

# WOMEN in AGRICULTURE

They care for their families, their animals, their plants and the land. Then, when those duties are done, their workday—generally off the farm—is ready to begin.

“We discussed the challenges of women in agriculture, engineering, et cetera, that have in years past been male-dominated industries. As I reflect on issues and barriers, I think of the many times I wanted to quit. ... It is important to note that regardless of the negative circumstances that we may be facing, there is always hope, always a divine purpose awaiting each of us if we can turn our focus away from self and focus on those around us, on what needs exist, then determine what gifts and resources we have to overcome the challenge or to serve someone. Nothing or no one can stop any one of us from fulfilling our purpose if we are on the right path.”

—Anna Welch

Anna Welch

Despite what the statistics for Indiana might say, more women — at least anecdotally — are becoming involved in farming operations. In fact, Purdue Extension Educator Kelly Heckaman, who organizes the extension’s Midwest Women in Agriculture conference, sees several subsets of women attending the conferences, which draw annually from five states.

Roughly half of the attendees work off the farm, perhaps balancing raising children with their outside jobs and farming duties. Most tend to be the bookkeepers as well, she says.

Another subset includes those women who, instead of working off-farm, are actively involved as equal farming partners, helping to plant, harvest, care for livestock

and take on other hands-on tasks. These women generally share decision-making and planning responsibilities with their husbands, says Heckaman.

An older demographic includes retired women who own property, though they may not be actively engaged in farming. Their land may be farmed through a cash-rent scenario, shares or flexible leases, but they are still deeply invested in the agricultural realm.

And a growing subset is made up of sole proprietors on smaller farms with niche markets.

Looking back over the 13 years that the conference has been running, Heckaman says each of these groups was always represented to some degree. “Probably what’s changed the most are sole proprietors running small farms and women getting more involved in the day to day and making

## Women In Numbers

Nationwide, the share of U.S. farms operated by women nearly tripled over the past three decades, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The agency’s Census of Agriculture first tracked gender of farm operators in 1978, and in that year, women numbered 5 percent across the U.S. By 2007 that number was up to 14 percent.

In Indiana, the number of women operators appears to be on a slight decline since 2007. The 2012 Census revealed that 5,745 Indiana farms are under female operatorship, versus 6,377 in 2007. However, the total acreage of farmland owned by Hoosier women in 2012 actually increased by more than 20,000 acres (541,991 in 2012, vs. 520,437 in 2007). The market value of agricultural products sold from these operations also showed a significant increase since 2007.

According to Purdue Extension Educator Kelly Heckaman, organizer of the extension’s annual Midwest Women in Agriculture conference, additional census figures due out in May might shed light on that unexpected drop. “It’s kind of odd that the trend would be decreasing,” she says, pointing out that as women tend to outlive their husbands, more farmland is owned by women.

“I don’t have an explanation yet for why they showed a decrease in number of operators,” she adds. But in May, the USDA will release the numbers of second and third operators, which might be how some female farmers are quantified — for example, daughters farming alongside their fathers and brothers. The second and third operators were not included in the preliminary USDA report.



LEADING LADIES

Kathy Robertson



**AG OPERATION:** Maranatha Farm

**LOCATION:** Near Hopewell, Johnson County

**SIZE:** Twenty acres

**WHO SHARES FARMING DUTIES:** Husband, Joe Robertson, fixes fences, and grown children, Rebekah, Charity and Jonah, help with animals

**TYPE OF PRODUCT:** She raises Shetland sheep, rabbits

and pygmy goats to sell, and also has eggs, strawberries and asparagus along with a vegetable garden for personal use.

**HOW TO BUY:** eBay classifieds

**WHAT SHE DOES:** Breeds and cares for the animals

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Sometimes things get “wild,” like the Christmas she brought a newborn goat into the house during a stretch

of bad weather.

**BIGGEST REWARD:** Working with baby animals

**OF NOTE:** Her animals are part of the petting zoo at Apple Works.

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** “I do think that women have a sixth sense about how animals are doing. Like you can look at a kid, you can look at their eyes and know they don’t feel good.”

