

LEHIGH VALLEY STYLE / APRIL 2015 / GROWING OUR NEXT CROP OF FARMERS

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Growing Our Next Crop of Farmers

From Seed, To Farm, To Market, You Might Not Recognize The New Face Of Farming In The Valley

BY CINDY KALINOSKI | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN WCISLO



Lindsey Parks, executive director of the Seed Farm with local farmers who participated in the program.

"I don't know about you, but for me there came that moment during every visit to the farmers' market when I wanted more. I wanted to be the one standing behind the folding table, a truck of organic produce at my back, displaying my heirloom tomatoes...and handing over glossy sheaves of Swiss chard. I wanted to be that...person at the farmers' market. The one with ideals and produce to sell."

Excerpt from Home to Woefield by Susan Juby

We used to be a land of farmers. No longer. Not that long ago, farming as an occupation was basically hereditary, and new farmers were raised pretty much like the rest of the crops: naturally. But large-scale crop production changed things. Soil became depleted, many farms were developed, and crop-growing land decreased by 70 million acres.

Nowadays, just two percent of us are farmers or ranchers. Add to this the average farmer's age (58) and his offspring making other career choices, and the picture's not pretty.

It's a nationwide phenomenon, and across the country, solutions are being proposed. Part of the problem locally is that, in the 1980s, farmland was being preserved like jam in August.

But there just weren't enough people interested in farming those acres. Jeff Moyer, Farm Director at the Rodale Institute, recalls, "We looked at all of the farms without farmers and realized we needed to do something to create new farmers."



Emma Cunniff, Kneehigh Farm

A Changing Image

Fortunately, there's a new movement afoot in the Lehigh Valley. There's a program designed especially to launch new farmers. A community of entrepreneurial farmers and mentors is building, and beginning farmers are connecting with the rich experiences of established farmers. New farms are appearing on our landscape. But they might not look like what you'd expect.

"First of all," says Lindsey Parks, Executive Director of The Seed Farm (theseedfarm.org), a new farmer training and agricultural business incubation program based in Allentown, "today's new farmers don't fit into the typical image. Many have advanced degrees (often in unrelated disciplines), and they didn't grow up on farms, so farming is not a default occupation. They're committed to farming because they truly love it. But they also want to help feed their communities and make career choices that leave the world a better place."

Emma Cunniff of Kneehigh Farm (kneehighfarm.com), runs "a one-woman vegetable farm" in Emmaus: "In this area you see the monocultures of corn and soy and all these massive parcels of land growing crops that no one can really eat. You also see land being treated so poorly to the point where you can't grow anything on it, so it gets developed." She decided that, to change the system, she'd have to do it from the inside.

Cunniff says sustainable agriculture is healthier for our residents and for the regeneration of the land, which is their home. Striking out from the suburbs of San Francisco at age 17, she worked on a sheep ranch and other farms in Canada and then back in California. Eventually, she googled agricultural incubators, and lo and behold! The Lehigh Valley rocketed onto her screen.

So Cunniff signed up as an apprentice at the Seed Farm. After graduating from the 600-hour program, she became one of six farm stewards leasing acres on the Seed Farm property, where everything is grown sustainably.



Ben and Karah Davies, Wild Fox Farm

Defining Sustainable Practices

When people talk about sustainable agriculture, they mean farming in ways that are good for everything: the environment, our health, animals and even the livelihood of future farmers.

Typically, this means using little or no pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. It may mean using no genetically modified seeds nor giving animals hormones or antibiotics to increase production. Or it can mean all of this and more.

New farmers Ben and Karah Davies of Wild Fox Farm (wildfoxfarm.com) bought 40 acres in the Butter Valley in 2012. The Davies' dream was to work from home, producing nutritious food for their community, and doing this sustainably. Today, with the support of a strong agricultural community, they're living the dream. To them, it's not about being certified organic.

Ben Davies explains: "I think 'sustainable' is more important than 'organic' because it incorporates the idea of financial, economic and community sustainability. It's a much more holistic approach. It forces us to think long range, beyond this growing season, beyond the bills we have to pay this week, and even beyond our own lifetime."

Over at Good Work Farm (goodworkfarm.com),

Lisa Miskelly also thinks sustainably. She farms with Anton Shannon, one of the first graduates of the Seed Farm program and incubator. Being good stewards, in their case, involves the old-fashioned kind of horsepower. Daisy and Duke, draft horses that are Percheron-Morgan crosses, help reduce the farm's carbon footprint (or, if you will, hoofprint).

Miskelly also believes, "It's important for people's physical, mental and spiritual health to connect more closely with where their food is coming from and what they're eating. Building that meaningful connection with farmers and land and food is beneficial."

A group of local citizens valued that connection and brainstormed about how to generate interest in sustainable farming. They proposed an agricultural incubator in 2003 on land specified for farming or public use that Lehigh County had bought. Their proposal was turned down. Other ideas were floated, but a resurrection of the incubator plan in 2007 prompted then Lehigh County Executive Don Cunningham to give it the green light.

Planting a Crop of New Farmers

What form the solution would take was yet a mystery. A training program, centered on courses by Penn State Extension, was developed, and a federal grant kicked in, helping to launch the incubator that later popped up on Cunniff's search engine: the Seed Farm. It offered both hands-on and classroom learning. After all, participants needed to learn as much about business plans and managing risk and weeds and pests as the more inviting topics, like "Exploring the Small Farm Dream."

