

# Women, Food, and Agriculture Network

*Women Growing Together.*



Spring 2010

A Quarterly Newsletter



## The Invisible Woman

**or, Should Women in Agriculture Be Forced to Work with Tools Designed by and for Men?**

by Liz Bresinger  
Co-owner, Green Heron Tools

Book? Movie? Superhero? How about farmer? (Better yet: farming superhero!)

Despite the vital and ever-growing role of women in agriculture and the passionate advocacy of groups like WFAN, there's at least one area in which women farmers have remained practically invisible until very recently: the realm of agricultural tools and equipment. Extensive research has failed to identify a single tool or piece of equipment in the industrialized world that was de-

signed explicitly to work with women's bodies. This omission is so long-standing that it's become part of the landscape of farming – something so taken for granted that we don't really see or question it. Like late blight or drought or weirdly changing weather patterns, we live with it.

But we shouldn't. And the fact that we've been asked to do so for so long is an outrage.

Here's why: Tools and equipment function best – are safest and easiest and most efficient and effective to operate -- when they fit the user. Women's and men's bodies are significantly different, and not just in obvious attributes like height or weight. Women also tend to have 40-75% less upper-body strength, for example, and to be both more flexible and more sensitive to vibration than men. Even the tallest and strongest of us is anatomically and physiologically different from men in ways that affect tools use.

Yet virtually all tools and equipment currently on the market have been designed either for men or for some "average" user whose size, weight, strength, etc., were heavily influenced by the average man's.

The results, according to women from all over the U.S. who responded to our online survey or participated in focus groups (thanks to WFAN for organizing one!) or

interviews: tools that are too heavy or too long, grips that are too big, handles that are too high or widely spaced, pull strings that are too long, gas and brake pedals that are too far away, and mechanical equipment that is too bulky and difficult to maneuver.

**Extensive research has failed to identify a single tool or piece of equipment in the industrialized world that was designed explicitly to work with women's bodies.**

The ramifications? Hard to know, exactly, since very little research has been done on the health and safety of women farmers, particularly with respect to tools use. We do know, however, that farming is the number one occupation linked to musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), including lower back pain, in women – and that redesigning tools is one of the two best ways identified by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Preven-

tion to reduce work-related MSDs. We also know that women put themselves at risk every day by doing what-

ever it takes to use inappropriately designed equipment; our favorite terrible example is a woman who props her chainsaw in the Y of a tree so she can get enough distance to pull the cord.

Enter Green Heron Tools, LLC, a company that Ann Adams and I started in 2008.

**Green Heron Tools, cont. on p. 4**



*Ann tests a prototype shovel in a PSU high tunnel.*



## Executive Director's Update

In synch with the warming weather, things are heating up this spring with WFAN. The board and I are hard at

work navigating the application for 501(c)3 status, creating articles of incorporation and by-laws, registering with appropriate state agencies, and creating a solid foundation for WFAN's launch as our own independent non-profit entity. During our 12 years as a project of the Tides Center, we concentrated on building our program and networking

components, and now that those areas are flourishing – see the enclosed 2009 Annual Report to read how well! – it's time to take on responsibility for our own governance.

Soon you should all be receiving a 2010 appeal letter asking for your tax-deductible donation to help us make this transition on a sound financial footing. Please give generously so that WFAN can support, inform and empower more women in sustainable agriculture around the country.

(During the 501(c)3 application process, we have contracted with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation for limited fiscal sponsorship, so when you donate, you may receive a thank you from both WFAN and INHF.)

We are grateful for the support of *Iowa Edible River Valley* magazine publishers Kurt and Kim Friese of Iowa City, who won national honors with that wonderful slow foods publication

([www.ediblecommunities.com/iowarivervalley](http://www.ediblecommunities.com/iowarivervalley)) and donated their \$1,000 prize money to WFAN at a benefit event in Des Moines on March 4. You can read more about it on page 4.

WFAN continues to serve women landowners with the *Women Caring for the Land* program, providing them with the resources and support they need to make soil and water conservation improvements on their farmland. A group of landowners in southeast Iowa just finished their series of meetings, and another set is planned for western Iowa (Boone and Greene Cos.) in early May. Visit the website and watch your email for details.

A small but mighty group of WFAN women attended the annual conference in late January. We will be offering a full day of WFAN programming at the 2011 conference, scheduled for next Jan. 29 in central Iowa, venue TBA. Don't miss it!



This newsletter is a quarterly publication of **Women, Food, and Agriculture Network**. We welcome suggestions, stories, and news from your part of the world. Our emphasis is on women's lives, their relationships, communities and families as they related to sustainable agriculture and food systems. We publish first-person articles, research summaries, book or video reviews, original poetry and art, and letters to the editor.

