



How to Launch a Women Farmer Network in Your Community



SOIL SISTERS TOOLKIT:

*How to Launch a
Women Farmer Network
in Your Community*

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a project of Renewing the Countryside



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INTRODUCTION

Are you a woman farmer interested in connecting with other women in your area who share your commitment to sustainability, soil health and local food?

Maybe you love living rural on your farmstead but have realized it can be isolating and are looking to cultivate connections with kindred, conservation spirits.

Are there gaps in your knowledge and resource base—from borrowing equipment to seeking advice on developing a local market for your products?

Or maybe you are currently an enthusiastic gardener and homesteader with a dream of launching a viable farm business and are seeking mentors, support and inspiration.

For all these reasons and more, welcome to the power of women gathering!

A deep-rooted source of inspiration for women spanning generations, learning circles offer safe spaces to ask questions, share information, provide support for personal and professional growth. They are informal yet powerful.

This toolkit focuses on building connections between women farmers, particularly in rural areas, who share a commitment to sustainable agriculture, conservation and land stewardship. It also seeks to support those interested in developing on-going, lasting connections in their home region.

Toolkit Goals:

- Provide practical resources and ideas to start gathering women in your region with a goal of building an on-going, lasting network.
- Offer tangible guidance on how to facilitate such gatherings, based on potlucks and the learning circle model where research has shown women learn best.
- Highlight insights and advice from women farmers seasoned in such work through first-person stories.

This Toolkit draws insights from the founding Soil Sisters network in Southern Wisconsin—women farmers involved from the inaugural first meeting, 15+ years



ago. It also includes perspectives from women new to the area as well as guidance from the seven new pilot networks launched during this SARE project. While some of the information presented relates to opportunities to start a Soil Sisters group, the ideas are intended to be universal and helpful in any setting.

Fostering these local and regional connections among women, strengthens the organic and sustainable agriculture movement by addressing the barriers women encounter, including isolation and a gap in female-targeted farming and agricultural resources.

By empowering women farmer networks, this Toolkit also addresses the ongoing need to increase representation of women in leadership roles related to agriculture policy and local community issues, particularly related to conservation and land stewardship.

Note: We use the terms “women” and “female” throughout this resource from the perspective of welcome and inclusivity for anyone women-identifying on the gender spectrum. Welcome!

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The individuals highlighted in our case studies: Dela Ends **Scotch Hill Farm & Innisfree Farmstay**, Betty Anderson **The Old Smith Place**, Ashley Wegmeuller **Wegmueller Dairy**, Heather Lynch **Green Haven Gardens**, Katy Dickson **Christensen Farm**, Bethany Storm **Little Red Homestead & Driftless Tannery**, April Prusia **Dorothy's Range & Meatsmith Co-op**, Erica Roth **Ewertopia Farm**, Kriss Marion **Circle M Farm**, Alicia Gasaway **Gasaway Gardens**, Pat Skogen, LindaDee Derrickson **Bluffwood Landing**

The 250+ people participating in and engaged with Soil Sisters and the Green County Area Women in Sustainable Agriculture Network who meet regularly for potlucks, events and daily listserv connections

The new pilot Soil Sisters Networks:

In Minnesota: Rachel Sannerud **Pluck Flower Farm**, Noreen Thomas **Doubting Thomas Farm**, Theresa Bentz **Get Bentz Farm**

In Wisconsin: Clare Hintz **Elsewhere Farm**, Erin Link **EB Ranch LLC**, Betsy Manteufel **Flourishing Farmstead**, Molly Waisman **Little Heathens Farm**

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COVID-19 CONTEXT

This NC-SARE project officially started in April 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began. COVID-19 reminded us of the importance of strong community ties, particularly in our sustainable farming and rural communities. This current Toolkit reflects the changes and new territory we navigated together, like continual pivots and evolutions. For example, the idea of virtual gatherings did not appear in the original project proposal.

Our deep appreciation to everyone at NC-SARE for their support, along with the new pilot network leaders for being so very flexible to navigate this new space. Look for future evolutions and additions as we learn and navigate together.

CHAPTER 1

Soil Sisters Wisconsin History & Network Roots



Importance of Women's Networks

The idea of women gathering is hardly new. For generations, women in agricultural communities have connected in various ways to learn from and support each other. Women now make up one of the fastest growing groups of new farmers, according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Additionally, many female farmers choose to focus on and have a passion for soil health and local food, yet do so amidst the still male-dominated culture in agriculture. Supporting the development of women's networks, helps grow and strengthen our sustainable and organic agriculture movement.

"Build it and they will come" not only works for a baseball field of dreams in Iowa, it adds up to good advice when forming women's networks. Start initiating, keep inviting and stay in it for the long term and you'll be amazed with the results. This Toolkit aims to provide stories, resources and inspiration to help you bring women to the table.

History of Soil Sisters in Wisconsin

The original roots of Soil Sisters, now a project of Renewing the Countryside (a Minnesota-based nonprofit), go back to a November 2008 evening in Madison, Wisconsin.

"I taught an introductory beginning farming workshop for women," says Lisa Kivirist, co-founder of Soil Sisters. "About 30 women gathered that night, none of whom I knew. After a brief welcome, I kicked things off as I always start my workshops, with everyone introducing herself: name, where she's from, and what farm dream brought her there.

"First, FL Morris stood up and introduced herself as running Grassroots Farm near Monroe. Later, Lori Stern gave a shout out of how she and her partner had just moved to the area with visions of launching a farm stay. The introductions wrapped up with Katie Lipes, a chicken-raising momma with a baby in a sling. I thought, 'Who are these cool women, and why haven't I met them before?'"

The question lingered in Lisa's mind as she drove home. Somewhere amid the cornfields, she decided to throw a potluck to get to know the women better. She emailed an invite for the first Sunday night in December and left it at that.

"Lots of women came. As the goat cheese and cracker tray got passed around, a welcoming warmth filled the room. Early on in the evening, folks started asking, 'When are we doing this again?'"

That marked the beginning of the group now known as Soil Sisters/Green County Area Women in Sustainable Ag Network. The Network boasts over 250 area women who gather at about six on-farm potlucks throughout the year.

"What continually amazes me," says Lisa, "is the growing list of tangible outcomes from these informal, but regular, gatherings over supper. A beginning farmer connected with a woman who had extra land to lease, and they ended up forming a partnership. Another group of women started a chicken-feed-buying co-op to enhance their buying power. We've also shared countless baby goats, heritage hogs, and local insurance agent recommendations."

These outcomes go beyond the sharing economy. They spark new businesses, with dollars flowing into the local community and enhancing the economy. For example, Anna Landmark and Anna Thomas Bates met at a Soil Sisters potluck and eventually formed a partnership. Landmark was already on her way to earning her cheesemaking license and launching her own operation when she met Bates. But she needed a partner to help with the business, especially the marketing. Bates, a savvy food writer, gladly filled that role. The duo launched what is now an award-winning cheesemaking venture: Landmark Creamery.

"We're both moms with kids in the same school district, but we never met until these women-in-agriculture potlucks," reminisces Anna Landmark. "Even if we had met in a school setting, I'm not sure we would have had the opportunity to connect in a way that we did over cheese and wine. The potluck provides a welcoming, supportive setting through which women like myself and Anna feel comfortable sharing our big-picture visions and dreams."

As the group continued to meet regularly, it grew in numbers and personal connections but remained largely unknown to the surrounding community. This inspired them to go public with an educational mission.

"We applied for and received a NC-SARE Youth Educator Grant in 2013," says Lisa. "The grant piloted a one-day public farm tour with a focus on championing our Network stories to encourage young women to consider careers in farming. We called the event 'Soil Sisters.'"

The name eventually became the moniker of the group as well as an annual, public festival the first weekend in August: Soil Sisters: A Celebration of Wisconsin Farms and Rural Life. The weekend involves a day-long educational session for beginning women farmers (Soil Sisters Share) along with on-farm workshops, culinary events and tours. What started as an informal potluck is now an award-winning women-farmer led celebration—the largest of its kind in the country—which has boosted the local economy by hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past ten years.