Here's how it works. Farmer Jane completes 100 hours of in-class studies and 500 hours of on-farm training. Then she can propose a farm business based on leasing a plot on the incubator property. Jane must project a profit, of course. This is made easier by reduced rates for using the farm's equipment, tools and infrastructure. The catch is, Jane can only do this for three years, max. Then, to borrow an analogy, the mother bird throws her out of the nest, and she flies on her own, but she can still take a refresher course in flying, or in this scenario, enjoy access to know-how and staff.

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Jeff Moyer, Rodale Institute

A Community of Support

Other parties in the area were on board. Longtime farmers. Farmers' markets. Food services that coveted fresh, local food. And, not surprisingly, the Rodale Institute. Well known for its research and advocacy for land preservation and organic farming, it had long been sharing best practices. So connecting with a nearby movement encouraging sustainable farming was a no-brainer. Their link to the incubator and training program took the form of Jeff Moyer's involvement: he became president of the board at the Seed Farm.

Moyer looks at it this way: "If you look at the Lehigh Valley, there about 800,000 people, and they all eat three times a day. But most of those people are not eating food that comes from the Lehigh Valley. We think that's a mistake. We should be growing, at least in season, most of the food they're eating. And we should be doing it in a way that encourages new growers to come into the system." He wants to equip new farmers so they learn "not just how to farm, but how to develop a marketing plan."

The Seed Farm calls this "from seed to harvest to market," which includes a stand at the Emmaus Farmers' Market, along with wholesale accounts with restaurants and grocers, which the apprentices manage. Moyer explains, "We offer them the opportunity to put the experience to work as a farm steward. And then we say, 'You have the opportunity, the expertise; we have land resources and equipment. Let's get you started.'"

This land Is Our land

Getting started usually involves moving a business off the Seed Farm property. This is easier said than done. One, finding the right kind of land is a challenge. Two, buying is expensive.

Three, locating a landowner open to leasing can be so difficult it's been compared to dating.

Miskelly of Good Work Farm says, "It's a really intimate relationship we have with our landowner. Someone who grows corn or soy is there maybe once in the spring, then again to spray. We have to be there every day with livestock, even in the winter. It's a serious commitment on the part of landowners to allow us to be that much a part of their life."

While she was able to use the Seed Farm's greenhouse during the transition, Miskelly says when you don't own the land, it's difficult to make major investments, like building a barn or putting in a well.

Facing the same dilemma, before Ben and Karah Davies were able to buy their own parcel of land for Wild Fox Farm, they farmed on his parents' property. Later, they leased land from four different landowners and had to manage four different types of soil.

"Land security was our biggest challenge," he says, "because we need to manage soil fertility on a long-range basis, since it directly influences the quality and quantity of our product."

Once they bought land, their business grew rapidly and they've been able to improve their soil fertility. Davies admits, though, that "The financial piece was always a challenge and will probably remain a challenge. There are a lot of great tools and equipment I wish we could afford, but we just learn to make do."



Lisa and Anton Miskelly with Daisy and Duke, Good Work Farm

Removing Barriers and Dreaming Big

As if the financial piece isn't enough of a challenge, imagine graduating college with serious debt. Add to that growing up not knowing how to ride tractors or handle animals. The entry barriers are significant. Someone, somehow, needed to make farming more accessible. The good news is that someone (actually many "someones") did, and it's happening right here in our area.

Cunniff says, "The Seed Farm gave me the tools I'm going to be needing. Best of all, I've learned I could actually make a living at this and love it." Her father, who predicted farming was a phase, now proudly shows off her website; her February blog features seeds she's clearly having a blast selecting. Purple cauliflower? Torpedo onions? Absolutely.

Cunniff's next challenge is finding land where she can grow long-term crops like fruit trees, asparagus, and strawberries. Currently, she runs a CSA (community supported agriculture) plus drop-off locations, and delivers to widespread restaurants. Her goals are joining a farmers' market in Antietam, increasing her CSA members from 25 to 40, and encouraging more of her members to come out to Kneehigh Farm to experience the visceral joys of farming firsthand.

The Davies' Wild Fox Farm now offers a winter CSA season, allowing them to spread the workload over the whole year and offer year-round employment. In addition to the pigs, sheep, lamb and chickens and eggs they raise, they take part in the Emmaus Farmers' Market. Coming soon is a vineyard, with grape varietals like the hybrid crimson cabernet, a full-bodied deep red, and cabernet doré, a yellow gold grape that can promise a wine with notes of pineapple and papaya.

For Good Work Farm, along with running a successful business, it's also about food justice. They work with local food pantries and created the Good Food Fund, which allows people to join their CSA regardless of their financial situation. Miskelly hopes the farm can play a greater role in education and outreach. "It's been extremely empowering for me to grow my own food, and I'd like to bring that meaning to others, possibly to those who struggle with physical or mental injuries."



Lindsey Parks, The Seed Farm

A Growing Market

The Seed Farm's executive director, Lindsey Parks observes that the new demand for organic and sustainably produced food is making small farms a more profitable proposition. "I'm extremely excited about the program because I'm seeing interest in farming growing. Local food service suppliers are seeking healthy, local food. New farmers who can fill that need have to develop higher-level skills, like budgeting and marketing and planning, to run successful farm businesses. These are some of the things we cover in our training program. We try to set them up for success."

Board president Moyer, who is also an organic farmer, says, "This is the most exciting time in the history of agriculture because there are so many opportunities for people to get involved. I don't think we've ever had a time when consumers have supported individual farms like we have today. It's quite a movement, and it's not going to go away."