The newsletter is published each March, June, September and December; submission deadline is the 10th of the month. Email submissions to [leigh@wfan.org](mailto:leigh@wfan.org), or mail to WFAN, PO Box 611, Ames, IA 50010.

WFAN website: [www.wfan.org](http://www.wfan.org)

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Leigh Adcock

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### April 3

Urban Soils Workshop, Minneapolis, MN. Sponsored by the Permaculture Research Institute. Visit [http://www.pricoldclimate.org/event/urban\\_soils\\_workshop\\_0](http://www.pricoldclimate.org/event/urban_soils_workshop_0) to register.

### April 6

Crop Rotation Webinar for diversified farming. Key findings from research, rotation planning. Presenter is Chuck Mohler of Cornell University. Register at <http://www.extension.org/article/26734>.

### April 7

Farm to Cafeteria Workshop, Baxter, MN. Learn how to bring locally grown foods to schools and institutions in MN. Register by April 2 at <https://tools.crk.umn.edu/web/cgi/registration3.pl>.

### April 8

Farm-Scale Biodiesel Webinar. Sponsored by NCAT. <https://www2.gotomeeting.com/register/380798506>

### April 8-10

Pennsylvania Land Conservation Conference. <http://www.conserveland.org/conferences/2010/index>.

### April 10

Raw Milk Symposium, Madison, WI. <http://www.farmtoconsumerfoundation.org/rawmilksymposium/>.

### April 16

Developing Food Policy, New Haven, CT. US and international perspectives. Sponsored by Yale Law School. Register at <http://www.law.yale.edu/news/foodpolicyconference.htm>.

## ~ Female Fare

## Sow Sustainable Ag Funding Seeds This Spring

by Lisa Kivirist

While we are all spring planting on the farm, remember there's another group of "growers" cultivating policy priorities on Capitol Hill. Thanks to organizations like the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC), farmers have a direct voice in Washington, D.C., that champions good policy and increased funding for sustainable agriculture programs. But as spring ushers in budget planning for the 2011 federal fiscal year budget, each of us needs to contribute our voice in advocating for such efforts – changes that can impact our farms and businesses directly.

"The current Farm Bill contains more sustainable agriculture programs than ever before in history," explains Aimee Witteman, executive director of NSAC. "However, every year we still need to fight for the funding behind these priorities and make sure our elected leaders in Congress realize and understand the importance and impact of these programs."

This federal funding process takes place during "appropriations," a process that launches every spring after the President makes recommendations to different committees on what next year's federal budget should look like and what programs should be prioritized. The agriculture appropriations subcommittees – one made up of House members and one of Senators – review these recommendations and develop the agriculture budget.

Two key sustainable agriculture funding priorities that directly affect women farmers include:

### Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Account (BFRIDA) Pilot Program

This initiative is based on individual development accounts (IDAs), a competitive "matched savings" plan that matches funds saved by individual farmers, typically three to one: every \$100 a farmer saves each month equals \$300 in her account. The money saved can be used after two years toward specific business investments, such as a farm down-payment or to purchase farm equipment.

To further ensure long-term business success, program participants are also required to complete financial training programs in business planning and market development, as well as create savings and business plans, before the funds can be used. These programs have a successful track record: **participants in IDA programs designed to start up small enterprises across various business categories are 84 percent more likely to become profitable business owners than those who have not participated.**

The current federal food and farm bill created the first-ever IDA program specifically for farmers. Unfortunately, Congress did not appropriate funds for the program in last year's budget. NSAC is currently advocating for \$5 million in 2011 to launch a pilot program in 15 states.

### Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG)

VAPG grants directly fund farmers to research and develop new value-added ventures on their farms. From processing facilities to grower cooperatives, VAPG funds directly stimulate rural economies by supporting innovative entrepreneurship. NSAC recommends a \$30 million VAPG budget for 2011.

"Every person can make a difference in achieving these sustainable agriculture funding goals by contacting



Rebecca King, a beginning dairy sheep farmer and cheese-maker from Monterey County, CA, received IDA funds under a California pilot. See her op ed in the San Francisco Chronicle at <http://www.sfgate.com/>

your senators and representative and expressing your support of BFRIDA and VAPG at these funding levels," adds Ariane Lotti, policy associate at NSAC. "Each individual call makes a difference in collectively achieving increases for sustainable, small and mid-scale farmers."