When Soil Sisters first started the event, they partnered with the Wisconsin Farmers Union for fiscal and administration support. This relationship worked well to get the Network and event up and running, but Soil Sisters eventually grew to the point that they needed a permanent home as part of a 501(c)3 nonprofit, which Wisconsin Farmers Union is not. In the fall 2019, the group officially became a project of Renewing the Countryside, a Minnesota 501(c)3 organization.

"This collaboration enables us to grow and take on new projects like this Toolkit," says Lisa. "We are also able to do new network development along with strategically partnering on other opportunities to amplify women farmer voices and sustainable and organic farming educational resources."

Cultivating Future Connections

This Toolkit presents the history of Wisconsin Soil Sisters to provide inspiration and an example of how you might bring together women farmers in your region to build a supportive, education-driven and lasting community. The topics and ideas curated throughout are universal and evergreen and can be used however you prefer to form your own networks. It doesn't have to be a formal or cookie-cutter process; your community make-up and needs, as well as your perspectives and goals as a founding leader, are unique.

If, however, you are interested in launching a network under Soil Sisters—using the name, logo and other resources—please contact Lisa Kivist at lisa@rtcinfo.org for more information and next steps.

Case Study:



Dela Ends, Brodhead, WI Scotch Hill Farm & Innisfree Farmstay

“Sometimes you just need to start something,” shares Dela Ends, co-owner of Scotch Hill Farm & Innisfree Farmstay, a regenerative, sustainable family farm in Brodhead, Wisc. “Plant those first seeds and give it a good growing environment along with time, and you might surprise yourself with what comes up. If you would have told me at that first potluck over fifteen years ago that we would grow into Soil Sisters, I think we all would have laughed.”

An organic farming pioneer, Dela and her husband, Tony Ends, started Scotch Hill Farm nearly 30 years ago as one of the first organic CSA (community supported agriculture) in the state. “I remember feeling very isolated, particularly when we started the farm. We were one of the very few organic farmers around, using completely different growing practices than our conventional neighbor farmers.”

That need for connection motivated Dela to attend that first potluck. As time went on and the group of women grew, her feelings of isolation transformed into empowerment, especially to get involved locally. Dela ran for and served as township clerk; she also helped found the Community Kitchen Co-Op, a cooperative-run commercial kitchen supporting area farmers.

“The kitchen idea had been percolating for years amongst Soil Sisters and finally the right location and opportunity all came together,” says Dela. “Because we had these strong existing relationships, we were able to step up together.”

Ideas aren’t the only things shared through Soil Sisters.

“I can’t remember how many goat babies ended up with other area Soil Sisters,” laughs Dela about the goat exchanges that went far beyond just a transaction.

A goat from Dela came with education, support and mentorship. “Local veterinarians around here often just focus on cows and don’t know anything about goats or other smaller livestock like sheep, so that knowledge exchange between us women farmers has always been a vital link, from fencing set-up to making cheese and soap. It’s very rewarding for me to inspire others to take on goats and fall in love with these animals as I have.”

For Dela, one of the most important aspects in building strong networks is being a good listener. “Ideas need safe space and time to process, and that often starts at our potlucks then extends to folks following up and connecting on their own over coffee. Some of our more seasoned and experienced farmers even invite younger ones over to see something in action,” she adds.

Soil Sisters also helps its members work through personal issues—from advice on aging to relationships. Though it may not seem agriculture-specific, at first, these topics often involve farm evolution and transition, issues vital to the success of any farm business.

“We’ve had several women in our network go through divorces and relationship break-ups over the years,” says Dela. “We were able to offer support, both in terms of mental health as well as some of us speaking from personal experience on how to handle and ideally keep your piece of the farm business running.”

Reflecting on those early days of Soil Sisters, Dela advises not to over think it when starting a new network. “For us, it simply felt good and rewarding to gather so we kept doing it. Remember you don’t need a detailed and final master plan. Simply creating time and space for ideas to spark and grow will go a long way.”



Case Study:



Pat Skogen, Monroe WI formerly Reeson Family Farm

“It’s all about partnerships and building connections for the long haul,” offers Pat Skogen when asked for her advice in women farmer network building. A long-time organic dairy farmer, Pat has personally experienced the importance of these connections at different phases of her sustainable agriculture journey.

Before moving to the Green County area and connecting with Soil Sisters, Pat helped organize an informal network of women farmers in the Sauk County area. “We were all women vending at various area farmers markets and shared similar experiences and learned a lot from sharing with each other. We’d meet informally in various ways, sometimes as an organized potluck or even just gathering at a local café after market.”

The relationships that formed sparked a support network that produced various “collaborative fruit” that benefitted all. “Because we knew about each other’s lives and what loads someone might be carrying, we could

offer support. For example, one woman was struggling with balancing the farm business with caring for elderly parents. When she couldn’t make a market because of eldercare needs, we could step in and absorb and run her booth with our own and she didn’t lose that income.”

When the dairy farm closed along with a divorce, Pat moved to Monroe to be closer to family and found the Soil Sisters network a way to engage and find support in different ways. Even though she wasn’t farming anymore, Pat provided a wealth of resources and knowledge to other women in sustainable agriculture.

“Creating safe spaces for women to share their farm struggles goes a long way in finding positive solutions,” shares Pat. “I found that by offering my personal story of our farm closing opened doors for others to open up and put their challenges issues on the table and together we could come up with new possibilities. Most importantly, it helps to know you as a farmer are not alone.” For those new to an area and seeking to connect, Pat recommends going to places and events where women farmers are already gatherings, anything from 4-H to Farmers Union meetings or even the local coffee shop.

A key aspect of crafting welcoming spaces from Pat’s experience is embracing the unpredictability of farmers’ lives and the fact that we’re all in this together. “If you’re hosting an event and your kitchen is a mess, don’t worry about it. We’re all farmers and we know things happen. The important part is to make the time to say come over and spend some time around my kitchen table. That’s where the community magic lies.”



CHAPTER 2

Why Learning Circles & Potlucks?

Key Elements of Women's Learning Styles

Ask an organic farmer for the best source of information on farming, and you probably won't get a book or website but the name of another farmer. From serendipitous conversations at a farming conference to lessons learned at a field day, the strength of movements like Soil Sisters deepens and widens through our support of each other.

Fostering connections ranks especially high for female-identifying farmers. A 2010 University of Wisconsin Extension research study revealed that women farmers learn best from each other. Women farmers, in both traditional dairy and small-scale diversified crops, were asked where they go for agricultural information. Fellow farmers was the leading response while grassroots, nonprofit organizations like Renewing the Countryside was a strong second choice. More traditional sources of information, such as the Farm Service Agency (FSA) or a county's Extension agricultural agent (most of whom are male), fall low on the trusted information list.

"Hands down, women turn to other farmers as their primary source of trusted information," explains Dr. Astrid Newenhouse, senior scientist at University of Wisconsin-Madison and a leading researcher in 2010 study. "The results of our study are clear that female farmers learn best from each other, and they champion opportunities for women to connect and share resources and experiences." Studies in other states and regions have yielded similar results.

The network concept has been successfully used by women farmers in the past, especially before the internet and social media. For example, the Wisconsin Women in Sustainable Agriculture Network (WWSFN) launched in 1994 and ran for nearly a decade, organizing on-farm workshops, training events and connecting women with each other via email communications and print newsletters.

"Before today's wealth of online resources and connection opportunities, a network like this was the only option where women farmers could both meet and learn from each other in our state," recalls Jody Padgam,

a poultry and sheep farmer in northern Wisconsin who credits the group with empowering her to purchase a 60-acre farm in 2001. Jody now also serves as the Finance Manager for Renewing the Countryside. "A lot of us were just starting out or new to farms and had no place to go to learn. Meeting through WWSFN, we shared what we were learning with each other. The safe, women-focused environment was valuable and strengthening."

As more women lead farm operations, particularly in sustainable and organic agriculture, the need for resources and connections continues. A majority of women farmers running sustainable agriculture operations often do not "fit in the box" of the larger scale, conventional programs and educational resources offered, making these peer-to-peer, learning circle models even more critical to lasting agribusiness success.





