



# Women, Food, and Agriculture Network

*Women Growing Together.*

Leah Wilson photo, © 2009.



Summer 2010

## Reflections on “New” Women in Agriculture

by Nicole Sugerman

It feels kind of like the elephant in the room. It’s not that we don’t talk or think about it around here — indeed, we do both, rather frequently. But rarely do we discuss it with others. For some reason, it’s not the kind of subject that is discussed all that openly. Instead, it’s alluded to subtly, in a manner that just confuses me at first, until I remember that this is a little unusual.

“You don’t look like a farmer,” people say when I tell them my profession.

“What do you mean?” I reply, never able to let an issue go.

“Oh, I don’t know,” they reply. “You’re just little. You don’t look like you ride a tractor.”

It still takes me a minute to put it together. (Why do you have to be “big” to ride a tractor? Why do you have to ride a tractor all the time to be a farmer? What does it mean to not “look” like someone who does ride a tractor?) Until I realize, oh, they mean because I am a young woman. At this point, I never know quite what to say. “I ride a tractor sometimes,” or, “Yep, well, I am.” The subject changes. But I am constantly reminded that to be a female farmer is something a little out-of-the-ordinary; to work at a farm site staffed almost entirely by women, even more so. So I decided to express my thoughts about some of the intricacies of women in agriculture.

Lately, I hear a lot about female farmers as a “new trend.” According to the 2007 census, one or two out of ten farms is now operated by a woman. However, the “trend” part is hard to track, and seems to me to obscure some history of women who have always been involved in farming. Female farmers have been historically under-reported and under-recognized. The U.S. census records only one operator per farm, the deed-holder. As the majority of land is officially owned by men, this renders invisible all female partners who manage farms with their husbands or families.

As I learned from [this episode](#) of the radio series *Making Contact*, worldwide, between 65 and 75 percent of all food is grown by women, who own only one percent of the world’s land. Mainly operating as subsistence growers, this food production is often conceptualized as “domestic work,” obscuring recognition of these female farmers worldwide. Still, the visibility of female farmers, at least within the U.S., is growing. For all its limitations, the census has recorded a more than doubling of farms operated



*Nicole weeding onions at Henry Got Crops!, the CSA farm she co-manages near Philadelphia, PA. Dave Tavani photo.*

by women between 1978 and 2005, from 100,000 to 250,000.

As the country’s farmers age, a new “back to the land” movement, fueled partly by desires to put personal politics into action and an increasing disillusionment with the job market and traditional concept of careerism for young people, is encouraging a new crop of farmers, many of them women. We new farmers often farm under nontraditional arrangements — co-farmers are often platonic managing partners instead of the heterosexual husband-wife team of the past — meaning women are more often recognized as farm owners or principle managers. Additionally, as farmers age, their land is more often being taken over by wives, daughters, or other female family members.

*Continued on page 4*



## Executive Director's Update

I spent most of yesterday clearing branches from our yard and barnyard in the wake of a severe windstorm the night

before. We lost several trees, but fortunately only a little of the fence line was damaged; buildings were unscathed.

Whether or not you "believe in" man-made climate change (and I do), I think we can all agree that severe weather events have multiplied in number and ferocity over the past few years. Floods, thunderstorms with damaging

winds and hail, and extreme fluctuations in temperature pose serious challenges for everyone trying to make a living in agriculture. But severe weather damage hits our market farmers the hardest.

The farmers who raise food on small acreages for community markets and direct sale have razor-thin profit margins, no government subsidies, and often minimal (if any) insurance to cover damages. One bad storm can wipe them out for the better part of a season.

You can help keep them viable by investing in their products, either through CSA shares or patronizing (matronizing?) the markets and restaurants where they sell their food.

On a broader scale, you can support policies from the local to the national levels that provide some security for our food producers. Visit the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's website at [www.sustainableagriculture.net](http://www.sustainableagriculture.net) to browse the most comprehensive set of tools and action alerts available for supporting our kind of agriculture, from the

aisles of your grocery store to the halls of Congress.

WFAN's philosophy is that systems change takes a combination of federal policy and grassroots action, with the emphasis on the latter. When you start a farmers market in your town, work with your child's school to improve lunchroom offerings, or run for city council and encourage local foods policy when you win, you are creating a space in which healthy, local foods can improve the lives of your family and your neighbors in the most elemental way.