For more on the 2011 agriculture appropriations priorities, and to sign up for the NSAC Action Alerts that summarize these policy priorities and the calls and action steps you can take, go to [www.sustainableagriculture.net](http://www.sustainableagriculture.net) under "Take Action."



Lisa Kivirist directs the Rural Women's Project, a venture of the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) and is the co-author of

*ECOpreneur and Rural Renaissance. She and her family run Inn Serendipity Farm and B&B in Browntown, WI, completely powered by the wind and the sun.*

**Green Heron Tools, continued from front page**

We were interested in agricultural tools because we've been organic market growers for more than 15 years. We also have extensive experience in public health – Ann's got a master's degree in nursing and I've got one in public health – and so the connections among tools, equipment, health and safety were obvious to us. Initially we assumed the right tools were out there – just not easy to find. But the deeper we got into our search for appropriate equipment, and the more people in the industry we talked with who had never considered that women might benefit from different tools, the more we realized that if you want something done, sometimes you really do have to do it yourself.

Fast forward to today. We've just finished an 8-month project funded by a USDA Small Business Innovation Research grant that enabled us to work with engineers at Penn State University

to design a hybrid spade shovel specifically to work with women's bodies, as well as a hoe. We hope to finish fine-tuning the shovel and make it available within the year.

We've written a second USDA grant that, if funded, will allow us to design something to take the place of the traditional walk-behind rototiller. And with the help of women throughout the U.S., we've identified some of the best currently available equipment that works for women (examples: a tractor rapid hitch that facilitates the safe and easy connection and disconnection of implements without leaving the tractor seat; a fully adjustable, lightweight wheel hoe; Asian-built pruning equipment, designed for a smaller-stature market with characteristics similar to many women's).

We're continually revising our website to make it a source for not only great

products but also valuable resources and information. We're building the company on a foundation of sustainability. For us, this is not just a business – it's a tool, no pun intended, for promoting public health and social justice. It's a mission.

And we'd love to hear from you! Visit us at [www.greenherontools.com](http://www.greenherontools.com).



*Delta-hook tractor rapid hitch.*

**WINE-TASTING BENEFIT A DELICIOUS SUCCESS**



*More than 50 supporters of healthy local foods and sustainable agriculture packed themselves into the intimate confines of Sbrocco Wine Bar's tasting room in Des Moines' Court Avenue district on March 4. Kurt Friese (center) and his wife Kim (right), publishers of Edible Iowa River Valley magazine, presented a generous donation of \$1,000 to WFAN, and supporters who attended the event contributed \$1,400 more during the two-hour tasting and benefit. WFAN executive director Leigh Adcock is at left.*

**International Women's Day Celebrated on March 8**

March 8 has been celebrated as International Women's Day for nearly a century (it began in 1911). It was created to honor the economic, political and social achievements of women past, present and future, and to raise awareness of the challenges women still face around the world. In some places like China, Russia, Vietnam and Bulgaria, IWD is a national holiday!

Here are a couple of our favorite 2010 IWD blog posts related to sustainable ag and food systems:

"Oughta Be a Woman," post at Institute for Ag and Trade Policy by Alexandra Spieldoch, <http://iatp.typepad.com/thinkforward/2010/03/oughta-be-a-woman-celebrating-international-womens-day.html>

"Salute to the Sustainable Ag Women of Iowa," post at Blog for Iowa by WFAN co-founder Denise O'Brien.

[http://www.blogforiowa.com/blog/\\_archives/2010/3/17/4478204.html](http://www.blogforiowa.com/blog/_archives/2010/3/17/4478204.html)

## “Brilliantologist” Rene` Groom Comes Full Circle

by Rene` Groom  
Prosser, WA

*“A person who says it can’t be done is usually being passed by someone doing it.”*

For me, that quote says it all. Those doing the passing are the ones that I choose to spend time with. I see myself as one of those who stands along the race course handing out water bottles to the runners. While some people might overlook us, few *runners* do. They know we are committed to the cause. We get up, show up, and educate ourselves about the tasks at hand.

As a young woman preparing to graduate high school, I received some advice as I struggled to find my place in the world. I was encouraged to figure out what I loved to do, and then find a way to make a living doing it. While that sounds simple enough, my vision was too short back then. Growing up in a rural community with a population of 600, the majority of those families dry-land wheat farmers, the fact that I wanted a farm life did not seem so far-fetched. However, back then, there weren’t tools in place that would have assisted me in purchasing my own little corner of the world. In my upbringing, farm ownership was reserved for men; and truth be told, I wouldn’t have thought of dreaming big enough to consider a place of my own; and while I know now that there were women trail-blazers then, I hadn’t yet met one.