Learning Circle Format & History

“A learning circle, by definition, is when women gather in a collaborative learning environment to share information, resources and support,” explains Dr. Jean Eells, owner of E Resources Group and the leading researcher behind learning circles for women in agricultural spaces. “Our research has shown learning circles work very well with women committed to conservation, as it provides a safe space to be vulnerable and open, which thereby increases confidence to take action.”

The learning circle concept is not new. Women have been gathering in such spaces for generations—be it around a fire to cook meals or a loom to weave a rug. What is new, however, is that this approach to women’s education is particularly effective in supporting women in agriculture.

“Even in today’s world, the learning circle concept is quite different and innovative in traditional educational space where ‘education’ is considered something communicated via a traditional classroom lecture, still most often led by a male. Learning circles celebrate and

champion how women learn most effectively: from each other,” adds Eells.

The ideas you’ll find in this resource are based on this learning circle model, using potlucks through which women come together to share food as well as knowledge and ideas. Some date the word “potluck” to 16th century England, where it was originally described as a meal “taking the luck of the day’s pot,” offering guests whatever food happened to be available. An even older tradition was the “potlatch” observed by indigenous people in North America, it encompassed various community feasts and ceremonies.

If the learning circle concept sounds similar to a potluck, you’re right! Adding a shared food element to the learning circle amplifies the gathering. With rural living, it takes additional time for attendees to drive to the gathering, often making a meal necessary. Plus, the potluck provides a friendly and accessible means for women, who may start as strangers, to leave as colleagues. More on potluck organizing and logistics in the next sections.

Case Study:



Betty Anderson, Brodhead, WI **The Old Smith Place**

“Honestly, I wasn’t looking for a group of women to connect with,” explains Betty Anderson, reflecting on her introduction to Soil Sisters. “I’ve personally found women’s groups to be on the competitive side. They weren’t a place I could truly relax, be myself and ask questions.”

That changed with Soil Sisters. Betty started by attending August weekend workshops on fermentation and fiber and an on-farm food business session offered, in part, by Renewing the Countryside and North Central SARE. She appreciated the collaborative education process, networking opportunities and the sincere welcome of the women farmers who openly shared their knowledge and experiences.

“At the time, I was a newlywed and had moved to my husband’s family homestead. I was in the middle of trying to figure out what to do with this place and my new life in it. I had a lot of ideas and started to find that connecting with other area women farmers gave me instant support and mentorship along with the opportunity to see things in action and ask questions.”

Those local connections opened up direct next steps for Betty to pilot different ideas she had for The Old Smith Place. She began strategically, on a small scale, to see what worked.

“Another Soil Sister was starting a farmer’s market in Blanchardville that needed vendors and invited me to join,” she recalls. “It proved to be the ideal opportunity to get my feet wet in selling and test some product ideas I had for canned items. Up until this point, I never thought about being a vendor at a market because I didn’t see myself as a farmer, but such personal support from another woman farmer I respect was very motivating.” Betty discovered her niche by creating unique flavors,

like combining jalapenos or ginger with her farm produce, products she still makes today.

The small town, low-pressure experience inspired Betty to say “yes” when a new opportunity came along: vending at the Veteran’s Administration in Madison, a venue aligned with Betty’s values as a veteran. “Having local women farmer support for that first market gave me the confidence to take on this larger opportunity.”

Betty also embraced the opportunity to take on a larger leadership role in her community by running for and winning election as her township’s treasurer. She now navigates important issues like local elections and budgets.

“I personally experienced how important it is for women to encourage each other to take a risk and challenge ourselves to take on leadership positions and have our voices heard. Direct support from other women farmers helped facilitate this process. I knew I would not be alone in new situations like local budget meetings. It boosted my confidence and helped me succeed.”



Case Study:



Bethany Storm, Blanchardville, WI Little Red Homestead & Driftless Tannery, Argyle, WI

Bethany Storm's experience with Soil Sisters exemplifies the power of women farmer networks to recruit new, rural residents who are active, positive contributors to the local sustainable agriculture community.

In 2013, Bethany, her husband and two young daughters lived in the Chicago suburbs. While searching for property online, she discovered the Soil Sisters.

"I found out they were hosting a series of on-farm events in August so a girlfriend and I drove up for the weekend event," she recalls. "The women I met that weekend got me hooked up to the listserve. Those initial connections and support I immediately received from women farmers was invaluable. They were strangers at the time but are now dear friends as well as business partners," shares Bethany.

Within the following year, Bethany and her family had purchased land and started building Little Red Homestead, a diversified, small farm where they live today.

"[Soil Sister's] listserv was a great place to start. It helped me connect with this women farmer network," explains Bethany. "I was so new to all of this at the time, and I had a lot to learn. The Soil Sisters were always quick to answer my questions or give me some advice. They are such an experienced and savvy group. They helped me with everything from finding local contractors to where to buy the best fruit trees.

These connections, open support and sharing of knowledge convinced Bethany she was on the right path and gave her the confidence to keep moving forward.

"Because I already had connected with folks via the listserv during our transition, I started attending in-person potlucks right away [once she moved]. I immediately felt connected. I'm not one to jump into things, particularly new communities of people, but the listserv really helped build those relationships more slowly and authentically for me."

Not long after Bethany settled into her property, she diversified into small-scale livestock. She quickly realized that her sustainability values of respecting the whole animal necessitated new processing, particularly the tanning of the hides. So, she reached out to the Soil Sisters community and found others experiencing the same issues. "We all were very disappointed in the lack of options, much less the fact that the tanning services we did find used an array of chemicals and unsustainable processes," says Bethany. "I felt there had to be a better way."

A few years later, in 2020, Bethany and two other local women launched Driftless Tannery. "What really helped us [get started] is the support of other women in our network," she says. "To have others in our farming community excited about what we're doing and even offering hides for us to practice on, both improved our skill set and made us realize we are not alone in any of this."

Not wanting to go into debt at the onset, Bethany and her co-founders held a plant sale to fundraise the start-up costs. "We were so moved and inspired by our network coming out to donate plants to sell, along with purchasing items. The emotional support is priceless."

Driftless Tannery continues to grow, has opened its own processing facility and now has a staff of five. "It's important for us as an up-and-running, women-led business to share our story and experiences—from informal conversations at potlucks to leading Soil Sisters workshops. Transparency and vulnerability are two qualities women bring and shine in. I find it so rewarding that I can now help provide support to other women in similar situations that I was in just ten years ago."

CHAPTER 3

Getting Started: First steps

Setting a Foundation

Feeling inspired to start a local, women farmer network in your region? Here's two key words of advice: start small. Building networks takes time and commitment. This often means letting go of rigid expectations. Take a lesson from Mother Nature, and let your group evolve and grow organically, based on the needs in your area. Those needs can vary widely, depending on the age, business variables, farming vision and time availability of who shows up.

Putting some thought into setting foundational basics for your network can support a healthy launch and drive long-term success. Here are three key subjects to think about:

Geography

What is the overall region from which you hope to draw? An hour's radius from the meeting place works well as a starting point. Sixty minutes is usually the maximum folks are willing to drive for a potluck or gathering. A key variable to ongoing network success and active community building is that folks need to interact regularly and connect beyond a scheduled potluck. While you can definitely communicate inclusivity and encourage all women to come—no matter where they live—keeping things local goes a long way in consistent attendance.

Group Make-up

While the core of our discussion in this Toolkit focuses on connecting women farmers, remember that the community needed to support business success goes behind the farmer themselves and includes eaters, customers and other supporters. It may help to think beyond women farmers to related business, such as feed stores and restaurants, and homesteaders and gardeners (who may become farmers one day, especially if they connect with inspiring role models).

Community Needs

Exactly what your community of women need—i.e. what

is motivating them to connect—may be a bit fuzzy at first. Remember to keep things simple and don't get too caught up in the need to have it all figured out. Give space and time for serendipity to emerge. Quite often, after a group meets for the first time, the overall sentiment is that they just want to gather again. Many attendees are seeking that feeling of connection, so don't feel the need to get too structured from the start. Simply focus on crafting regular, consistent, welcoming spaces that the women are motivated to return to.

