



Leah Atwood

# Networking for Change, One Farmer at a Time

*Director of Programs and Partnerships, Multinational Exchange for Sustainable Agriculture (MESA)*

*Board Member, Planting Justice | Co-founder, Wild and Radish*

**WORKS:** Berkeley | **LIVES:** El Sobrante

**FIELDS:** Farming, Advocacy

**W**hen not at her day job, Leah Atwood can be found at home milking goats, tending bees, and picking produce on a 13-acre urban farm and developing eco-village she's helping to create in El Sobrante. As the director of programs and partnerships at MESA, Atwood champions strengthening traditional agricultural practices, honoring farmer-to-farmer peer exchanges, and supports collaborative efforts that sustain small farmers across the globe. A graduate of UC Berkeley, she has lived in South and Central America as well as Southeast Asia working on social, environmental, and food justice projects.



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**T**he Multinational Exchange for Sustainable Agriculture (MESA) is a modern day, ag-centric matchmaking service. It pairs up sustainable farming leaders around the world and offers training and cross-cultural collaborations to bolster local food systems. The non-profit has worked with more than 1,500 farmers and activists worldwide, and helped incubate around 150 small-scale farms and food justice projects in Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, Nepal, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Armenia, Kenya, Ghana, United States, and elsewhere. “At its core, MESA is a network of primarily farmers, but also activists, researchers, food artisans, and agropreneurs,” says Leah Atwood, 36, who has worked for the organization since 2005. “We cultivate changemakers who are dedicated to reviving community food systems all over the world by linking ancestral knowledge and modern innovation rooted in earth stewardship, fair economies, and multicultural alliances.”

The program marries hands-on technical experience and online theoretical education with peer-to-peer mentorship. MESA is a State Department sponsor organization, meaning farmers from outside the US can apply for educational

exchange visas to come to the US to participate in MESA programs. These grassroots global growers share personal experiences, study organic and biodynamic farming methods, and learn how to market produce and organize politically. MESA partners with community organizations, NGOs, and other non-profits in a model designed to address challenges and develop solutions. “This is a horizontal learning and sharing exchange with MESA offering educational resources and academic research to small-scale farmers involved in seed-saving projects, diversified crop farming, animal livestock, and other agricultural practices,” says Atwood.

Atwood grew up on a homestead in the redwoods of Freshwater, in Northern California’s Humboldt County. She was raised by a single mom who worked two jobs; money was tight. Still, her frugal mother saved enough to enable an adventurous young Atwood to take a trip to Ecuador in high school. She learned to speak Spanish during a college year spent working on a small farm in Costa Rica. While traveling, the budding activist began to understand the impact of multinational corporations on local economies—in Ecuador a



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fast-food giant replaced farmland—and Atwood realized the need for global grassroots organizing to protect small-scale agriculture. “Food, land, and markets can be controlled by these immense corporations that have no real connection to the lives or the earth they’re impacting,” says Atwood.

Now Atwood is part of a social experiment of her own: she’s teamed up with like-minded food-justice advocates to plan a communal eco-village a mere twenty minutes from downtown Oakland. On land in the small municipality of

El Sobrante, the founders of the limited liability corporation Wild and Radish are growing a cooperative, sustainable farming community on the urban fringe. Currently they’ve built two homes on the property; the plan is to build about six more, all of them rentals, in an effort to make joining the community affordable. “A lot of traditional co-housing communities do great sharing resources but don’t do a great job on accessibility for low-income folks or diversity,” says Atwood. “We want to address that.”

Wild and Radish has 19 investors and leases land (for a nominal dollar a year) to two non-profit partners: MESA and Oakland-based Planting Justice, which builds and maintains urban gardens and trains the formerly incarcerated and urban youth in sustainable agricultural practices. The long-term goal: to offer a scalable, replicable eco-village model for land conservation, agricultural production, and affordable housing, a place where people with shared values and philosophies can live and farm together. “The concept of community-supported agriculture isn’t new,” says Atwood. “This takes that model a step further: a community-supported community.”



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The Planting Justice farm is primarily an orchard with 50 to 60 different kinds of trees. The MESA farm saves seeds and grows annuals and perennials with a focus on medicinals and crop experimentation and preservation. MESA farm crops have included moringa, heirloom corn, amaranth, squash, and beans. Row crops on the half-acre plot feed residents; any surplus is sold to a local natural grocer. There's also a micro-dairy with six goats that produce milk and cheese. “If we want to rebuild our food system in a resilient way, we need to look at how a lot of food can be produced in a densely-populated area to feed a large group of people,” says Atwood, whose personal and professional lives are deeply entwined. She divides her time between the farm and MESA HQ.

MESA's online content—a pilot project five years in the making—is built with millennials and non-academics in mind: Its multimedia offerings include webinars, podcasts, and infographics. There are more visuals and, Atwood notes, less jargon than conventional courses; each subject is broken down into accessible lessons based on distinct single-topic modules. In keeping with the network's philosophy of accessibility, the curriculum is available online to anyone for free.

For a sliding-scale fee of between \$150 and \$350, students can enroll in one of MESA's four certificate programs, the benefits

of which include instructor evaluation on assignments and grades. Currently, about 1,000 people are enrolled in certificate courses. The non-profit, with an annual budget of around \$420,000, generates 50 percent of its income from its own revenue-making programs and the other 50 percent from grants, foundation support, and individual donations.

In addition to global outreach, MESA keeps a local focus through its Bay Area Farmer Training, an intensive training program in conjunction with Planting Justice. The three-month course, geared toward female farmers, the formerly incarcerated, immigrants, and refugees, looks at all the barriers that these underserved groups face in the area and discusses strategies to overcome them. Participants are also matched one-on-one with mentor farm leaders in the region. And there's an apprenticeship program in which budding farmers are placed with established farms, these newbie food producers learning the lay of the land from seasoned growers.

Many people in the world are dealing with so many structural barriers and oppression built into the food system that it's a daily struggle just to get food on the table, Atwood says. “The problems in our agricultural systems are complex. And there's no one size fits all solution. That's why we favor a multipronged approach.”—Sarah Henry