

Equal Share

Women's Role in Agriculture Expanding

by Tara Maxwell

The role of women in agriculture continues to grow as more women take the helm of farms and ranches across the country. Of the 3.3 million U.S. farm operators counted in the 2007 Census of Agriculture, 30.2 percent — or more than 1 million — were women, and the number of women who were the principal operators of a farm or ranch increased by almost 30 percent from 2002. The USDA Economic Research Service's "Beginning Farmers and Ranchers at a Glance" 2013 edition states that although most principal operators of farms in the United States are men, whether beginning or established, beginning farms are more likely than established farms to have a principal operator who is a woman.

When compared to all farmers nationwide, the 2007 census data revealed that those with female principal operators tend to be smaller both in size and sales, however, women are more likely to own all of the farmland they operate.

HOME SWEET HOMESTEAD

One of these small farm owners is Elysa Bryant who has owned her Guil-

ford, Connecticut, farm since November 2008. Her farm, Stonewell Homestead, is roughly two acres in size. She raises poultry (chickens, turkeys and ducks), goats and American Guinea hogs and sells directly from the farm and through an egg CSA. Her love of caring for the land and animals was cemented when, as a child, she spent time on her aunt and uncle's farm in Chesapeake, Virginia, and a summer on a New Jersey dairy farm.

Bryant, who practices sustainable farming, is a participant in Holistic Management International (HMI)'s Beginning Women Farmers Program (BWF). The objective of the program is to educate and empower women farmers so they are positioned to apply holistic management principles and practices in order to build successful businesses. To date, 270 women have benefited from the program.

"A great need exists for a program that focuses on women with less than 10 years in ranching and farming to learn and hone their skills for success," said Peter Holter, chief executive officer for HMI. "We are excited to learn that the number of young women getting into farming and ranching is growing. If you look at demographic, social and economic factors, they

indicate that number will continue to rise in the coming years."

Shortly after purchasing her home with acreage, Bryant saw a notice for HMI's BWF through CT NOFA. Bryant, who has a background in industrial-organizational psychology, said holistic management shares some common principles.

"It is really understanding how to create the best environment where the people and the system itself can thrive and can work to their best potential in achieving the mission of the organization," Bryant said of industrial organizational psychology. "So even though it's completely agriculturally based, when you look at holistic management, that's essentially what it's doing. It's taking the system of the farm and the farmer and the family and whatever lives on that farm, nestled within its community. It says, 'Farmer, what do you want to have happen here? What will that look like that will help you support that system and that end vision?'"

Bryant has taken many important lessons away from her ongoing experience with HMI, including the importance of properly managed grazing and the financial planning concept of wealth generating expense.



Elysa Bryant applies holistic management practices to her farm in Guilford, Connecticut.





“One of the things I find most interesting is planned grazing and how that sequesters carbon, how that improves the soil and improves the environment of my farm and the health of the animals.”

Bryant said she received a very high compliment when her vet told her that her goats were the healthiest of all her patients.

“I want to encourage biodiversity. Trying multi-species grazing and planned rotational grazing, I find it so interesting and satisfying to see the changes after the animals go through,” she said. “I love seeing more birds, more butterflies, more dragonflies. I just find it really interesting to see how my choices of livestock and how to impact the land with them, how it has this series of effects in many different ways.”

Although she farms using organic methods, Bryant has not pursued USDA certification and says she is reaching customers who understand her passion for preserving the land and naturally caring for her animals and the soil.

“I was always interested in organic gardening so somehow it seemed a natural extension of that ... it’s some reflection of understanding of what I’m not willing to put into the soil that I wouldn’t eat or drink myself.”

Due to having two acres of land to work with, Bryant said she is ever mindful of the importance of being intentional in her planning and practices.

“I tend toward diversity, and I think being on a small piece of land requires me to be intentional with what I want to create because the impacts when you go wrong are hard to ignore when you

are only on two acres. So I have to think about what I really want.”

PASTURED PROFITS

Tricia Park, a BWF graduate, farms 150 acres in New Woodstock, New York. Park owns Creekside Meadows Farm along with her husband, Matt, and produces grass-fed beef and pastured poultry and pigs. The Parks, including 16-year-old son Cameron, currently sell direct from their farm and at the Cazenovia Winter Farmers’ Market.

Park says she got into farming “accidentally” when she and her husband moved into a repurposed barn with tall grass all around and needed a natural way to mow. They obtained two Herefords, George and Betsy, to graze the land and ended up putting George in the freezer later that year. They also bought a dozen chicks and ended up selling eggs to neighbors. After George they obtained BJ (short for Big & Juicy), a donkey, more chickens and two pigs — Porky and Petunia.