Three Steps to a Successful Kickoff

Three things to keep in mind when establishing a local network:

1. *Commit to lead for one year*

As the person reading this Toolkit, you've shown interest and enthusiasm in local organizing, but before you jump, ask yourself if you can take this on as your personal project for at least one year? While these networks do not need to be formal organizations with elected officers, bank accounts, and long-term commitments, they still need consistent leadership to get off the ground. And that requires more than just organizing a first gathering.

The person organizing the group will need to be that "go to" person to recruit other potluck hosts, set a schedule, send out reminders, and answer questions. It's not only rewarding personally, but you will contribute to the longevity of the network. Having a consistent organizer in the beginning is key. While of course you can determine the exact time commitment and shape of your leadership role, the point here is consistency. Serving in such an informal, yet vital, leadership role evolves things to the point that others are fully engaged and dedicated.

2. *Recruit beyond farmers*

As we were discussing earlier in this section, be sure to include a broad range of rural women—beyond just those currently farming—who share your passion for

sustainability. This will increase the likelihood of network longevity and, more importantly, enhance your business success since these women will buy and support your products.

By casting a wider net, you may discover a new crop of farmers. For example, someone may attend who is an enthusiastic home gardener with a hidden dream of becoming a farmer. Being around you and others already farming, might be just the encouragement she needs to take the next step.

3. Communicating Inclusivity & Welcome

Creating welcoming spaces is a core component of everything we are talking about here, yet fostering inclusivity is something that needs careful thought to grow community most effectively. Some ideas to get you started:

“But I’m not a farmer”

Anecdotally, it’s amazing how many women will say, “I’m not a farmer” while their lifestyle and livelihood indicate otherwise. Whether it’s a lack of confidence or role models or a simple misunderstanding of what a farmer is—the USDA defines it as “anyone who sells anything they raise”—bringing women into these networks creates space for them to see themselves as farmers and meet other inspiring women.

Gender inclusivity

We live in an exciting and evolving era. It is one with broader, open discussions on gender definitions and fluidity on the gender spectrum. While there is still much to discuss and learn on creating gender inclusivity, our experiences have shown that authentic, open and welcoming spaces—from personal invitations to smiles and hugs upon seeing someone—create an atmosphere where individuals feel they belong and can best express themselves. Network gathering, where all women are welcome, can provide opportunities for area LGBTQ farmers to connect and share by communicating with all who identify as women.

Kid Friendly

For many women, the work-life balance of raising kids along with farming and other responsibilities can be a real challenge. Often, the only way someone can attend an event is if they bring their kids. Remember to communicate that children are welcome, even by simply saying an event is “family friendly, bring your kids.” No

formal childcare plan is needed, just acknowledge and embrace the idea that kids are welcome. And—bonus—there will most likely be other women attending whose kids have fledged the nest who are happy to play “grandma” as mom gets some food or has an adult conversation. “It takes a village” in action.



Outreach Support Ideas

On the “keep it simple” mantra, don’t worry about size of your first gathering or ensuring that you’ve tapped into all communications outlets. The beginning is definitely a “quality versus quantity” type event, and there undoubtedly will be additional opportunities to bring in more women and connections down the line. If your first events are more like a dinner party than a larger potluck, that’s great. Think of it as an opportunity for more intimate conversations and bonding.

That said, outreach is still important especially if you, as the organizer, have a personal goal of finding more sustainability-minded women in your area. Where do you find these women? Some starter ideas include:

- Word-of-Mouth
Hands down, the best way to connect new women

farmers with Soil Sisters is having current attendees invite them. As your gatherings continue, encourage past attendees to bring a new person. Seek out connections folks may have to other local groups, like a gardening club or homeschooling group. They often include women interested in sustainability and conservation issues.

- Extension connections

Your county extension agents—either ag or development—can be a good source of connections. Extension typically receives lots of community informational inquiries, including calls made by residents new to the area who are interested in agriculture. Introducing yourself as a resource and local network connection would be a great fit.

- Local newspapers

If you are fortunate to have a local newspaper in your area, consider contacting the editor to help get the word out, either via an article and/or announcement in their community calendar.

- Social media

Increasingly, social media, especially Instagram and Facebook can help build direct local community connections. Particularly for the younger generation, Instagram plays an important role in initial connections, especially fueled by these beginning farmers very transparently and creatively sharing their stories (accompanied with beautiful photos and videos).

Additionally, look for things like Facebook Groups that focus on your region (may be a swap/sale page but also a place for announcements). Also check neighborhood-focused apps like NextDoor or Meet-Up that may be established in your area.

- Regional Sustainable Ag Organizations

Are there state or regional sustainable agriculture organizations in your area? Try getting an announcement in their newsletters or an event listing on their website or social media. Other farming nonprofits can be good allies in your networking mission since it helps support their overall goals, too.



Case Study:



Erica Roth, Albany, WI
Ewetopia Farm

A network can clarify one's farming vision and help bring it to fruition, as evidenced in the inspiring story of Erica Roth. After living in Kentucky for a few years, she, her husband and three kids moved back to Wisconsin to be closer to family.

She vividly remembers the first potluck she attended. "I arrived early because I didn't yet have a feel for rural drive times. The host so warmly welcomed me that I jumped in and helped set-up. That was also the first time we connected with the local homeschool community, which really helped our family settle in. We moved to our farm with a lot of enthusiasm, but no master plan. I had a lot of ideas, and the women farmer potlucks with Soil Sisters became extremely helpful, as I could ask a lot of questions. Lots of my questions were basic and introductory, but no one made me feel lacking or ignorant. No one laughed!"

Seeing women farmers in action proved to be a great strategy for Erica. It helped her gain knowledge and connect with informal mentors, which was especially important since she was entering a new-to-her world of livestock.

"Before we started with pigs, my whole family and I visited April Prusia," Erica recalls the farmer who helped her (and who is a featured case study later in this Toolkit). "April so transparently and generously shared her knowledge with us. We ended up getting our first piglets through her."

Connections through Soil Sisters also granted Erica the opportunity to visit sheep farms and learn more about the breeds she was interested in raising. She was also able to borrow equipment and tools and try them out before investing in them herself—something she now does for other folks.

These informal learning opportunities helped Erica try out new farm enterprises more readily without overcommitting, especially financially. For example, while she loved raising pigs, she discovered her heart was more into sheep, and she learned pigs would rip up the pasture making it difficult for sheep rearing.

"Even though we're not raising pigs currently, that experience and the opportunity to first connect with experienced women hog farmers instilled in me the importance of treating animals well and sustainably. Now I'm in a position to support farmers like April through our family's purchased pork."

A few years after she and her family settled into their farm, her Soil Sisters community inspired her to run for (and win!) a position on the Green County Board. "Another woman on the board asked me to run. When I went public with the decision to run, the support from the network was incredible. It really grew my confidence and commitment, especially since this was my first time running for office and campaigning."

The network's support also made a huge difference to Erica in managing COVID-19. "We would have all been hurting if this network hadn't already been established. Because a community already existed, it was easy to keep connected via Zoom calls. Taking advantage of the good times really helps you get through the tough phases."

Erica's advice for those thinking of starting a network: Dream big and keep an open mind.

"We all bring something different—from our skill set to our experience even our personal farm visions. The key is to let people bring their strengths and gifts however they want and never let anyone feel 'less than' because of where they are. That warm acceptance helped me greatly when I got started, and I'm very grateful."

Case Study:



LindaDee Derrickson, Monticello, WI Bluffwood Landing

A spry seventy-something solo woman farmer, LindaDee Derrickson exemplifies the importance of intergenerational connections in building women farmer networks. While LindaDee has done many things in her life, including a stint as a serial restaurant entrepreneur, her heart is on the farm, raising sheep and championing fiber education through a non-profit she founded, Heartland Fibershed.

"I love that Soil Sisters includes women of all ages. I look at these young women and it gives me hope knowing that our future is in good hands," shares LindaDee. "At my stage in life, I feel a calling to help them hop on board to both run successful farms themselves as well as nudge them to take on leadership roles. I know what I can realistically do in my 70s and am thrilled and eager to encourage younger women to step up and take charge."