Iowa WFAN-ers, watch your email box for news about two special guests coming to our state in the fall: *Farmer Jane* author Temra Costa will visit several communities Sept. 25-27, and Lisa Kivirist will join us for a series of talks on "eco-preneuring" November 2-4. We'll be helping host communities plan local food and farming events in conjunction with their visits.

Enjoy the rest of your summer!



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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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### July 31

**Farm Field Day at Rolling Acres Farm, Atlantic, IA**, a CSA farm owned by Denise O'Brien and Larry Harris. Co-sponsored by WFAN and Practical Farmers of Iowa. Begin with a noon potluck lunch at nearby Harrisdale Homestead, then travel to Rolling Acres. See the high tunnel, an innovative cooling system, and various production practices. See the WFAN website for details.

### August 3

**Women Caring for the Land** free conservation information meeting for women landowners in Carroll and surrounding counties in western Iowa. Meeting begins at 9 a.m. at St. John's Church, Carroll. Call 712.792.4415 to register.

### August 25

**Women Caring for the Land** free conservation information meeting for women landowners in Pottawattamie and Shelby Counties in southwest Iowa. Meeting begins at 9 a.m. at Therkildsen Community Center, Harlan. Call 712.755.2417 to register.

### September 10-12

**Go Run Women's Political Leadership Training, Duluth, MN.** See p. 3 for details.

### September 10-12

**Growing Power's National-International Urban & Small Farm Conference, Milwaukee, WI.** Visit <http://growingpowerfarmconference.org/> for information.

## ~ Female Fare

## Recipe for Change: Women in Agriculture Invited to “Go Run” Leadership Training Sept. 10-12 in Duluth

by Lisa Kivirist

You probably stand buried in summer abundance as you read this. Between the zucchini pile-up on your kitchen counter and peak summer farm chore demands, this season ushers in a super-size serving of the passion we all share for agriculture: that direct connection to the land and healthy food sources for ourselves and our community. As women in agriculture, we stand well-seasoned in two things: balancing multiple hats, and an appreciation for diversity. You probably harvested several tomato varieties this morning, not just one. You typically plant a few new seeds in the garden every season to keep things new, fresh, healthy and interesting.

In this spirit, consider planting a pack of “leadership” seeds this September by attending the “Go Run” training in Duluth, MN, September 10-12, 2010. Sponsored by the White House Project, a national non-partisan organization dedicated to supporting women to take on leadership roles, this intense weekend leadership training initiative will offer a special focus on rural women and those with a commitment to agriculture and food system change. WFAN and the Rural Women’s Project, a venture of the [Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service \(MOSES\)](#), will partner with [The White House Project](#) to help facilitate this connection at the September training, with women like myself and Leigh Adcock, WFAN Executive Director, attending.

“Whether you want to take on a leadership role in your local community or possibly run for public office someday, the ‘Go Run’ weekend provides an amazing, intense opportunity to create new allies and networks of women from

throughout the Midwest sharing similar values and missions,” explains Liz Johnson, Midwest Regional Director for The White House Project. “Whatever your situation, whatever cause you’re passionate about, this training will help you take your leadership skills and influence up several notches, as well as provide fertile ground for new ideas and collaborations to unfold.”

While women remain underrepresented nationally in elected positions of influence, this gap is particularly noticeable in regard to women in agriculture. Women currently make up only 17 percent of Congress. On a global scale, the U.S. ranks 71st out of 189 countries in terms of proportion of women in their national legislatures. We trail behind the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Canada and Australia, as well as Afghanistan, Cuba, United Arab Emirates and Pakistan.

Of the women currently in Congress, none came to elected office from an active farming background. Three were raised on farms or ranches, but unfortunately, none brings a current hands-on understanding of the current face of women in agriculture.

However, women are increasingly taking on senior leadership roles within the political structure that can potentially support women in agriculture. Arkansas Senator Blanche Lampert Lincoln serves as the first woman chair of the powerful U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, setting policy and funding direction for America’s farms. Kathleen Merrigan, a champion of sustainable and organic agriculture, serves as the USDA Deputy Secretary, second in command at the largest federal agency. This upcoming

“Go Run” training aims to foster further advancement of women in agriculture into a variety of leadership roles, from influencing food options in your local school cafeterias to strengthening the role of women in agriculture on a national platform.

“Connecting to new groups of inspiring women is particularly important to rural women like myself, who can easily sometimes feel isolated and alone because of our geography,” adds Nevada Littlewolf, Rural Leadership Field Organizer for The White House Project, and the only woman currently elected to the city council in rural Virginia, MN.

