

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

1/21/26 Amira Shatara

Individualized Major: Sustainability, Cannabis, and Plant Sciences

Ken:

This is *Indie Major*, a show devoted to the wide-ranging stories and visions of individualized majors at the University of Connecticut. I'm your host, Ken Cormier. Today we're with Amira Shatara. Hi, Amira.

Amira:

Hi.

Ken:

Thanks for coming in. Amira, you created an individualized major here at UConn called **Sustainability, Cannabis, and Plant Sciences**. Do you want to tell us a little bit about what that major entails?

Amira:

Yeah. My major focuses on social and environmental sustainability and how we can use those ideas to create more sustainable and circular societies. The cannabis aspect fits into that, but it's not the main focus of my degree. Cannabis has so many uses—not just for physical health, but also as an industrial material for things like clothing or building materials.

It's also great for regenerative agriculture. You can use cannabis for phytoremediation or as a cover crop to help bring nitrogen back into the soil and collect nutrients for future crops.

Ken:

That's really interesting—so multiple uses for cannabis. Historically, this seems like a moment where society has finally caught up and is beginning to explore those uses again, after a long period when that wasn't possible.

Amira:

Yes. For a long time, cannabis was criminalized as a way to punish communities where it was part of cultural traditions and everyday life—often communities tied to immigration. Now, as it's being decriminalized, we're rediscovering all of its many uses.

Ken:

Right. When people hear “cannabis” or “marijuana,” they often think only about recreational use. Growing up in a society where it was illegal and classified alongside narcotics always felt strange to me—especially when alcohol was openly promoted as a recreational drug, while fields of marijuana, a literal plant, were burned.

If you move past that one-dimensional view and see the broader applications, it feels like we lost decades of potential research and use.

Amira:

Exactly. Especially because we actually have an endocannabinoid system in our bodies that processes compounds from cannabis. That's very different from many opioids or psychiatric medications, which don't have naturally occurring systems in the body to interact with them in the same way. It makes cannabis a fascinating subject of study.

Ken:

There's a holistic, ecosystem-based perspective there that's really compelling. Most of your coursework seems to be in plant sciences. Who have you been working with, and what has that experience been like?

Amira:

I worked closely with Dr. Berkowitz to design my major and to think through what I wanted to do with it. I've focused on sustainable and regenerative agriculture practices. With Dr. Berkowitz, I took a course on sustainable vegetable production, where we learned about organic farming methods.

We also went on field trips to farms that use crop rotation, no-till or limited-till methods, and other sustainable practices. Seeing these ideas in action—beyond textbooks or lectures—really opened my mind.

Many of the farms we visited were small-scale. Some farmers had come from corporate careers and bought just five acres or less, then built successful farms using regenerative practices. They shared how they serve their communities through CSAs, farmers markets, and even food donation programs for produce that's still safe to eat but not marketable at full price.

Ken:

It's amazing how much food can come from just three to five acres. We see local farms supplying farmers markets, food co-ops like the Willimantic Food Co-op, and even school programs.

Amira:

Yes. There's a program in Bridgeport where the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation grows hydroponic lettuce and sells it directly to the Bridgeport school system. It creates income for them and provides high-quality produce to kids who might not otherwise have access to it.

Ken:

That connects nicely to the sustainability aspect of your major—how agriculture supports not just the environment, but communities and local economies. You're working on a capstone paper now. What are you focusing on?

Amira:

My paper looks at how small-scale farming can empower communities through food sovereignty. It explores how local farming can make fresh produce more accessible and affordable, and how it keeps revenue within communities.

People get to know where their food comes from and build relationships with farmers. Some farms use pay-what-you-can models, where people who can afford to pay more help subsidize those who can't. This was especially important during the pandemic, when food prices skyrocketed due to reduced imports and local farms stepped in to support their communities.

Ken:

It almost feels like a return to something pre-industrial—or maybe post-industrial—where local food systems regain importance. Do you think there's a growing movement toward this?

Amira:

Definitely. People want to support local businesses because they see how it strengthens their own communities instead of large corporations. That mindset extends to food, too. Knowing the farmer makes the experience more meaningful.

Ken:

Looking ahead, do you see yourself farming, working in policy, or involved on the organizational side? I noticed a business administration course in your major.

Amira:

I really want to be a cut flower farmer. This past summer, I interned at Off Center Farm in Woodbridge, a small cut flower farm run by two women, Christina and Becca. They grow flowers and herbs using sustainable practices and sell at farmers markets and through a flower collective.

I helped with everything—growing, fertilizing, pest control, harvesting, bouquet-making, drying herbs, and even working at the farmers market. I realized that while many people grow vegetables, flowers bring a different kind of joy. Walking through a flower field, knowing the care that went into growing them, makes the experience really special.

Ken:

That resonates with me. My wife and I worked with a local cut flower farmer for our wedding, and visiting the farm ahead of time made the flowers feel much more meaningful. Local flowers last longer, too, and you know they're supporting your community.

Amira:

Exactly. Seeing people's excitement at farmers markets when certain flowers or colors are in season is so rewarding.

Ken:

I love the subject matter of your major. It's inspiring work, and I really admire what you're doing. Thank you so much for coming in and sharing this with us.

Amira:

Thank you.

Ken:

Thanks for listening to *Indie Major*. For more information about individualized and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, visit iisp.uconn.edu. We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.