"When the chips are down, that's when the Soil Sisters community means the most," according to LindaDee. She personally experienced the powerful positive impact of farmer support networks when she was in a near fatal car accident in October, 2022. "I wouldn't

have made it without this community of women and I most definitely would not have been able to keep the farm running," reminisces LindaDee, who a year later was still in physical therapy for related mobility issues. "Soil Sisters and neighbors in my community stepped up and took care of my sheep, brought meals and drove me to medical appointments. They even put me in a sled and pulled me over the ice to the barn to visit my animals. This kind of Soil Sister support has helped me heal."

It's that mutual sharing on multiple fronts that LindaDee feels both creates strong community and importantly, advances everyone's knowledge and farming success. "There's a lot of exchanging between Soil Sisters, from borrowing farm equipment to exchanging food preservation tips to marketing farm goods. But for me it goes beyond this practical sharing, it goes much deeper into a spiritual level of connectedness"

For LindaDee, knowing a supportive group of women farmers has her back infused her with confidence and the ability to do everything from showing up at events by herself to taking on new endeavors like starting Heartland Fibershed, a networking & educational organization through which she encourages consumers to support local, sustainable fiber & textile growers, processors, and retailers.

"Risk taking", LindaDee advises, "is the key to so many opportunities, ones that are more exciting and joyful than what you could ever plan. For example, I purchased a rural restaurant on 90 acres envisioning a financially successful business. It wasn't and I closed it to avoid bankruptcy. That decision allowed me to concentrate on raising heritage sheep, Scottish Highland cattle, and chickens. This brought me back farming which then led me to embrace the fabulous Soil Sister networking community of women farmers."



CHAPTER 4

Cultivate successful gatherings



Creating a welcoming gathering and starting a farm share have something in common: there is no “one-size-fits-all” rulebook on how to do it. That said, while events bringing together women farmers can (and frankly should) vary in many ways, we have learned there are consistent themes and approaches that help foster success and longevity. Below are some insights Soil Sisters groups have gathered that might prove helpful in your organizing.

Determine Date, Time & Location

The day of the week and time frame for your gathering really depends on a blend between your personal schedule as organizer and your community needs. For example, are most folks at market on certain days? Do your attendees have dairying or animal chores a certain time of day?

Gatherings can vary range in day of the week and start-time, depending on your groups’ needs. One common time frame is that Sunday evening slot. Historically, in our founding Wisconsin group, we’ve met Sundays at 4pm for consistency, which generally works well (thought it isn’t ideal for those milking). Another, more informal approach, is to host the event in the afternoon, starting at 2 pm. Ask attendees to bring snacks, keeping it even more simple than a potluck dish.

The most important variable in choosing a successful event location is an enthusiastic host. Someone who regularly hosts field days, open houses and other farm events may have their logistics down pat, making them

a good choice. It’s also helpful to have a site that offers something of interesting to see and tour, such as a farm stay or hoop house (used for season extension).

Other things to consider in looking for an event site:

- Areas for parking
- Spaces for tables and chairs to gather and eat. Ask attendees to bring chairs if needed, especially as group numbers grow.
- Shelter or indoor space if the weather is inclement. We wrote this Toolkit during COVID-19, so having events outside during the warmer months remains a priority, especially since it increases inclusivity for those with higher COVID precautions. Having a place with an open garage or barn roof to tuck under if raining—or a fire pit for cooler weather—is also helpful.

Sample Agenda

Most gatherings include both a potluck and a farm tour or other activity that spotlights the host’s experiences and expertise. Either way, an agenda is helpful, so attendees have an idea of what to expect. Here’s a simple sample:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 4:00 pm | Gathering starts
Get nametag & write out dish name/
ingredients sheet |
| 4:30 pm | Farm Tour [or other activity] |

5:00 pm Potluck, Introductions & Announcements

Not surprisingly, given all the things farmers are juggling, we tend to run late. Having a little cushion for arrival helps to have some quorum for the farm tour rather than folks trickling in. It also helps to consistently start the farm tour or activity at the designated time to keep things moving along.

Name tags can be very helpful. Hopefully, you will always have new people or some women who haven't met yet. Consider adding a question to the nametag as an icebreaker like: "What's your superpower" or "What's the last thing you harvested?"

To celebrate the food and include folks with dietary needs, have attendees fill out a blank index card, including the following:

- Name of dish
- Name of the chef
- Ingredients
- Anything else interesting and special. For example, list ingredients you grew yourself or if it's a special family recipe.

Don't forget people get hungry, especially with so many amazing dishes at a farmer potluck! We've found opening the buffet, getting food and then doing longer introductions while folks eat works well and is a much more relaxed, engaged setting.

Importance of Introductions

Introductions are the key part of the learning circle. Gathering together to connect, share and grow starts with knowing more about the people in attendance. Be sure to have a plan for introductions and provide for plenty of time to get to everyone to maximize their impact.

A circle is ideal for introductions whenever possible. A simple circle of chairs and folks settling in with plate of food work great. But even several tables grouped together work well. While one long table creates a beautiful "farm-to-table" dining setting, it is not ideal for learning circles because the layout makes introductions challenging. Hearing and seeing can be too difficult or

impersonal, depending on the length of the table and the size of the group.

Once everyone gets their food and settles in, the facilitator (see the next section for more on the facilitator role) kicks things off with:

- A welcome and thanks for coming. Reading a poem, quote or other seasonal reflection work well here. This can often be a good place to acknowledge and honor the indigenous roots of the land on which you are gathering, recognizing specific tribes or other actions. Draw on the expertise of the group, especially if there is an indigenous woman attending or one who can facilitate such acknowledgements.
- Thank the farmer host (if she's not the facilitator) and address any logistics needed, such as help cleaning up, moving tables, etc.
- It's always a good idea to explain the purpose of the event, even explaining what a learning circle is and why creating a safe, women-only space is important. Some groups work well with shared agreements and prefer to develop a list of principles that describe the space to be created. For example: "What is brought to the circle stays in the circle and is not to be shared with others."
- While introductions should cover the basics (i.e. name, where you live/geography, a little about your farm business/livelihood, personal pronouns), the idea is to get beyond just the "what do you do" type question and dig deeper. A question we regularly use at Soil Sisters potlucks is: "What do you have to share and what do you need?" Purposefully broad and general, this question opens up discussions, as everyone probably has something they are seeking as well as something they can offer. These needs can be immediate and specific ("I need a ride to the city tomorrow") or broader ("I'm anticipating my first goat birth this week and would love someone seasoned onsite with me"). Something to share can be anything from an abundance of winter squash to a specific skill set that would help others, like pruning fruit trees.
- Additionally, ask attendees to give some detail on the dish they brought, to feature homegrown fare and address dietary needs. The food is always so fabulous with lots of unique dishes and farm-raised ingredients; take the time to celebrate that.

- Add creative touches to the introductions! One thing Soil Sister's has done is to create a "rag ball" during the intros. Take an old bedsheet and tear it lengthwise into long strips about two-inches wide. Before the introduction start, roll a few together to create a small ball. When people are doing their intros, have them take one of the strips and wrap it around the ball as they talk. This both communicates clarity and brevity (especially helpful in larger groups), gives the speaker something to do with her hands, and by the end of the intros you have a larger ball of everyone's strips symbolizing collaboration and connections. Using different colored sheets and strips creates an attractive looking rag ball.

Other introductory questions include:

- What are you looking forward to this fall/summer?
- What was the highlight of your week?
- What is a challenge coming up this month/season?

Consider writing the questions out on a whiteboard or chalkboard for folks to refer to.



Facilitation ideas

Having someone in the role of host and facilitator goes a long way in creating welcoming spaces and keeping the program on track. The facilitator can readily be the person hosting or a group leader who steps into this role. As facilitator, you take on a special lens to keep an eye on the group dynamics to curate a positive, engaging, inclusive vibe by:

- Rallying the group when it's time for the tour, introductions, etc. During the introductions, time allocations depend on the number of introductions. The larger the group, the more you may want to watch the clock.
- Start the introductions. It sets the stage and provides an example for folks to follow.
- During introductions, if someone exceeds an appropriate amount of time or takes their introduction into a topic not suited for the learning circle format, jump in and kindly redirect. For example, saying something like: "This is an interesting topic and something that's understandably very important to you and deserves more time than we have right now. Let's talk more after we finish introductions."
- Model the behavior you want to see by actively listening.