LEADING LADIES

Sarah Dye

**AG OPERATION:** Schooner Creek Farm

**LOCATION:** Brown County

**SIZE:** Three-and-a-half acres

**WHO SHARES FARMING DUTIES:** Husband, Doug Dye

**TYPE OF PRODUCT:** Heirloom and chemical-free produce and perennials

**WHERE TO BUY:** Bloomington Community Farmers Market

**WHAT SHE DOES:** Shares farm duties equally with husband and works the market

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Balancing motherhood and farming

**BIGGEST REWARD:** Connection to the land, raising her 4-year-old son in a healthy environment

**OF NOTE:** She plans to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity to develop her carpentry skills so that she can tackle projects like a goat shed with confidence.

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** “I feel like there is a part of us (women) that has been kind of buried and oppressed for many, many generations, and I believe that by getting back into the soil and nurturing — as the natural nurturers that we are — (when we’re) nurturing the seeds and caring for crops, it’s kind of like delving into something ancient and beautiful that we’ve known forever.”



Resources for Women in Agriculture

A list of helpful organizations, conferences and sites

Organizations and Programs

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) is a source of grants and education for sustainable agriculture innovation. [www.northcentralsare.org](http://www.northcentralsare.org)

Purdue University’s Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Team offers educational resources and education around agriculture and related topics. [www.extension.purdue.edu/anr](http://www.extension.purdue.edu/anr)

Growing Forward, a program of Farm Credit Mid-America Association (covering Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee), engages, educates and assists young and beginning farmers. [www.e-farmcredit.com](http://www.e-farmcredit.com)

USDA’s Farm Services Agency targets a portion of its loan funds to minorities and women farmers and ranchers. [www.fsa.usda.gov](http://www.fsa.usda.gov)

Hoosier Organic Marketing Education provides education concerning organic food and farming, and links farmers to funding. Email: [CVOF@earthlink.net](mailto:CVOF@earthlink.net)

Local Growers Guild connects and supports small farmers and promotes local food. [www.localgrowers.org](http://www.localgrowers.org)

Conferences

Purdue Extension’s Indiana Small Farm Conference supports small and alternative growing operations. [ag.purdue.edu/extension/smallfarms](http://ag.purdue.edu/extension/smallfarms)

Purdue Extension’s Women in Agriculture team plans an annual conference and smaller regional meetings as well. [ag.purdue.edu/extension/WIA](http://ag.purdue.edu/extension/WIA)

Websites

Farmer Jane is a hub for women farmers. [www.farmerjane.org](http://www.farmerjane.org)

Annie’s Project offers “Risk Management Education for Farm and Ranch Women.” [www.extension.iastate.edu/annie](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/annie)

Missouri Alternatives Center compiles information from extension agencies and other sources. [agebb.missouri.edu/mac](http://agebb.missouri.edu/mac)

Agricultural Marketing Resource Center is a national clearinghouse for value-added agriculture, offering help with business planning and enterprise development. [agmrc.org](http://agmrc.org)

Center for Crop Diversification (University of Kentucky) offers printed and electronic resources on “new crops” and marketing channels. [www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/intro.html](http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/intro.html)

decisions with their husbands.”

Sarah Jordan, a Farm Credit loan officer, says she’s also noticed the trend: “I’m seeing more women getting involved with their husbands.” While she hasn’t observed a large number of women applying for farm loans on their own, this scenario may become more likely with a recent new service being made available in Indiana, Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio.

“We have a new program called Growing Forward, which is geared toward younger beginning farmers, and women would definitely qualify as part of that program,” Jordan explains. The relaxed underwriting standards allow loan officers some flexibility in getting new farmers on their feet. (See sidebar on resources.)

That’s good news from the perspec-

tive of Purdue Extension Educator Roy Ballard, who is the state coordinator for Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE). He notes that women make up over half the vendors in the Hoosier Harvest Market, an online marketplace of locally grown and produced food. From the beekeeper to the cheesemaker to the beef producer, women growers are capitalizing on this opportunity to get their products to consumers.

