Fazakas Imre
– Model farm for healthy soils

Photo: Gergely Rodics

Name	Fazakas Imre Farm
Country	Romania
Biogeographical Region	Alpine region in the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, Csík basin and slopes of the Hargita mountains.
Region	Harghita county, Central region, Romania
Landscape/ Eco system type / protected area	Mountain basin, 700+ m above sea level. Partly Natura 2000 area.
Size / Scope	50 hectares
Type of farm	Organic mixed farm
Agricultural Use	Mixed organic farm: arable land, grasslands, cattle.
Best-practice / main idea	Live and produce in harmony with nature
Involved Stakeholders/ Partners	It is a small family farm, relying on the labour of family members and one additional employee. They are members of a small cooperative funded by 5 farmers from the village.
Duration	6 years min-till, 10 years organic, many generations farming family , ongoing
Goals	The farm focuses on organic milk production on grasslands and self-produced fodder. They cultivate organic crops on their arable land, employing regenerative farming techniques. A key priority is to use nature-friendly methods and to enhance soil

	health. These techniques aim to increase humus content, improve water retention, strengthen soil structure, and biology as well as biodiversity. While carbon sequestration is a beneficial by-product, it is becoming an increasingly important consideration in their decision-making process.
Activities	They practice regenerative agriculture while fully adhering to the standards of certified organic production, employing the following methods: • **Min-till arable land cultivation** • **Cover crops** • **Organic manure** • **Crop diversification** • **Glyphosate-free approach** • **Rotational grazing** • **Water retention lakes and swales**: On the grasslands, they have implemented water retention systems and actively plant trees to mitigate drought, enhance water management, and foster biodiversity. • **Permaculture practices in vegetable gardening**: they apply permaculture principles, such as planting trees and bushes, creating wet habitats, and following keyline design principles where the land structure allows. These integrated practices not only promote sustainability and ecological health but also support the farm's goal of enhancing biodiversity, improving soil health, and mitigating climate impacts.
Measures addressing water and/or soil management	Healthier soil, no use of chemicals, water retention, tree planting. Healthy soils, lakes and swales improve water retention and quality
Measures addressing biodiversity, climate	Mostly all above measures contribute to storing more carbon in the soil through restoring soil health and soil biology. Additionally, the planting of trees and bushes as well as lakes and swales improve biodiversity.

Funding / Financing	CAP direct payments and organic scheme payments, but mainly own funding from the farm
Transferability	Local farmers follow his example, both within and outside the cooperative they operate.
Tip / suggestion from the farmer	His main message to other farmers at the end of farm visits: RESTORE WATER!
Role of Landcare Associations	ACNT works with him as a role model for farms facing similar challenges. ACNT invites him to farmer forums, farmer-to-farmer trainings regularly and they also organise farm visits to Imre for farmers from Transylvania.
Further information	They have no intention of expanding the business, as they are content with its current size. Their primary focus is on fostering a harmonious relationship with nature and identifying the most effective methods to preserve and restore their surrounding natural environment. They advocate for converting arable land into forestry or other natural landscapes, recognizing that conventional agriculture is no longer profitable in this region when using traditional methods.
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"I believe that humanity must learn to work with nature, not against it. When we truly understand the natural world, its climate, and its soil, we can learn to work, live, and breathe in harmony with them. In doing so, we become part of the living systems that sustain us. I believe this is ultimately the only way humanity can survive and thrive in the long term." Fazakas Imre

II Detailed Description

Farm background

Imre Fazakas, a farmer from Madaras, has been involved in agriculture since 2000. In the early years, he followed conventional farming practices, including intensive animal husbandry,