This upcoming “Go Run” will be held at the Holiday Inn in Duluth, MN, and run the evening of Friday, Sept. 10, through the morning of Sunday, Sept. 12. Topics will include: communications and public speaking, fundraising, coalition-building, networking opportunities, and campaign strategy.

In addition, a special “Leadership Cohort” session dedicated to women in agriculture will help spur specific next steps among attendees on ways we can increase the leadership role of women dedicated to food system change.

Scholarships opportunities are available; please register by August 1. Visit the White House Project online for more info and to apply. See you in Duluth!



*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 ECOpreneuring and Rural Renaissance. She and her*

*family run Inn Serendipity Farm and B&B in Brountown, WI, completely powered by the wind and the sun.*

## Reflections on “New” Women in Ag, continued from front page

Interestingly, as making a living as a farmer becomes ever more difficult, it becomes women’s work. At a farmer’s market I frequent, one of the farms is a hundred-acre conventional New Jersey farm that sells corn, tomatoes, squash, and tree fruit. The farm is run by two middle-aged sisters who recently took over management of the farm from their 80-year-old father. I was excited to see a farm run by women of a slightly older generation, so I asked them their thoughts.

“Most of the time, other farmers treat us okay,” they told

**“We bring along [our brother] to market sometimes; he doesn’t know a thing about farming, but people just want to talk to ‘the man in charge.’”**

me, “although if we do something wrong, it’s, ‘oh those girls.’ We bring along [our brother] to market sometimes; he doesn’t know a thing about farming, but people just want to talk to ‘the man in charge.’” They took over the farm, they told me, because their husbands and brothers had to get “better” jobs that brought in more money. Without the expectation of being primary breadwinners, they were left as the ones who could keep the family farm alive.

In both conversation and personal thought about females and farming, I want to be careful to avoid gender essentialism. I do not want to make generalizations like, “Women make good farmers because they like to nurture the earth,” or, “Men are better with machines.” Gender expression, I believe, is a complex combination of socialization, culture, and genetics. Not being able to divorce these things from each other, I find it frustrating and counterproductive to base ideas or logic on what men or women are “naturally” like or good at doing.

That said, I acknowledge my shortcomings, like a lack of confidence with machines and power tools. Part of this is completely personal, gender aside; I happen to not be good with power tools, whereas I know many women who are. However, there is a gendered aspect to power-tool-confidence. My sister recently visited me in Philadelphia, and came to work with me on the farm. When I asked her what she wanted to work on, she replied, “Anything with power tools,” explaining that she recently volunteered recycling old doors for a green-deconstruction non-profit with a male friend of hers.

When the staff person trained them, he offered a power drill to help, but spoke about it and handed it only to my sister’s male friend. Finally, the friend asked my sister if she, too,

would like to use the power drill. My sister did, and had a great time.

My insecurity with machines and tools has several layers. I am not good at them, I suspect, because I was never encouraged to use them, so I never gained comfort or ability through practice. Now, I am afraid to practice because I am not good, and I do not want other people to notice and use their observations of my fumbling to further whatever ingrained ideas they have of women being bad with power tools. It gets rather angsty.

I do not want to speak for all female-bodied farmers, but I think many of us feel like we have something to prove. I have to remind myself sometimes that just because I can’t shovel compost as fast or carry a wheelbarrow quite as full of watermelons, doesn’t mean that I am not strong or not a good farmer. We work together. And anyway, we all can handle wheelbarrows that are pretty darn full.

We never intentionally created a female-dominated farm here at [Henry Got Crops](#). Most of our applicants for internships and apprentices just happened to be female, and most of those qualified ended up being women. I am glad, though, to be able to offer a positive view of women as strong, hard, workers to the students here at Saul; I want the female students to know that they can be farmers if they want, or anything else they aspire toward.

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One of our Saul summer interns brought her boyfriend out to work with her one morning. “How did he like it?” I asked her the next day. “I brought him out so he would see how hard I work,” she replied. “He said it was fun, but really hard. He said he couldn’t do this every day.”

I have to admit, I was pretty proud.