The ratio of women to men may be even more lopsided in an urban setting as community gardening takes hold. Kay Niedenthal, who has been an urban farmer in Indianapolis for a few decades, notes that lately she sees more women getting their hands dirty “in community gardens and those kinds of efforts.”

Indeed, industrial agriculture seems dominated by men, while the growing

numbers of women seem to be concentrated in the small farm arena. Of the 5,745 farms that the Census of Agriculture lists as having women principal operators in Indiana, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) are farming fewer than 50 acres.

Cissy Bowman, founder of Hoosier Organic Marketing Education (HOME), says she suspects that women are drawn to diversified produce growing, versus the monocropping typical of commercial operations. Through several decades as a small farmer and advocate for organic food, Bowman has attended countless agriculture conferences and gatherings, where she’s lately seen the ratio of men to women shift. “I don’t have any statistics to quote, but I can tell you that when I first started working in it (agriculture), I might (have been) the only woman at a con-

ference, and now there’s definitely a whole lot more of them.”

A younger demographic is taking advantage of such opportunities, says Heckaman. Though the average age of Hoosier women proprietors is listed as 59.4 in the 2012 Census, this year’s Women in Agriculture conference and regional meeting trended younger. “We’re starting to see an influx of younger women involved,” Heckaman says. The average age of attendees was between 45 and 55.

Bowman, who has been on the planning committee for the Indiana Small Farm Conference as well as the Indiana Horticulture Congress, says that as child care becomes increasingly available at such gatherings, more farmers who are mothers will be able to attend these annual events.



LEADING LADIES

Kim Beesley-Shatto

**AG OPERATION:** Shatto's Poseys and Pumpkins

**LOCATION:** Near North Vernon, Jennings County

**SIZE:** Seven acres of produce and mums, plus 13 greenhouses

**WHO SHARES FARMING DUTIES:** Husband, Ralph Shatto

**TYPE OF PRODUCT:** Mums, produce, cut flowers

**WHERE TO BUY:** Farmers markets, flower shops, garden centers

**WHAT SHE DOES:** "Whatever's needed," but mainly she tends greenhouse plants

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Long hours, except for January and February

**BIGGEST REWARD:** Being her own boss

**OF NOTE:** Son, Ethan, 13, was diagnosed with leukemia in 2009. Beesley-Shatto's flexible work schedule allowed her to continue tending plantings while taking him for treatment at Riley Hospital. He is now in remission and doing well.

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** "I've worked for somebody else, and I've worked for myself. If I decide to sit down on a five-gallon bucket and think about what I want to do next, I can do that, because I know I'm not going to get paid if I don't get up and do whatever I want to do."



you're starting to see them." And things are much better than they were when Bowman started out, some three decades ago. "I can remember being on buses going to conferences, and (I'd) have somebody look at me and say, 'What are you?' I'd say I was a farmer, and they'd start laughing," she recalls. The respect might have been slow in coming, but no one can deny the impact of women on agriculture now. And Bowman, who administers grants in her role with HOME, notes that as far as funding, there's no gender barrier. "There are programs out there," she explains. "Anything a man is eligible for by way of funding or education, a woman is eligible for, too."

In the financial scene that loan officers like Jordan oversee, the same holds true: "It's definitely a level playing field with Farm Credit on the financing side," Jordan says. "We look at each applicant as an individual, and we don't see any barriers between the sexes there."

So what are the unique strengths that women bring to the agricultural table? Roy Ballard, in his experience coordinating SARE and facilitating the Hoosier Harvest Market, has found that networking is a particularly female skill. "I'm generalizing here so I'll probably get in trouble," he says, "but I think they tend to create social networks better and collaborate among themselves a little bit better sometimes."

He's also seen flexibility in women farmers, who often bring innovation and creativity to their endeavors. "They do their homework," he says. "They come at it with lot of enthusiasm, a lot of passion, and they seem to be very good at what they do. Not that the men aren't, but I think the women are willing to reach out and embrace new concepts, new ideas and new products."