which relied on protein-rich feed containing GMO (genetically modified organism) soybeans. While the cows produced milk as expected, health problems began to surface within the herd, as the animals did not respond well to standard treatments.
Over time, Imre shifted his focus from quantitative production to considering the quality of food on his family's plate. Between 2008 and 2011, he transitioned from conventional to organic farming for both fodder crops and dairy production, earning organic certification. Imre introduced "Grauvieh" cattle, brought from Tyrol, Austria, known for their hardiness and ability to thrive in tough conditions. These medium-weight animals have low energy requirements and, in their native region, can withstand up to fifteen lactation periods. Imre believes animal husbandry and fodder crop production complement each other well. In fact, he views animal husbandry as essential to organic crop production, as organic fertilizer plays a key role in maintaining soil fertility and water storage.
However, over time, Imre realized that relying solely on ecological farming methods was insufficient. The landscape and climate had changed so dramatically during his lifetime that continuing traditional farming practices was no longer sustainable. In the past, the Olt River regularly flooded, creating wetlands that supported a rich and diverse ecosystem. But in the 1960s, the river was regulated to make way for collectivized and industrialized agriculture. As a result, the once fertile floodplains have become depleted, and the water level of the Olt River has significantly dropped. The land, now used for monocultures of grains like barley, wheat, triticale, and rye, has lost much of its biodiversity.
Seeing these changes, Imre sought alternative solutions and discovered permaculture and regenerative agriculture. Both approaches place a strong emphasis on landscape and water management. In 2018, he began transitioning to regenerative agriculture while still maintaining his organic certification.
Out of his 25 hectares of arable land, Imre dedicates 5 hectares to growing cereals, such as spelt, for sale, while the remainder is used to produce alfalfa to feed his animals. He also manages 25 hectares of grasslands and pastures, where he keeps 25 dairy cows and 20 young cows. During the summer, the cows graze extensively on pasture, while in winter, they are housed in the barn.
Imre and four other like-minded dairy farmers formed a small cooperative in an effort to secure a fair price for their milk. He also sells his milk directly to consumers through vending machines in the nearby town of Miercurea Ciuc and produces artisanal cheeses.

Applied techniques

- **Min-Till**
  He has gradually moved away from plowing and now only performs shallow subsoiling with a cultivator, at a maximum depth of 10 cm, while preparing seedbeds separately.
- **Direct Sowing – A Challenge**
  Some regenerative farming practices, such as direct sowing, have not been successful for him. Since he doesn't plant grain on the same parcel every year, weeds often dominate the crop. As an organic farmer, he cannot use herbicides, which led to the difficult decision to sell his direct seed drill.
- **Organic Fertilization**
  Thanks to his livestock, he is able to return organic manure to his fields, a practice

that is rare among arable farmers in his region, most of whom rely on artificial fertilizers and, to some extent, green manure. The prevalence of mixed farms has diminished in his area, making this approach stand out.

- **Crop Rotation**
  He practices crop rotation on 5 hectares of his 25-hectare farm, alternating between legumes—such as alfalfa, trifolium, and vetch—for 4-7 years, followed by a year of grain production. This allows for improved soil health and reduced pest and disease pressure.
- **Cover Crops**
  Cover crops are used primarily for soil improvement and weed control. If grain is sown in the fall, legumes are planted in the spring. Peas and vetch are typically sown as a second crop after harvest and are left in place without termination. Before planting grain in the spring, the remaining vegetation is mowed in May-June.
- **Afforestation**
  The strip plot structure of his land presents challenges for implementing afforestation. As the hillsides become less suitable for arable farming, he believes the entire area should be afforested, which could bring both ecological and economic benefits.
- **Rotational Grazing**
  Every 10 years, he reseeds his meadows and pastures with a mix of at least 4-5 species (e.g., white fescue, red fescue, alfalfa, knotweed, meadow fescue/phleum, English fescue). Each pasture section is about 5 hectares, and the animals graze for around one week, depending on weather and grass condition. Older, natural grasslands yield less, so the animals are moved more quickly across them, while the sown fodder requires less rainfall and is more resilient to changing climatic conditions.
- **Permaculture**
  He manages a 15–20-hectare area based on permaculture principles, creating a self-sustaining wet ecosystem. In addition to planting a variety of fruit trees and bushes, he operates a thriving vegetable garden. He also designs and constructs wetland areas and small lakes, which are interconnected by swales and gravity-fed pipes to optimize water flow and conservation.

Results

- The quality of his soil has significantly improved. While neighboring farmers often struggle to prepare seedbeds in the fall during certain years, he faces no such challenges. When they asked for help with their seedbeds, they were surprised to learn that the difference wasn't due to his machines, but rather the improved, looser soil structure he had achieved through permaculture practices.
- His yields are on par with those of conventional farmers, but with much lower input costs. By using less machinery, fuel, and chemicals, and reducing tillage, he requires fewer working hours, leaving him more time for other activities.

Photo: Gergely Rodics

Photo: András I.Gábor

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