



Natural Resources Conservation Service

Reaching Out To

WOMEN FARMERS

While the overall number of farms in the United States has been in steady decline, the percentage owned and operated by women is increasing. These women-owned farms do not often fall into the “traditional farmer” category. In Indiana, nearly two-thirds of women-owned farms are less than 50 acres, one third of female principal operators have been farming less than 10 years, and 68% of the annual reported sales for women owned farms is less than \$5,000¹.

Women farmers share many of the same values and motivations of their male counterparts, but their outward expression, or the manner in which they prefer to receive communication and information can differ dramatically. The Women, Land, and Legacy² group found that women farmers, whether producers or landowners, typically prefer:

- Regular, single, special topic meetings
- Small groups (6-8 people)
- Meetings for women, hosted by women (see information about Women’s Learning Circles below)
- Active, informal learning
- Emphasis on storytelling
- Meeting in peaceful, neutral spaces, with childcare available, if possible
- Mentoring programs
- Alternative meeting times - evening meetings after work and domestic chores are done
- Alternative media, including newsletters, social websites groups specifically for women

Not only does the manner in which women wish to receive their information differ from more traditional methods, but the information they are searching tends to focus on different topics as well. Because many women farmers own small, organic, or specialty crop type farms, their needs differ from large scale grain or livestock operations.

Here is a list of practices that are commonly helpful to women farmers in the local and organic food industries:

- High Tunnels and Micro-Irrigation Systems
- Fencing, Pipeline, Watering Facilities and Pasture Management
- Cover Crops and Crop Rotation
- Windbreaks
- Nutrient Management
- Pollinator Habitat
- Manure Management (often multi-species)

Many women farmers are familiar with farming, having grown up on a farm or been married to a farmer, however a growing number of new women farmers do not have that background. Young women may enter this sector because they believe strongly in safe food or local economy. Some women started out simply managing a large garden so their family would have fresh vegetables and realized that with a bit more planning they could turn this into an income-producing operation. When a woman with this type of background walks into the NRCS office it can be very overwhelming to digest the agency’s program rules, timelines, requirements, and to see all the paperwork involved.

¹ Footnote: Data from www.nass.usda.gov “2007 Census of Agriculture”

² Bregendahl, Corry, et. Al. 2007. *Informing Outreach Strategies to Better Serve Iowa’s Agricultural Women. Women, Land, and Legacy. Ames, Iowa.*

Below are some helpful hints in working with women who manage farms. Of course every individual is different, and the following points are generalizations based on WLL survey data and panel discussions.

- As with any beginning farmer, start by asking how or why she got into farming. This will help you understand how much agricultural experience she has.
- Women may become frustrated if they feel they are being given special treatment because of their gender. However, most women want to know they will have an equal opportunity to participate in programs.
- Speak to her level of understanding. Just because she is new to agriculture does not mean she is unfamiliar with farming practices, such as soil health, conservation tillage, or rotational grazing. Take the opportunity to learn from her experiences.
- If there are women producers in your county who have developed a conservation plan or participated in NRCS programs, ask for their permission to share their success story with others.
- Be prepared with handouts or fact sheets explaining the steps of how to work with NRCS. Include items such as obtaining a DUNS number, application process, available practices, registering with the FSA, and opportunities for beginning farmers.
- If the woman is a landowner with tenants, offer to meet with both her and the tenants to discuss conservation options and practices she is interested in applying on her land. It is important both the landowner and the tenant are at the meeting together for a fair and open discussion.
- Help her find a Women's Learning Circle in the area if possible. Women's Learning Circles are locally driven groups hosted by women for women with support from conservation agencies and organizations such as SWCDs, Extension, NRCS, FSA, and others. They provide female farmers and landowners the opportunity to learn from each other, discuss conservation and the availability of technical and financial support, and participate in a field tour.
- Additional resources are available from multiple agencies. Indiana has two reference guides regarding Indiana Specialty Agriculture, Organics, and Small Farms available on the [Indiana NRCS News Room webpage](#).

PROVIDING INFORMATION

Reaching out to women farmers can be challenging. Remember, many women are non-traditional farmers and many still have primary child care responsibilities. They are not likely to walk in our doors, attend a field day that targets large-scale production or regularly visit the FSA, implement dealer, or grain elevator.

You can increase your likelihood of success by seeking women audiences in a variety of locations.

- Make connections through the County Extension office, especially Master Gardeners, Home Economics Groups, and 4-H programs.
- Contact the local branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and ask if they can help you make contact with women involved in agriculture.
- Find out who coordinates the local farmers' market. Ask to speak at a meeting.
- Obtain permission to post flyers at home sporting events at local schools.
- Check to see if any restaurants advertise they serve locally-grown products. See if they would be willing to connect you with their supplier(s).
- Work with the local library to advertise an outreach meeting. Leave handouts at the check-out desk or on the bulletin board that focus on local food production and organic farming.

CONTACT INFORMATION

www.in.nrcs.usda.gov

If you encounter barriers to reaching women farmers (through conversations with them or your own observations) or would like more information, please contact Jill Reinhart, Assistant State Conservationist for Special Projects and Outreach Coordinator (jill.reinhart@in.usda.gov), or Brianne Lowe, Indiana's Federal Women's Program Manager (brianne.lowe@in.usda.gov). Their role is to assist field offices in identifying barriers and providing equal access to NRCS programs.