"In general, women see the world in a slightly different perspective because they have been the ones who have to nurture and have not had to think in that competitive level," Bowman says. "(So) they may be more likely to find solutions with everybody working together, as opposed to 'I need to win.'"

The bottom line, adds Bowman: "They can do it!"

LEADING LADIES

Anna Chase

**AG OPERATION:** Artesian Farm

**LOCATION:** Hancock County

**SIZE:** 800 acres (100 acres of woodlot, 150 of pasture/hay, 550 of corn and soy, with 20 acres recently certified organic, and a plan to convert more acres to organic each year over next four years)

**WHO SHARES FARMING DUTIES:** The eighth-generation family farm is co-owned among eight siblings and cousins. A farm partner is the operator, and a cousin who lives on the farm oversees property maintenance.

**TYPE OF PRODUCT:** 100 percent grass-fed beef

**WHERE TO BUY:** Contact her at [artesianfarm@att.net](mailto:artesianfarm@att.net).

**WHAT SHE DOES:** She and husband, Dan Chase, who live in Indianapolis and are both retired, regularly work on fencing and woods maintenance. She is in charge of bookkeeping and maintaining the organic transition plan and related paperwork, and she also serves as family facilitator, keeping all as involved as they wish to be, in immediate and long-term farm planning.

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** The complex work of preparing for the next generation, preserving what is precious and unique, while establishing sustainable systems on which they can build.

**BIGGEST REWARD:** Working toward sustainability on the land imbued with family history.

**OF NOTE:** Every May she continues to host the annual wildflower walk her mother started years ago, showcasing the diverse wildflower population in the woods.

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** "When I'm there I have a sense of past generations. I never feel like I'm alone there. ... I've just had that feeling ever since I was a teenager. When I'm there the past is with me, and my relatives are, too. Some I've just heard about and never met, but I've heard a lot about them. It's good to carry that on."

Because they're typically the primary nurturers in the family, women often have trouble getting away, and if they're breast-feeding or home-schooling, the complications mount. For a model of a conference on the cutting edge in this regard, Bowman points to a child care program in place for years at MOSES Organic Farming Conference in Wisconsin. She hopes that quality child care becomes the norm at farm conferences, because "women automatically have a little more trouble, historically, getting to conferences when (they're) the ones responsible for being the food source and everything else."

"If each of us finds our passion and makes a commitment to find the path in how to complete our life's journey, it will come to pass."  
—Anna Welch

Indeed, women who farm typically wear many more hats than their male counterparts. Many are involved in advocating for agriculture beyond the farm, Heckaman has found, along with serving in their roles as wife, mother, bookkeeper and employee outside the farm.

Many also act as resident mediator. Heckaman describes it this way: "Probably the most unique and challenging thing — honestly, they're the peacemaker in the family," she says. "Especially if multiple generations are involved in a farming operation, mom is always viewed as the peacemaker. Mom is just always the conduit between dad and son or daughter."

Several other challenges face women farmers. Niedenthal lists "brute strength" and "mechanical skills" among hers. Identifying herself jokingly as "single, without someone to lift heavy things or fix the tractor or the tiller," she says that sometimes she surprises herself. "I have discovered that I'm a lot stronger than I expected I would be ... and I now have a much better set of tools and I know how to use them."

The learning curve may be steep, but even trickier is navigating the sometimes treacherous waters as a woman in a traditionally male field. "I always like to think that in the year 2014 we've gotten past the stereotype that women (can't be) the sole owners, or sole decision makers, to be treated equally as men," Heckaman says. "But I know some women still have challenges being accepted in that role."

Bowman concurs. "There are still those people out there that think a woman should be staying home with her children," she explains. While most of the women interviewed denied facing a gender barrier, these outdated attitudes do persist in some pockets.