Educational Component: Farm Tour & Skill Sharing
Women farmer network gatherings blend community-building and discussion with pragmatic education. That educational activity most often is a farm tour—a tangible draw for attendees and an easy way for the host to share her personal story. Such intimate farm tours in a women-only setting open discussions and, more importantly, provide a tangible visual for attendees to experience a women-farming model. If the weather is inclement or the host site may not be suited for a tour, creating an informal demonstration works well.

The tour can involve sharing a specific skill, such as:

- Composting
- Cover crops and building soil health
- Grafting
- Organic certification (taking attendees through their

process and paperwork, an interesting activity for the dead of winter)

- Canning and other ways to preserve the harvest
- Cheesemaking

Another collaborative approach is to pick a topic where anyone can bring something to share, such as:

- Seed or seedling swap
- Fermentation “show & tell” (bring in what you’re brewing and share)

As your group grows, consider having one co-ed gathering where women bring their spouses, partners, and kids—perhaps a summer picnic. The annual event gives everyone a chance to meet the family and significant others.

Potluck Success Tips

No surprise, the potluck meal is a real draw for the event. Be sure to maximize it with a dash of pre-planning. Key things to think about in your set-up:

- Create a “welcome station” where attendees can write-out a nametag and dish description. Provide blank cards and pens.
- Make sure to have enough plates, cups, silverware, etc. If you think you’ll run short, it’s a great opportunity to connect and ask someone in the group to bring extras or simply ask attendees to bring their own dishware. Place plates on the front end of the serving table with silverware and napkins on the other so guests don’t need to juggle utensils while dishing up.
- Put out an array of serving utensils, knives, cutting boards, bowls and baskets on the buffet table for guests who bring a bag of chips or bread that needs to be cut. A range of condiments, at the end of the serving table, such as salt and pepper, butter, jam, mustard and ketchup, is always appreciated.
- Keep an eye on how long the food stays out to ensure food safety—no longer than two hours, less if the event is held outdoors in the summer. Have extra ice on hand for keeping food cold and netting to keep bugs away, if eating outdoors.
- Clean-up is a breeze with the “tub method.” Provide

empty plastic bins labeled: dishware, compost, recyclables.

When you’re starting a new network and the number of attendees is more in the dinner party range of 6-12, consider assigning categories of dishes to people to ensure variety and balance. Additionally, sometimes a theme or more detailed potluck plan works well, especially if you have been meeting for a while and want to liven things up a bit. Some ideas include:

- Potato Bar: Host provides plain, baked potatoes and attendees bring toppings (cheese, sour cream, ground beef, etc.)
- Pizza Party: Host makes dough (regular and gluten-free) and attendees bring toppings



Case Study:



Ashley Wegmueller, Monroe, WI Wegmueller Dairy & Farmstay and Bo & Olly's Produce

Collaborative farmer networks can be especially important during life and career transitions. The support Ashley Wegmueller received from Soil Sisters helped her crucial life pivots not once, but twice!

The first came in 2015. Ashley had been a music teacher in the public school system and knew she needed a change. “I always loved growing vegetables and gardening and thought maybe this could evolve into something,” she explains. “My husband and I were running a dairy farm that goes back in his family for generations, so the idea of diversifying into something else was really new, scary, and exciting.”

Ashley saw a beginning women farmer workshop offered during the Soil Sisters August weekend, held at nearby Christensen Farm run by Katy Dickson, a woman who returned to her family land to reinvent the farm as an organic vegetable operation (see her case study later in this Toolkit).

“I remember trying to convince another female friend to come with me to this workshop, but no one could make it. I still went, even though I was nervous about not knowing anyone,” says Ashley who found the gathering warm, welcoming, and far more inspiring than she had even hoped. “I’m a visual person, and there was something about seeing Katy in action, having her share her story during the tour that gave me a boost of confidence that I could grow and sell vegetables too.” Ashley later launched Bo & Olly’s Produce, her vegetable operation.

Flash forward a few years. Dairies across Wisconsin were struggling, including Ashley’s. It needed a financial boost, but both Ashley and Dan were not interested in falling into the “just milk more cows” mindset. The

idea of bringing people out to a farm stay came up, and Ashley turned again to other women farmers. This time she studied their transitions into diversifying with agritourism and farm stays. Any apprehension she had soon dissolved as the support from other women flooded in.

“My first step was asking questions to other women in our network for practical advice on how they ran various forms of farm lodging. It was so very helpful, particularly navigating start-up issues like local zoning and state inspections, things that could have been barriers but weren’t because others gave me such helpful insights. The idea of opening a farm stay went from feeling like an overwhelming process to a vision that could really become reality.”

The result was “The Dairy” at the Wegmueller Farm, the first farm stay on an active dairy farm in the area. It quickly grew into a successful operation, especially grabbing the attention of families from the Chicago area. “People are so disconnected from their food source and farmers but want to interact and learn. We provide that opportunity, and many children have been able to see (and even milk) a cow for the very first time on our farm.”

The farm stay is now on track to generate more income than the dairy side, inspiring further diversification that includes equine opportunities like riding lessons and trail rides. The Wegmuellers received Green County’s Entrepreneurial Spirit Award by Green County Economic Development for their inspiring pivot.

“When women gather and create such collaborative spaces, like we have in our network, something changes. We naturally start to think differently and on more of a process level. We look at things from a perspective of how things are interconnected and how we can support each other. It isn’t in any way about competition and scarcity but abundance. When we help each other we can all grow.”

Ashley’s farm stay was never viewed as competition from fellow women farmers but an opportunity to include another successful farm lodging, collectively increasing area tourism—which benefits everyone.

Case Study:



Alicia Gasaway, Monticello, WI
Gasaway Gardens

What's the secret to long-term success and vibrancy for a women farmer network? Continually bringing in new women, particularly younger women with fresh perspectives and skill sets. Alicia Gasaway exemplified just that. She moved to Green County with her husband and young family just before the pandemic kicked in and recently connected with Soil Sisters as things opened back up.

"I was at a local farmers market talking to a woman vending there. Once I started talking about our new farm property and my vision for diversification through everything from berries and fruit trees to medicinal herbs and animals, she recommended that I connect

with this network," Alicia explains. "One person enthusiastically reaching out can make all the difference. I immediately felt welcomed and that I would be among kindred spirits because she kept saying things like 'Oh you must meet so and so.'"

The warm invitation motivated Alicia to join the Soil Sisters listserv to get a feel for the group and then attend her first potluck. "I remember I came to that first event by myself not knowing anyone, but I immediately connected with others as we did the introductions. I could feel the strong energy among the women there; they shared my passion for the caring for the land and raising food."

Alicia went beyond attending and jumped in right away, volunteering to help at everything from the Soil Sisters August event to creating a Soil Sisters Spotify playlist for a summer event—a creative way to amplify the group and engage others that wouldn't have existed without Alicia's fresh spin.

"As a new person to the group, I saw contributing my time as a way to help while connecting with and learning from others," says Alicia who recommends taking the first step. "Find those who have been already doing the things you want to learn about and reach out, get involved and take a chance to learn from a mentor. I found my first farm job from ad on Craigs List."



CHAPTER 5

Develop On-going Communications

Once women farmers start to gather, look for ways to establish a means of regular communications. This is a key element and fantastic next step because it creates momentum, on-going interest and provides an outlet for those daily questions—everything from a baby piglet crisis to seeking local tractor mechanic recommendations.

Identify Communication Goals & Audience

There are a perennially expanding range of communication options, particularly as social media opportunities grow and companies want to attract dedicated, committed groups on all topics. These multiple outlets also create a challenge as various portals change and evolve and may even disappear. So, remain flexible. New tools and platforms may be even better and more robust than what's available currently.

For simplicity, the options discussed below are all free (as of this 2022 edition). That said, there is still administration, start-up learning and set-up time to consider. The key is to take time to understand and get to know the core of your group and what platform works best for all. Starting out with a basic email list and determining what will work best for your group is always a good strategy, as it can be difficult to change once you've invested in a platform.