*Nicole Sugerman farms at the “Henry Got Crops!” CSA, a joint project of the [Weavers Way Co-op Farm](#) and Philadelphia’s [W. B. Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences](#) and one of the first high school-based CSAs in the country. This article originally appeared in the Weavers Way Shuttle, and is reprinted with permission.*

## Growing Urban Agriculture in the Southeast

*Editor's Note: Every week, more women join WFAN's online community by signing up to receive this newsletter and our monthly e-bulletins, and by joining our list-serv.*

*When I can, I like to ask the new arrivals what they do in the field of sustainable agriculture. Every single one of them has a fascinating story to tell.*

*Here's one....*

Dina Clingman-Bell has been active in supporting sustainable agriculture and natural products in Florida for nearly a decade. She has been vice-president of InterNatural Marketing, and was instrumental in starting their organic certification support program for area growers.

In October of 2009, Dina joined a subcommittee of the City of West Palm Beach Urban Green Taskforce, where she helped create a city ordinance to allow for urban agriculture. In January of 2010, Dina was inspired to create her own company under the name of AGvocacy, LLC, to support urban agriculture. One project is the development of [Urban Growers Community Farm](#), serving the City of West Palm Beach.



*Dina at work in south Florida.*

Below are Dina's responses to questions about her work:

**WFAN:** Can you explain how you became interested in urban agriculture?

**Dina:** I had learned early on about the success of community/allotment gardening and Victory Gardens. Through my work with organic agriculture, I was always looking for growers who showed innovation in the realm of healthy food production. A few years back, I started noticing a "growing" trend towards urban farming, I learned of [Jac Smit](#) and other pioneers in the field. Soon after, I read about the brilliant work of Will Allen and his organization [Growing Power](#) in Milwaukee, WI. This is how my "seeds" were planted.

**WFAN:** What are some of the projects you are working on now?

**Dina:** I am currently with Urban Growers Community Farm. We are attempting to bring an urban farm to the City of West Palm Beach, FL. Through my company, AGvocacy, LLC, I also offer pro-active support to further the growth of the world of agriculture focusing on small farms and urban agriculture. I am a member of the stakeholders, fundraising, and organic/sustainable committees of the Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference.

**WFAN:** What are some of your most satisfying successes in your work?

**Dina:** Seeing progress made in increments. Less than a year ago, the opportunity to be a farmer in our city was merely a dream. This dream is soon to become a reality.

**WFAN:** What are some of the

most frustrating challenges?

**Dina:** Bureaucracy and not enough time in the day.

**WFAN:** If you were given the opportunity to make US agriculture and food systems look any way you wanted, how would you change them?

**Dina:** Through the networking of small farms and urban farms, it is my hope to be an integral part of bringing an efficient regional and local foods distribution system to the southeastern U.S. This would be a reverse trend, as I would like for food distribution to start locally and then spread regionally. This idea could be implemented nationally. As an overall plan for farming, I would like to have an agricultural roundtable or summit wherein all areas of agriculture are represented; here then could be devised, a common goal for an ideal "sustainable agriculture" growing model where we have taken the best practices of all methods of farming and formed a more unified agricultural community.

**WFAN:** How do you balance work and personal/family time?

**Dina:** As I work out of the home, I like to work late at night (no phones to deal with, no one comes to the door, no other appointments). Balancing family time is not as hard for me when I work at the house. I am always "on call." Since we are a family of five (three children, two parents), I don't really remember what personal time is, but I intend to live a long life so I am sure to get some at some point. The work that I do is very personal to me, so I am content.

**WFAN:** What/who do you find most helpful in your work?

**Dina:** My dear family for their understanding. My business partner for his vision and unending moral support. My computer and the internet, for without these I would be out of work!

## MAKING CONNECTIONS:

**The League of Women Farmers in Southern Oregon***by Melissa Matthewson*

The League of Women Farmers in southern Oregon began in the fall of 2007 when Maud Powell and I, Oregon State University Extension Small Farms agents, invited 30 women farmers from



*Melissa Matthewson and Maud Powell, co-founders of the League of Women Farmers of Southern Oregon.*

the Rogue Valley to an introductory meeting. Since that first meeting in 2007, the group has evolved into a membership-based group of commercial women producers who are running businesses or in the process of setting up their farm businesses.

The mission of the group is to provide women farmers with opportunities for business networking, expanding knowledge, and socializing in a supportive, open environment. Activities of the group range from potluck discussions on various topics including marketing and bookkeeping to on-farm field days focused on specific topics to skills training like welding and carpentry.

Upcoming activities include a possible chicken processing day at one of the farms, a discussion on balancing farm and family, as well as a tour of an organic flower farm. Many of the members run highly diversified farms with

various enterprises, and most of the women farmers direct-market their products.

