, land clearing	Omnivores, forage + supplements	Rotate through brushy areas or forest
Sheep	Meat, wool, grazing	Grass, hay	Can graze between orchards, cover crops
Ducks	Eggs, pest control	Similar to chickens	Thrive in wet areas, mosquito control

Use **rotational grazing or paddock systems**. Compost bedding for deep-litter fertility.

#### **Tier 3: Larger Scale or Land-Heavy Options**

Animal	Role	Diet	Integration
Cows	Milk, meat, soil building	Grass, hay	Mob grazing restores soil health
Bison	Wild meat, prairie restoration	Native forage	Large open areas, less human handling
Elk/Moose	Meat (wild management)	Native forage	Better for wildland stewardship, not active farming

Requires land size, fencing, water access, and careful rotational planning.

# **Principles of Regenerative Animal Integration**

- 1. **Stacked enterprises** multiple animals working different layers of the land.
- 2. **Mob/rotational grazing** animals intensively graze one area, then move on.
- 3. No bare soil cover crops, perennials, and pasture.

- 4. **Minimal or no external inputs** closed-loop systems (compost, manure, forages).
- 5. **Breed selection** hardy, heritage, climate-adapted stock over high-performance commercial breeds.

# **Regenerative** ≠ Just Organic

- You can be "organic" and still deplete soil or import lots of feed.
- Regenerative means healing land, not just avoiding chemicals.

# Starting from Inheritance or Scratch?

#### If inheriting a conventional farm:

- Gradual transition: Reduce chemical inputs, introduce rotational grazing.
- Use existing infrastructure (barns, fencing) to house Tier 1 & 2 animals.
- Retrofit degraded land with multi-species grazing and cover crops.

#### If starting fresh:

- Focus on modular systems (e.g., chicken tractors, portable fencing).
- Build soil first, animals second.
- Choose animals that do more than one job: **goats = milk + brush control**, **chickens = eggs + pest control**.



Credit: New Forest Farm

#### Trance:

The contrast to this is a food forest, which can support a family on a small property - like what Mark and Jen Shepard did with their New Forest Farm in Wisconsin, restoring a corn-degraded property to a flourishing savanna over three decades. He utilized his "STUN" method and adapted through the years, letting the land and the flora dictate and determine which species could survive and thrive with fewer - if any - inputs. I believe they have animals that roam freely for composting and pest control.

#### ChatGPT:

Exactly — and you're drawing a **vital contrast** between two regenerative approaches:

# Perennial Polyculture (Food Forest / Savanna Restoration)

- Long-term ecological mimicry of native systems
- Minimal inputs, once established
- Focus on **perennials**: nut trees, fruit trees, berry bushes, nitrogen fixers, vines, herbs
- Soil restoration by design, not disruption
- Animals used **strategically**, not intensively

Mark Shepard's work is a perfect case study: He essentially **replaced row-crop monoculture** with a **managed natural ecosystem** — integrating **productive species** into a **temperate-climate savanna model**, inspired by oak-hickory woodlands.

# His Key Method: STUN (Sheer Total Utter Neglect)

Rather than pampering every plant:

- He plants thousands of seedlings.
- Then he lets nature select the winners (drought, pests, poor soil).
- Over time, this creates a **resilient**, **hyper-adapted genetic population** that thrives *without babying*.

This is **opposite of industrial ag** and even much of permaculture — it's about *co-evolution*, not control.

# Animals in This Model

Shepard includes:

• **Pigs**: for rooting, tilling, composting

- Cattle: for grass management and carbon cycling
- **Poultry**: for pest control, especially under trees
- Bees: pollination support

But animals are:

- **Integrated**, not isolated
- Free-roaming in silvopasture setups, contributing to soil, plant health, and productivity
- **Dynamic**: Their movement is choreographed with plant cycles (e.g., chickens post-fruit-drop to clean up pests)

# Key Comparison: Food Forest vs. Animal-Centered Regenerative Farm

Feature	Food Forest Model (e.g., Shepard)	Animal-Centered Farm
Core Engine	Trees and perennial systems	Grazing livestock
Soil Strategy	Mulch, roots, fungal webs	Manure, hoof action, rotation
Inputs	Minimal once established	Moderate, especially early on
Animal Role	Supportive (pest, nutrient)	Primary producers
Product Mix	Fruits, nuts, biomass, honey	Milk, meat, eggs, fiber
Timescale	Long-term (years to decades)	Medium-term (1–3 years rotation)
Land Use	Dense layering, vertical stacking	Horizontal, paddock-based

# **Combining Both on One Property?**

Absolutely possible and increasingly common in permaculture and agroforestry:

- Zone 1-2 (near house): Garden, rabbits, chickens, food forest edge
- **Zone 3**: Silvopasture trees + pasture with goats, sheep, pigs
- **Zone 4–5**: Wilder land, managed grazing of bison, elk, or even passive restoration

This gives you **stacked resilience**: nuts in drought years, animal protein in poor harvest years, fruit in boom seasons.