Communication Tools & Options

Most likely there won't be one ideal platform, especially if your network has a diversity of ages (which is ideal!). That said, a summary of key communications options with pros and cons are below. Please keep in touch—and update us—with other platforms you find helpful.

Email List: A list of basic contact information including email. Someone in the group maintains communication, sending out regular emails.

Pros: Classic email communication still works! Message delivered directly to recipient.

Cons: More work on volunteer in group. Increasingly email overload is causing people to not receive/read them.

Group Text: Similar to the email list but using cell numbers and a group text chat.

Pros: Caters to farmers in the field. Appealing to younger generation.

Cons: Not everyone texts; messages more readily get lost.

Google Groups: Set up a Group via Google Tools, basically functioning as a listserv.

Pros: Robust system with ability to integrate into Google Site, which can serve as a private, free website, incorporating more free features and tools such as setting up a group Google calendar, Google map showing locations and a full network list with contact information.

Cons: More time intensive to set up and manage, especially related to Google Site. Need to set up for longevity and ability to transfer management between people; best to set up a new/separate Gmail for the group (instead of someone's personal or farm email).

Facebook Group: Creating a Facebook Group for private discussion and posting.

Pros: Easy to set up; offers additional tools like creating Events for potlucks and other gatherings. Posting/commenting is easy to use and everything is archived.

Cons: Not everyone is on Facebook (or active) especially younger women.

Whatever platform you use, it is helpful to still have someone keep a master list of all names and key contact information such as mailing address, email, cell, farm name, socials, etc. as back-up.

Case Study:



Katy Dickson, Browntown, WI Christensen Farm

"Having grown up on my family's farm, I wanted to get as far away as possible when I finished school," shares Katy Dickson. "But life takes interesting turns and can lead you right back to where you started," she adds with a grin, as she now runs a diversified, organic vegetable operation on the family land she once sought to flee.

The road back home began after a few years of traveling and serving in the Peace Corps. Katy and her husband started a family and wanted to be close to grandparents. An enthusiastic gardener, Katy quickly grew more than her family needed and started selling at a local farmers' market, which evolved into a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) model.

"I've always valued education and feel that experiencing something directly with another person is the best

way to learn," explains Katy who has always generously shared her farm experiences with others. She especially enjoys helping women farmers who are launching organic farms in rural areas or those seeking work-life balance while meeting the bottom line. "While I love my farming lifestyle, it can be isolating, especially for someone like me who tends to be a bit of a hermit already. Hosting a potluck or field day motivates me to keep connected with others and affirms why I chose this farming lifestyle. Seeing someone doing what you want to do, having that visual, can be so motivating."

She encourages anyone thinking of hosting a farm event to embrace the process and stop worrying that the farm isn't perfect. Imperfection helps other women "see the weeds" and realize she's building a farming business and lifestyle for the long-term.

"There have been many times when I've hosted something here where I didn't have the time to clean up or prep as much as I may have wanted to, but I remind myself that it's perfectly OK and that it even helps others more to see my own farm as a 'work in progress.'"

She also continues to learn from other women farmers, especially about opportunities. For example, another Soil Sister member participated in the US Aid Farmer-to-Farmer project, which connects farmers with communities abroad for shared learning and collaborative education. After her experience, she encouraged Katy to apply. Katy did and has since participated in trips to places like Azerbaijan.



Case Study:



Heather Lynch, Brooklyn, WI Green Haven Gardens

What's the key ingredient to a thriving, successful network in the long-term? New women coming in with fresh ideas and perspectives. In our Green County group, this meant connecting with women who have recently moved to the area as well as continually reaching out to long-term residents who share, or are open, to sustainability.

Heather Lynch is a great example of a more recent network member who provided insight into reaching younger women farmers through social media. Heather moved to the area with her husband amidst the pandemic in her early 30s, trading the urban Madison scene and a corporate career as a scientist to follow her dream of crafting a career in the soil.

"Social media, particularly Instagram, can be a real calling card for women to connect with each other and find kindred spirits in their immediate geographic community, as well as across the country and world," Heather shares. She learned about Soil Sisters through a member she met on Instagram. "The listserv proved to be a great point of entry for me as I joined in the middle of COVID with no in-person events going on. It gave me the opportunity to get to know folks a bit first online."

A few months later, Heather sent a personal introduction email to the listserv, after which she immediately received multiple replies extending welcome and connections. "It felt like a big hug to be so welcomed into the group. I could already sense that they accepted each other where they were and prioritized collaboration. That was extremely reassuring to me—to be in a group where everyone wasn't talking about what they want individually, but how they can work together and support each other."

Such support proved to be very valuable to Heather

as she developed her farming business, Green Haven Gardens, a diversified farm and homestead with a focus on education to support people in growing and preserving food.

"When I hosted my first plant sale, other women on the listserv—that I hadn't even met in person yet—showed up in support. It meant so much."

When Heather joined the Soil Sisters planning team for one of the August events, she gave back just as much as she's received. In addition to hosting workshops on her farm, Heather taught the team how to effectively use Instagram to boost the event and their own farm businesses.

"Being a part of such a network of women farmers and now having the opportunity to empower others brings me such joy. I honestly get goosebumps reflecting on all of this. It probably all reaches back to my educational roots as a scientist: how sharing resources comes naturally. Having a place to do that, where you also build relationships and see the results of it, is very rewarding and something that will inspire me to keep my hands in the soil for my new found career."



CHAPTER 6

Additional Ideas for Engagement

Developing a women farmer network generates additional opportunities for collaboration with existing programs and entities. Rather than creating something from scratch, collaborating with a partner organization who shares your ideals can amplify both your missions.

Partnering with Other Programs

Is there a project that another nonprofit, agency or Extension is leading that would be a good fit for your group? This can often be a real win-win if such a project is looking to connect with either women farmers or rural resident. Your network can support them in meeting their outreach deliverables while your group receives quality, targeted programming, typically for free or low cost.

For example, Farm Well Wisconsin, a mental health support network run by a regional social service agency Southwest Wisconsin Community Action Program

(SWCAP) developed a new, virtual mental health training series called The Water We Swim In that needed both outreach and feedback. Soil Sisters quickly brought together the ten women needed for this class so that it could run specifically for our network, providing education in this space as well as building deeper connections among those participating.

“Partnering with Soil Sisters was an example of an ideal partnership where all of our goals aligned. Because we had these existing relationships, it saved time and amplified our efforts,” explains Chris Frakes, Community Wellness Group Director for SWCAP. “Add in the fact that I’m also personally part of [Soil Sisters] and that further amplifies the collaboration and deepens the relationship. And bonus: there have been several women who participated in the Soil Sisters cohort for The Water We Swim In who chose to get more involved in mental health advocacy in our community.”

The cohort structure can go a long way in building partnerships with other organizations, once a network achieves enough volume to identify and recruit a subgroup interested in a certain topic or opportunity. This happened when Soil Sisters partnered with



a statewide NRCS program working with women landowners: Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC). Several members of Soil Sisters were already part of WiWiC through their work with Renewing the Countryside—another agriculture nonprofit.

A main deliverable of the WiWiC project was to recruit women landowners to help them develop a land conservation plan for their property, supporting long-term land stewardship. Because of existing the relationship between Soil Sister’s network of women farmers and landowners and the woman on staff at the county soil and water conservation department, we recruited a cohort of 23 Soil Sisters to participate in developing land plans, which was nearly half of the total project deliverables. Amplified cross-pollination indeed!

“The collaboration between WiWiC and Soil Sisters demonstrates the strength and power achievable when women collectively develop relationships, especially on a local level,” says Esther Shekinah, WiWiC project lead, based at the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute. “We are building on and strengthening existing relationships along with women’s connection to their land and conservation.”

Partnering with a “program” can also be exactly that: collectively watching a TV program! Soil Sisters was recently featured on Wisconsin Public Television’s *Around the Farm Table* with Inga Witcher (available online). The 30-minute show features several stories about founding the Wisconsin group and raises issues to prompt further discussion. Seeking earned (vs paid) media attention can also help amplify your group’s message and goals, so share your group’s story far and wide. You never know who might be listening.