As fate would have it, I married a farm boy. A match made in heaven, except for the fact that he was embedded in conventional farming, while I was enamored with less conventional forms of agriculture. I felt the pressure from family and friends who didn’t understand my excitement for what I was learning at the organic and sustainable lectures, classes and workshops, farm-walks and town hall meetings that I chose to attend. However, I pushed

through, not allowing anyone to convince me that I didn’t belong or have the right to explore this path. I knew instinctively that there was something in these conversations that rang true to my core beliefs.

I was somewhat legitimized with family and friends in our agricultural circle when I became a licensed crop insurance agent. Then, when some of our conventional farming friends decided to put some of their ground into organic crops but struggled with the paperwork, they called on me to assist. It didn’t take me long to see that fate had opened a door, so I chose to leave the insurance world and venture out on my own as a writer and consultant.

Three years ago, I hung out the shingle for my business called **Naturally Speaking**. I work as a consultant for those individuals or companies who have questions about how to start CSA’s, convert their ranches to grass-fed, start an egg business or grow an heirloom garden. I love the farm-to-table and farm-to-school conversations, and I am excited about the changes those initiatives are beginning to make in communities.

My job also allows me to write. While I could easily define myself as a freelance writer, which I am, I have instead chosen to introduce myself as a “brilliantologist”: a self-coined word I define as someone who studies brilliance. (I have discovered that almost anything followed by “-ologist” seems

to hold some kind of influence with those who like titles.)

As a brilliantologist, I especially love being able to share how folks are finding success keeping their family farms alive and well. I also spend as much time as possible with groups of women called Farmgirls, as the Sisterhood Coordinator and Rural Farm Girl blogger for Mary-JanesFarm, operating out of Moscow, ID.

([www.maryjanesfarm.org](http://www.maryjanesfarm.org))

Recently, I had a full-circle moment when I received a phone call from a young girl in her teens who was interested in following her passion as a farmer. She didn’t know where to begin, and was given my name and number as a contact and reference for networking. As I hung up the phone after speaking with her, I couldn’t help but think how much the landscape has changed since I was a young girl. I would have given anything to have an older, more knowledgeable and experienced woman come along side of me to breathe life into my dreams.

I feel content knowing that I have taken my place in the world – not so much as a trail blazer, but rather as someone standing on the sidelines willing to assist in any way that I can, lending my talents and what I have learned, and applying them where they are most needed.

I have spent nearly 30 years following my passion, one workshop at a time. While it has taken more time than anyone may have thought it should to get here, today I spend my days “Naturally Speaking” about those things that I have spent a lifetime being passionate about – knowing full well that my love of the land has earned me a seat at the table.



## Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat

### Profiles 30 Women Championing Sustainable Foods

*Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat* (Gibbs Smith, \$15.99, May 2010) by Temra Costa (below right) is a compelling new book about the decision-making power women have over what their families eat, the thousands of new farms women are starting, and their jobs at numerous organizations and businesses promoting a sustainable food agenda. As farmers, chefs, educator and activist, women are changing the way we eat and farm.



*Farmer Jane* profiles 30 women in the sustainable food industry, describing their agriculture business models and illustrating the amazing changes they are making in how we connect with food. These advocates for creating a more holistic and nurturing food and agriculture system also answer questions on starting a community-

supported agriculture (CSA) program, how to get involved in policy at local and national levels, and how to evaluate and finance various renewable energy technologies.

Visit [www.farmerjane.org](http://www.farmerjane.org) for more information on the book, profiles of the women it features, and resources and further information on sustainable food and farming.

Among the women profiled are WFAN founder Denise O'Brien, Iowa organic farmer and advocate; and current WFAN executive director Leigh Adcock. Other familiar names include Lisa Kivirist of MOSES and Aimee Witteman of NSAC.

Temra Costa became involved with sustainable agriculture during her seven years working for the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) in California, promoting the Farm to School and Buy Fresh Buy Local initiatives statewide. In addition to speaking

and writing about women in sustainable ag, she currently writes and co-hosts a radio show with filmmaker Deborah Koons Garcia on Green960 ([www.greenmorning.org](http://www.greenmorning.org)) that features challenges and solutions in the arena of food and farming.

WFAN is working on bringing Temra to Iowa in the fall of 2010 to speak and promote her book. Watch for more details in the summer newsletter. If you would like to bring her to your community for an appearance, you can contact her via the Farmer Jane website.



## Ag Women Needed to Review USDA Grant Applications

Women in sustainable agriculture: please consider serving as reviewers for USDA federal grants. As these federal funds (most farm bill related) are intended to be "reviewed by one's peers," it is important to have the voice of women in agriculture, particularly beginning farmers, heard in the process.