# If you're interested in learning more or applying this:

- Mark Shepard's "Restoration Agriculture" is essential reading.
- His farm proves that **regenerative systems can be commercially viable**, not just hobbyist dreams.
- And it shows that observing and adapting to your land not forcing it is the real magic.

#### Trance:

Working with nature. It's surprisingly simple, yet wildly complex to the modern mindset. The psychological warfare we undergo has us continually confused about time, presence, patience, and process. Homesteading is simply deriving a flowing, steady, stable home aligned with the seasons, pursuing inward and outer resilience, and remembering the integrity and character necessary to live a life of self-reliance.

I'd imagine there are experts and pioneers who have made these systems work in various areas of the world — differing climates, extreme situations, and everything in between. The decisive factor would come down to the individual, or family, and their values and priorities — as it is with anything. What climate, ecology, and

geography — even government system, state, or country — do they want to live in and set up their operation?

Utilizing services such as Curtis Stone's <u>Freedom Farmers</u>, which goes in depth regarding how to find the ideal property (specific to North America), can be valuable. Let's summarize the discussion and offer a resource list — websites, books, and prominent pioneer YouTubers — for people who are of the mind to pursue anything offered in our chat. It's a wide-reaching concept that is broadly open to interpretation.

#### ChatGPT:

You've beautifully captured the **essence** of regenerative living:

A way of being that aligns with nature's rhythm, fosters patience and integrity, and prioritizes resilience over convenience.

Modern homesteading and regenerative farming **aren't just practices** — **they're philosophies**. They challenge consumerism, disconnection, and the illusion of speed by rooting us in **place, time, and process**. You're absolutely right: It's *simple in principle*, but *profoundly challenging in application* — especially when unlearning decades of industrial, linear thinking.

# Discussion Summary: Regenerative Living and Homesteading

#### Foundations:

- **Regenerative agriculture** returns to time-tested principles: working *with* the land, not against it.
- Domesticated animals require stewardship but many systems can mirror nature with fewer inputs when done thoughtfully.
- **Food forests** and **silvopasture** represent deep ecological design integrating perennials, animals, and human needs in a long-term system.
- Success depends on **context**: values, geography, climate, family goals, and long-term vision.

#### **Approaches:**

- **Mixed animal farming** with paddock rotations builds soil fertility and food security.
- **Food forest models** like Mark Shepard's mimic native ecosystems for resilience and low maintenance.
- Combining both on a single property creates stacked yields and layered stability.

#### **Philosophical Pillars:**

- Patience over productivity
- Resilience over rapid returns
- Observation over control
- Integrity in relationship to land and community

# **Resource List for the Regenerative Journey**

#### **Books:**

Title	Author	Notes
Restoration Agriculture	Mark Shepard	Core text on perennial polycultures, savanna farming
The Resilient Farm and Homestead	Ben Falk	Practical systems design, cold climate focus
Dirt to Soil	Gabe Brown	No-till, soil-first regenerative ranching
The Permaculture Handbook	Peter Bane	Complete guide to permaculture and design thinking

One-Straw Revolution	Masanobu Fukuoka	Philosophical and practical roots of natural farming
Holistic Management	Allan Savory	Grazing, ecosystems, and decision-making frameworks

#### Websites & Platforms:

Name	Website	Focus
Freedom Farmers	freedomfarmers.com	Curtis Stone's land-acquisition and planning service
Savory Institute	savory.global	Holistic management, global grazing systems
Permies	permies.com	Huge forum for permaculture, homesteading, DIY
Regenerative International	regenerationinternational.org	Global movement and education
Unconventional Acres	YouTube / Justin Rhodes	Practical animal integration and family homestead life

# YouTube Channels & Modern Pioneers

Creator	Focus
Mark Shepard	Restoration Agriculture, STUN method, practical implementation
Justin Rhodes	Family-scale permaculture homestead (NC) — chickens, cows, pigs

Curtis Stone	Urban farming $\rightarrow$ land liberation, business-minded regenerative planning
Diego Footer (P.E.A.S.)	Thoughtful interviews with leaders in regen ag, small farms
Richard Perkins (Ridgedale Farm)	Cold-climate regenerative systems in Sweden
Living Web Farms	Workshops, compost, biochar, fungi, tech-for-farm
Neversink Farm	Market gardening with radical efficiency and soil health focus

# **Closing Thought**

The **land doesn't demand perfection** — only presence. What makes regenerative living work is not just your tools, animals, or even climate — but your **commitment to observing, adapting, and stewarding** over time.

Whether you're restoring a monoculture prairie, starting a small urban plot, or building a multi-generational homestead, the path will be unique — but the **values are shared**: Resilience. Reciprocity. Reverence.