Creative Local Collaboration

What are the ways your network can ally with and support local businesses? One easy one is by making and asking about local referrals—from meat processors to tractor mechanics. This dialogue not only helps someone find a product or service, it may also identify a community need that inspires action. For example, discussions lamenting the lack of local meat processing facilities inspired April Prusia to initiate and lead (with other Soil Sisters) a new meat processing cooperative venture. For more on how a listserv discussion sparked a much larger, robust project, see her case study below.

Another collaboration example might be found at your local newspaper, which is always looking for content, particularly regional voices. Soil Sisters approached the local newspaper, *The Monroe Times*, about writing a monthly Soil Sisters column, showcasing area agriculture, conservation and sustainability issues important to women farmers. They liked the idea and have now run the column for over two years, highlighting 25+ different women farmer voices and bringing their issues to a community dominated by conventional, male-led dairy farming.

Encouraging & Celebrating Leadership

As connections through these networks deepen, women farmers increase awareness of and direct involvement with local issues. Relationships prompt action, which can result in women farmers taking leadership roles in various capacities, from serving on county boards and committees to running for public office.

“A few years ago, I got thrown into the local advocacy scene when a large-scale CAFO started planning to build right next to our farm,” recalls Jen Riemer of Riemer Family Farm. “Already being connected to Soil Sisters and having this local network of women farmers, who I knew supported me, boosted my confidence to take

action. When, after a long and involved fight, the CAFO still came in, I leaned on this network to process, rebuild and plan my next steps.”

Women farmer networks can also inspire collective action involving men. After Soil Sisters network had been gathering for a few years, the group saw a need to get more active, particularly on a policy side to advocate for a more forward-thinking, sustainability agenda and regulations that would avoid what happened with Riemer Family Farm and the CAFO fight. The end result was forming a new chapter of the Wisconsin Farmers Union, creating a more public local effort on grassroots agricultural organizing and indeed, involving men.

Gathering Virtually

The COVID-19 Pandemic introduced many to the world of Zoom and virtual group connections. These tools often increase network connections. While nothing can take the place of a face-to-face conversation and sharing a meal at a potluck, adding in virtual components can enhance things in different ways.

Prior to COVID-19, Soil Sisters stopped gathering December through February. The inclement and unpredictable weather too often caused events to be canceled last minute. During lockdown, the group experimented with Zoom to keep connected. Adding a virtual component can add an element of inclusivity and bring even more women to the table. As Soil Sisters found, some women will attend Zoom meet-ups who are not able to come in-person.

For more on virtual education specifically for women in agriculture, see the SARE publication: *Reaching Women in Agriculture: A Guide to Virtual Engagement* (available online).

Case study:



April Prusia, Blanchardville, WI Dorothy's Range

April Prusia exemplifies how tapping into a local women farmer network can boost vision and outcomes, even transforming local meat processing opportunities along the way. April runs Dorothy's Range, a pig operation of champion heritage hog breeds, such as Gloucestershire Old Spots. Like many small-scale producers, April felt challenged by a lack of local meat processors. Many would not take smaller quantities or had long waiting lines and often used MSG or corn syrup versus the simple ingredients of more homemade and traditional ethnic recipes.

"There would be regular discussions on our local Soil Sisters listserv about the issue of not having a local meat processor period, much less someone who would truly work with us on issues like ethical slaughter," April recalls.

Knowing this need existed and realizing that she needed



to step up to get this project rolling, April recruited two other women meat producers with processing issues. Together, they applied for and successfully received a North Central SARE Farmer Rancher grant to research and explore the idea of a women-led meat processing cooperative in the southern Wisconsin region.

"Grant writing like this was new to me. So having another Soil Sister nudge me to apply and offer to help me through the application helped a lot," recalls April about the grant that was eventually awarded. "That NC SARE Farmer Rancher grant opportunity gave us the foundation to manifest a bigger vision into reality. Our new Meatsmith Cooperative is a women farmer-led project currently in the fundraising and building acquisition phase and is the direct result of those initial listserv email chains."

An important piece of the network-building approach for April is inclusivity, embracing and respecting that we all have something to learn from each other, especially when building bridges between those utilizing sustainable agriculture practices and more conventional farmers. "We can't box each other in with stereotypes and assumptions," April explains. "Your neighbor may not be that different from you. It always amazes me what we have in common."

Another piece of advice from April is to make an initial connection in a more informal, low-pressure place like a local café for a cup of coffee. "I find meeting in a common space takes off pressure of folks to host and makes it easy on everyone, especially for initial meetings."

April also finds that an open attitude toward collaborative education and sharing knowledge goes a long way in building farm business success for everyone. For example, to diversify the hog business, April runs an agritourism farm stay operation. She found tapping into the Soil Sisters network and asking questions in a safe space very helpful. Now, she finds herself in a reciprocal position to help beginning farmers. "What we're doing here defies traditional business advice of why would you ever help your competition. As women, we're constantly sent mainstream media messages of scarcity and how you need to protect your own," shares April. "But we as women also need to break that vicious, negative cycle. When we get to know each other as people and build trust through local networks, we quickly realize there is enough business and abundance to go around for everyone."

Case Study:



Kriss Marion, Blanchardville, WI Circle M Farm

Kriss Marion of Circle M Farm knows the power of longevity in a network. She attended the first inaugural potluck back in 2008 and has been an integral force behind Soil Sisters ever since.

“A potluck is a fabulous, exceptionally low-risk opportunity for women to get involved, particularly those new to the area,” reflects Kriss. “What comes out of these gatherings is incredibly powerful. A couple people connect on a bigger idea and—bam!—something larger unfolds.”

Kriss believes the diversity of the women at these gatherings strengthens both the networks themselves and the overall community, with the key being to remain open to the diversity of ideas. “Don’t make up people’s minds for them or assume they would or would not want to do something,” Kriss advises. “What people say, especially women who know you, may surprise you.”

This happened to Kriss when she sat next to a woman new to the Soil Sisters group at a gathering. As Kriss got to know the newcomer, she realized the woman lived in a township with an open county board seat. “At the time, I didn’t know her well enough to assess her background or readiness to run for office, but I simply put the invitation out there.”

The newcomer, Sue Nelson, was indeed ready and won the seat. She has been a champion for conservation issues locally ever since, including introducing a resolution through which the county would proclaim a commitment to water quality.

Knowing other women farmers in your area can add up to big policy change. Something else Kriss knows a lot about. She and two other Soil Sisters run bed and breakfasts that can serve home-baked goods to paying

guests. They were not, however, allowed to those identical goods to the public because the direct sale of home-baked goods was illegal in Wisconsin (at the time).

“We knew this barrier affected other people, primarily women, so we started organizing to get a bill passed to allow the sale of home-baked goods. When that didn’t work, we sued the state to have the ban lifted,” says Kriss.

And they won! As a result, baked goods made in a home kitchen in Wisconsin can now be sold to the public—under certain circumstances. For more information, see wisconsincottagefood.com.

This cookie battle later inspired Kriss to run for office, at the county board and state Senate and Assembly levels. She the County Board election several times but while she did not win the state officers, she won something more important: confidence and self-respect.

“Being connected to an established network of women boosted my confidence in running, both on a pragmatic level—as I knew I literally had their vote—along with an emotional level, having their perennial support and a safe space to call home,” sums up Kriss.



CHAPTER 7

Longevity & Transition

While the focus of this Toolkit is on the launch phase of a new network, it's helpful to keep in mind the issue of longevity: How can the network sustain itself for the long term? What about evolutions and leadership transitions?

A key variable here is volume and engagement: the more highly engaged, committed women you have, the longer something will last. Remember to give things time. With consistent engagement, networks grow—slowly but surely.

Keep an eye out for nurturing new leadership among younger women or women newer to the group. This helps support inevitable transition as others move geographically, transition out of farming or simply develop other interests.

Bottom line: send those invites and create that initial gathering, bringing together women farmers, landowners, conservationists and local food enthusiasts to champion sustainability and transform our food system into something stronger and better, one potluck at a time.