Reading and reviewing grants also provides insight into the grant-writing process and what makes a strong proposal – experiences that help in any future grants you may write yourself.

To help you understand what is involved in this task, the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC), in partnership with the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF), put together a compact overview on the review process:

<http://sustainableagriculture.net/take-action/advocacy-toolkit/grant-reviewer/>

Specific review panel opportunities are typically posted in NSAC's Weekly Update (sign up here:

<http://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/>).

Typically, expenses for any DC travel are covered.

*Female Fare* columnist Lisa Kivirist has served on the Beginning Farmer & Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) review panel, and is willing to talk with you about her experiences.

Contact her at [www.innserendipity.com](http://www.innserendipity.com), 608-329-7056.

## Key Resources for Beginning Women Farmers Available

Visit the WFAN website to check out a great new two-page summary for beginning women farmers and eco-preneurs that lists the federal farm bill grants and non-profit-based programs available to help women in organic and sustainable agriculture. See [http://wfan.org/Resources\\_files/RuralWomenProjectMOSESResources.doc](http://wfan.org/Resources_files/RuralWomenProjectMOSESResources.doc).

Find a program or grant that looks interesting and want more in-depth information? Check out SARE's new *Building Sustainable Farms, Ranches and Communities*, a guide to federal programs that provide financial and technical support for sustainable agriculture.

Download the publication for free at [www.sare.org/publications/ruralplaces.htm](http://www.sare.org/publications/ruralplaces.htm).

## New Radio Show from WI Features Sustainable Ag

Sylvia Burgos Toftness, a sustainable foods advocate and media professional from Wisconsin, is debuting a half-hour radio show on sustainable agriculture on Saturday mornings from 8:30 to 9 a.m. on WPCA Radio, 95.7, in Amery, WI. The program will be streamed live on the website, [www.wpcamusicsports.org](http://www.wpcamusicsports.org).

Sylvia says, "My aim is to provide a segment that is lively, non-threatening, and so practical that it entices farmers to listen and consider moving to, or continuing, sustainable practices. Most often, I'll conduct live telephone inter-

views with ag experts and experienced sustainable farmers who can provide valuable insights and information."

Sylvia asks sustainable growers, new and experienced, to contact her with questions and comments prior to and during a show by texting her at 651-238-8525, or email her at [sylvia@bronxtobarn.com](mailto:sylvia@bronxtobarn.com). She hopes you will suggest future topics and recommend people to interview.



## White House Project Trains Women to Run

If you have ever been interested in finding out what it takes to run for office, at any level from local school board to the US presidency, the White House Project's non-partisan leadership program GO RUN is made for you.

The weekend-long training empowers women to become more effective advocates for themselves, their families and their communities, whether or not they decide to run for public office.

Check out the website and sign up for the email list to learn about upcoming events in your part of the country: [www.thewhitehouseproject.org](http://www.thewhitehouseproject.org).

If you live in the Midwest, mark your calendar for the weekend GO RUN training set for Sept. 10-12 in Duluth, MN. Apply online at the website.

## Check Out Webinar and Journal Issue on Food Systems & Public Health Linkages

The webinar "Food Systems and Public Health: Linkages to Achieve Healthier Diets and Healthier Communities" is now available at <http://foodandsociety.blip.tv/file/3268439/>.

(Note: If you have challenges viewing the webinar, go to the blip.tv *Help* tab at the top of the page to assure updated software.)

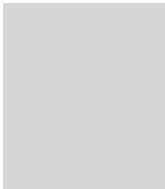
In addition, check out the articles in the special issue of the *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* (Volume 4, Issues 3 & 4) at [www.tandf.co.uk/journals/WHEN](http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/WHEN) (click on *Online Contents* on the right).

## American Sheep Industry Meeting Presentations Available Online

Presentations given at the 2010 American Sheep Industry Annual Convention in Nashville, TN, are now available online. A range of topics were presented and can now be used as resource materials. Topics covered include wool products and marketing, lamb marketing, animal health, and current research efforts. Visit

[www.sheepusa.org/2010\\_Meeting\\_Presentations](http://www.sheepusa.org/2010_Meeting_Presentations).





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Leah Wilson photo, © 2009.

# Invest in WFAN!

Be sure to stay connected by investing in WFAN. Please fill out the form below and make your check payable to WFAN. Your gift today will help WFAN remain a strong voice for women in agriculture and you will continue to receive WFAN newsletters and announcements. **We no longer send membership renewals**; please continue your support by making a contribution today!

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