In 2009, the Organic Farming Research Foundation funded four on-farm field days for the group targeted at educating women farmers about certified organic production. Another grant has been submitted to organize a rural women's retreat for Western and Eastern Oregon. The League of Women Farmers is growing as the group develops outreach materials and tools (brochure, website and Facebook page). Currently, while members pay a nominal fee to join the group, OSU Extension continues to devote staff time to organize and facilitate the group.

Many of the women farmers are finding great value in getting together fairly often to share their stories, successes and challenges of farming. It is also a wonderful social outlet for women, as many of them work on the farm and rarely see each other throughout the season. New ideas are being generated at each meeting, as well as new ventures and relationships. There has been talk of cooperative market-

ing endeavors, trading of agricultural products, as well as research projects and educational workshops.

The group has built confidence and a sense of identity in the women farmers, empowering them to feel that they are important to the small farm movement as innovative producers leaving behind the traditional identification as the "farmer's wife." It has also established a solid camaraderie and community among women farmers while validating the important work they do on the farm. Increasingly, the group is helping to develop and increase business sales as the exposure to niche and alternative marketing and enterprise opportunities grows.

Visit the League's website at <http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/> or check out their Facebook page for announcements and information.

*Melissa Matthewson is an OSU Extension Small Farms agent in southwestern Oregon. She also runs [Barking Moon Farm](#), a diversified, organic vegetable farm, with her husband and son in the Applegate Valley.*



*Suzanne Willow of [Willow Witt Ranch](#) talks about the Southern Oregon Poultry Cooperative shared equipment to women farmers at a field day in 2009.*

## Farming and Food Systems Funding Opportunities

If you are a farmer or someone who works with farmers to create healthy local and regional food systems, you will find these new resources helpful in your efforts.

Visit [www.farmaid.org/es](http://www.farmaid.org/es) to download the excellent report [Rebuilding America's Economy with Family Farm Centered Food Systems](#). At the bottom of that page, you will find a link to Farm Aid's [guide to funding opportunities](#) for rural development in farming and food systems.

Also, check out the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's new [Guide to USDA Funding for Local and Regional Food Systems](#), which identifies and explains key programs that can help community based organizations and others that are working to build infrastructure, provide training to farmers, research new marketing opportunities, and otherwise working to strengthen regional food systems.

## Finding Land to Farm in the Midwest

The Land Connection has launched a new website, [www.midwestfarmconnection.org](http://www.midwestfarmconnection.org). The purpose of this website is to connect retiring farmers in the Midwest with young or aspiring farmers who are looking for land to farm using sustainable techniques.

Related ATTRA Publication: [Finding Land to Farm](#).



*WFAN board member Jana Linderman (right) helps Girl Scouts plant pea and bean seeds to take home at WFAN's display at the "Girls Go Global" conference last April in Coralville, IA. The conference was hosted by the Girl Scouts of Eastern Iowa and Western Illinois. More than 1,000 girls in grades K-12 participated in the day-long environmental awareness event.*

## Pesticide Exposure Linked to ADHD

(Reuters) – Children exposed to pesticides known as organophosphates could have a higher risk of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), according to a U.S. study that urges parents to always wash produce thoroughly. *(Editor's note: Better yet, buy produce raised without chemical pesticides.)*

Researchers tracked the pesticides' breakdown products in children's urine and found those with high levels were almost twice as likely to develop ADHD as those with undetectable levels.

The findings are based on data from the general U.S. population, meaning that exposure to the pesticides could be harmful even at levels commonly found in children's environment.

"There is growing concern that these pesticides may be related to ADHD," said researcher Marc Weisskopf of the

Harvard School of Public Health, who worked on the study.

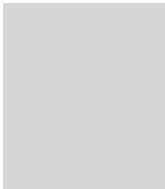
"What this paper specifically highlights is that this may be true even at low concentrations."

Organophosphates were originally developed for chemical warfare, and they are known to be toxic to the nervous system.

There are about 40 organophosphate pesticides such as malathion registered in the United States, the researchers [wrote in the journal \*Pediatrics\*](#).

Weisskopf said the compounds have been linked to behavioral symptoms common to ADHD – for instance, impulsivity and attention problems – but exactly how is not fully understood.

Although the researchers had no way to determine the source of the breakdown products they found, Weisskopf said the most likely culprits were pesticides and insecticides used on produce and indoors.



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This photo and grapes on masthead © 2009 by Mary Swalla Holmes.

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