Anna Welch of Fields of Agape has

encountered this issue in her endeavors in Carthage, where she's working with a team of people to establish a cooperative mill. "If a woman tries to give input on farming or engineering, it doesn't go over well," she says. Welch says she has learned to tone down her communication delivery to keep from shutting conversations down. "I do think it's a woman thing. Sometimes we are perceived as controlling."

Heckaman expects to see less of that as more women take on jobs traditionally held by men. For example, the roles of seed consultant and agronomist are now increasingly held by women, as banking and lending roles have been for a few generations.

"More women are involved in those agribusiness industries," she says, "and that helps women (farmers) — some of those barriers are starting to come down."

"In the time I've been in extension that has changed tremendously," Heckaman says, looking back at her 19 years of service, "because when I first started ... in agronomy and some of those other fields, you didn't find women, and now

**AG OPERATION:** Miss Mary's Wellness and Community Garden, a project of Center of Wellness for Urban Women

**LOCATION:** Westside Indianapolis, Marion County

**SIZE:** Ten vegetable and herb beds, including an elevated one for seniors

**WHO SHARES FARMING DUTIES:** Volunteers and community members

**TYPE OF PRODUCT:** Vegetables, herbs, fruit

**WHERE TO BUY:** The produce is given to community members and used in the nonprofit's programming

**WHAT SHE DOES:** Coordinates garden classes in a community space

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Funding

**BIGGEST REWARD:** Helping to address public health problems in Indianapolis

**OF NOTE:** The garden is on a lot owned by a granddaughter of the late "Miss Mary," a centenarian who lived there for years and owned her own restaurant on Indiana Avenue in the 1940s. Neighbors remember picking fruit from Miss Mary's peach trees.

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** "My mother's side of the family had seven women. And I have three uncles, and all three of them had muscular dystrophy. ... So I can't go whine to my aunts (about physical labor) because they look at me like I'm crazy. Many times at the garden, it's just females; it's just us lifting and moving and doing what we have to do. Sometimes you just have to, you know, toughen up."

LEADING LADIES

Rhonda Bayless

"I wouldn't say that I'm a farmer — more of an ally."







LEADING LADIES

# Lois Hatfield

**AG OPERATION:** Several joint operations, including Borton Cattle Co.

**LOCATION:** Northern, central and southern Rush County

**SIZE:** Large commercial ag operations

**WHO SHARES FARMING DUTIES:** Her two brothers, sometimes nephews and her grown sons

**TYPE OF PRODUCT:** Grain

**WHAT SHE DOES:** Everything her brothers do: Operate the tractor and field cultivator during planting season, and the tractor and grain cart during harvest season. "I don't drive the semi, but I can in a pinch," she says. Hatfield also does much of the bookkeeping.

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Explaining to non-farming friends what she does and why she has little down time, even in winter.

**BIGGEST REWARD:** Working with family

**OF NOTE:** She and her brothers are the 13th generation of farmers in their family.

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** "My boys were able to be with me in the tractor from a relatively young age. We'd do their spelling words as we were out in the field, and we'd do their multiplication tables."

LEADING LADIES

# Anita Spencer

**AG OPERATION:** Homestead Growers and Local Folks Foods

**LOCATION:** Sheridan, Hamilton County

**SIZE:** Two acres, plus hoop houses

**WHO SHARES FARMING DUTIES:** Husband, Steve Spencer, and brother-in-law, Jeff Spencer

**TYPE OF PRODUCT:** Chemical-free vegetables (Homestead Growers), Tomato sauces and stoneground mustard (Local Folks Foods)

**WHERE TO BUY:** Green Bean Delivery, grocery stores throughout the Midwest

**WHAT SHE DOES:** Bookkeeping, product demos, growing select crops

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Balancing family life with farm demands

**BIGGEST REWARD:** Knowing she's growing healthy food for the customer

**OF NOTE:** The farmland has been in their family since 1838

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** "You have to love farming to do it. You can't go into it thinking you'll make lot of money, because you don't, and you can't go into it thinking it's easy work, because it's not. You've got to love being outside. You just have to love what you're doing." \*FI



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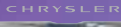
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