

# WOMEN'S WORK

## The Changing Culture Of Agriculture

BY CAROLINE PAM

When my picture appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2008 with my then five-month-old daughter, I was proud to be counted among a new crop of women farmers in America getting “Out of the Kitchen, Into the Field,” doing the hard work of producing high-quality food with my own hands. Back then I prided myself on keeping up, doing it all and coming home dirty. There was hardly a minute in a day when I wasn't physically handling the vegetables we grew (aside from the brief moments I huddled in the shade of the farm truck to nurse the baby before strapping her on and getting back to work.)

But since having a second child, my role on the farm has evolved. This season I spent more time on the phone, in front of the computer, behind the wheel of our delivery van and at the market than I did on my hands and knees digging potatoes. The kids are in day care three days a week, and my parents babysit on early harvest mornings. I'm always at the farm working, so why do I feel less like a woman farmer and more like a farm wife? And what's the difference between a woman farmer and a farm wife anyway?

Women have played critical roles on farms since the dawn of agriculture, but the number of “official” women farmers is definitely growing. Of the 3.3 million farmers counted in the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, 996,600 (30.2%) were women, up from 2002, when the Census recorded 772,558 women farmers.

Jean Conklin owns a dairy farm with her husband in New Hampshire, in addition to working full time as a loan officer at Yankee Farm Credit. Conklin grew up on a dairy farm in the 1960s and '70s and remembers watching her pregnant mother (who also grew up on a dairy) drive a tractor the day before giving birth to her younger sister. “There always were women farmers,” she said. “They just weren't named.”

Prior to 2002, the census only collected data on a single operator per farm, so many women farmers were probably not counted. “It used to be that when people came to the farm they would just look for the men and they wouldn't ever talk to me,” said Dorothy Hayes, who produces cow and goat milk, yogurt and cheeses at Sweet Pea Farm-House of Hayes in North Granby, CT, with her husband Stanley.

I was contemplating my evolving role on our farm when I enrolled in a “Whole Farm Planning” class for beginning women farmers sponsored by CISA (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture) this winter. Over the next six months, I'll be working alongside 15 other women at workshops ranging from *Increasing Farm Profitability* and *Creating a Marketing Plan* to *Soil Fertility Basics* and *Land and Infrastructure Planning*. “Running a farm is running a business,” Devon Whitney-Deal, CISA's local hero member coordinator, pointed out at the first workshop in the series. The traditional family farm is no longer the only model, and as the financial and marketing aspects of farming become increasingly crucial and complex, a farmer's



Photo by Carole Topalian

job must extend beyond plowing, planting and harvesting. While the workshops' content would be relevant for any modern farmer, there's “something to be said for women learning from women,” Devon told us. “It fosters a powerful camaraderie.”

Already, I've gained perspective on my own situation by discovering just how many different ways one can be a woman farmer. I know women who raise vegetables, fruit, meat, fiber, dairy and grain on their own, in partnership with other women, with husbands, children and parents, and as apprentices and farm managers on public and privately owned land. Some have second and third jobs, and some have partners with jobs.

Massachusetts has one of the highest concentrations of female farmers in the country—29 percent of the state's 11,983 farmers are women, more than double the national average of 14 percent. And the number of farms in our state is increasing, rising from 6,075 in 2002 to 7,691 in 2007, a leap attributed to counting more minority and small farm operators.

As women's roles on farms grow, so does their influence on the culture of agriculture. Missy Bahret, co-owner of Old Friends Farm in Amherst and one of the mentors in my class, says she feels that her experience as a farmer is different from a man's “only occasionally.” “Mostly, especially in the Valley and in the organic realms,” she explained, “there are many, many women farmers and there is no issue.”

Missy has found success as a “two-family farm” by going into business with a college friend, Casey Steinberg. The two grow certified



organic salad greens, cut flowers and vegetables in Amherst for farmers markets and wholesale. By dividing the farm's management duties they are able to "grow the farm at a faster rate." Missy got married this August and her husband Phillip Sherwood-Berndt helps on the farm but also works as a children's book illustrator. They don't have any kids – yet. If a women farmer becomes a farming mom, as I and many others have learned, the division of labor becomes a bit more complicated.

"Before [having] children we worked full-time together, dividing some tasks between us and sharing others," says Anna Maclay, who owns Natural Roots, a horse-powered vegetable CSA in Conway, with her husband David Fisher. "When our daughter was born, we quickly saw that my role was not going to be the same as it had been." Now, with two children and limited childcare, Anna's days are filled with things she can do with the children around or while they sleep -- cooking, errands, the office work. But she looks forward to a time when her children are old enough that she can "join in more fully in the physical farm work, which I have been only peripherally involved in for the last six years."

At Town Farm in Northampton, Oona Coy grows vegetables for a CSA, a farmers' market and area restaurants with her husband Ben James. The couple shares both parenting and farm work, enabling Oona "to get out into the fields and the greenhouse and not just manage children, email and finances."

"A generation ago, I believe that my farming role would have been more limited to the kitchen, house and kids, although I've seen

enough images of burly farm women of past generations to know that women did everything on farms," Oona told me. "But I also think that there would have been more people around to help with my kids than there are today."

Anna echoed this point. "Our family is far away, and I think it really makes the years of having young children, as farmers, that much more challenging."

For all the progress we've made as a society in terms of broadening the role of women on farms, women farmers still face a daunting challenge when they decide to have children. Maybe the large, extended farm family is the missing puzzle piece – the ancient institution modern women farmers need most.

As more and more young people start farming, we will continue to develop new strategies for dividing farm and family responsibilities. I look forward to probing these issues with my peers in the "Time Management" session of the *Whole Farm Planning* class this winter. That is, we'll squeeze it in when we're not busy addressing soil fertility and sustainability, infrastructure and land, profitability and finances, marketing and communications and of course, getting ready for another season of planting.

*Caroline Pam owns the Kitchen Garden with her husband Tim Wilcox. They grow specialty vegetables for farmers markets, CSA, restaurants and retail markets on 7 acres in Sunderland. The farm's website and blog is at [www.kitchengardenfarm.com](http://www.kitchengardenfarm.com).*