When they purchased 11 Scottish Highlander beef cattle from a neighbor they officially found themselves in the grass-fed business.

Park noticed that the Scottish Highlanders were slower growing than the Herefords and that “their horns were a pain, literally.” She even raised a Highlander calf side-by-side with a Hereford calf and realized the Herefords were a better option.

“If we had kept the Highlanders, we needed to market our beef as heritage and charge a lot more or we could go back to the Herefords.”

Standout States

The states with the highest percentage of female principal farm operators include:

- Arizona
- New Hampshire
- Massachusetts
- Maine
- Alaska

Source: 2007 Census of Agriculture

Park also obtained some local grass-fed Belted Galloways to incorporate into the herd.

“It’s kind of a funny-looking crew out there right now,” she said. “It’s a mixed bag, but our beef sells out every year, so I guess we’re doing something right.”

In July 2011 the Parks moved from their original 26-acre farm to a 150-acre farm nearby.

Park said sustainable, pasture-based farming seemed like the right fit for her family.

“We like seeing the animals outside being able to do what nature intended them to do ... it just seems like they should be outside, whether it’s the cows or pigs out to graze, they like to till things up, and the chickens really like being out on the grass.”

One of the most critical lessons Park took away from HMI’s BWF program was the importance of planning for drought, especially in grass-fed operations. She embraced the principals of making sure not to overstock, not to overgraze through proper resting and to leave residual. At the time of the drought the Parks had cattle, pigs, 700 chickens and around 80 turkeys.

“Behind our house is 30 acres and about half of it is open and all weedy and we said ‘that’s our drought reserve pasture,’ kind of jokingly, in April when it was pouring rain,” Park said. “Well in July we put up a few strands of temporary fencing and put the cows there and we were probably one of the few grazing farms that didn’t run out of grass and didn’t have to feed the cows hay, and we still had a full first cutting and second cutting hay put into the barn.”

Thanks to proper management and planning, the Parks’ pastures fully recovered when the rains came again last fall.

“Other people were saying their pastures didn’t perform and were dumping

on fertilizer or were plowing and re-seeding them,” Park said. “Ours took off like crazy. It looked like spring, and we couldn’t graze fast enough.”

FOREIGN & DOMESTIC DISPARITY

According to World Watch Institute’s “Investing in Women Farmers,” women farmers produce more than half of all food worldwide and currently account for 43 percent of the global agricultural labor force. “Women produce as much as 50 percent of the agricultural output in South Asia and 80 percent in sub-Saharan Africa,” write report authors Danielle Nierenberg and Seyyada Burney.

In spite of women farmers’ essential roles in global and local food security, there is a persistent gender gap in agriculture. Cultural norms and restrictive property or inheritance rights limit the types and amount of financial resources, land or technology available to women, according to findings by World Watch Institute.

“Recognizing the factors restricting women from receiving full compensation for their role in global agriculture is key to alleviating the gender gap in agricultural employment, resources, and development,” said Nierenberg, co-author of the report and director of Worldwatch’s Nourishing the Planet project. “Women produce 60 to 80 percent of the food in developing countries but own less than 2 percent of the land. They typically farm non-commercial, staple crops, such as rice, wheat and maize,

which account for 90 percent of the food consumed by the rural poor.”

Fewer extension or research services are directed at women farmers because of perceptions of the limited commercial viability of their labor or products — and only 15 percent of extension officers around the world are women.

As reported by Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES), according to data from Iowa State University, over 47 percent of farmland in Iowa is owned or co-owned by women, with more sole owners, primarily senior and widowed landowners who inherited family farmland.

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) took a look at the board membership of five of the largest organizations representing corn, soybean, wheat, cotton and rice growers in the United States (the five crops that collect 90 percent of federal farm subsidies) and found that female representation on these boards amounted to only 1.3 percent in 2011. By comparison, women on the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition’s (NSAC) Organizational Council outnumber men (55 percent).

Resources:

Worldwatch Institute
www.worldwatch.org
2007 Census of Agriculture
www.agcensus.usda.gov
USDA Economic Research Service’s
Beginning Farmers and Ranchers at a Glance, 2013 edition
www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eb-economic-brief/eb22.aspx

Holistic Management International
www.holisticmanagement.org
MOSES
www.mosesorganic.org
Women, Food & Agriculture Network
www.wfan.org

For more information on Stonewell Homestead, email stonewell.homestead@gmail.com.

For more information on Creekside Meadows Farm, visit www.creeksidemeadowsfarm.com.

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Tricia Park farms 150 acres in New Woodstock, New York.

