

# PATCHWORK

Working with women  
farmland owners to achieve  
their conservation and land  
management goals.

*Women Caring for the  
Land<sup>SM</sup>* is a program of  
Women, Food and  
Agriculture Network.

info@wfan.org  
515-460-2477  
www.wfan.org



**Sisters Martha Skillman (left) and Charlotte Shivers inherited family farmland near Knoxville, IA. They have worked to create a long-range farm plan and found a tenant who shares their vision.**

## Welcome to the first issue of *Patchwork*!

***Women own or co-own half the farmland in the Midwest, and an increasing number are sole owners.***

WFAN has been working with women farmland owners since 2003, listening to what you want for your farmland. Many of you express strong conservation values, and want to pass your family farm on to a new family who will love it and take care of it as you have.

We have created a program called *Women Caring for the Land<sup>SM</sup>* to help you plan for

conservation and transition of your farmland.

Many women are inheriting land who have never been involved in the day-to-day management decisions of the farm. They are eager for information on best management practices, cost-share and assistance programs, and language to use when discussing conservation with their tenants.

Since 2009, we have met with nearly 400 women farmland owners all over Iowa, Nebraska, and Wisconsin in “learning circles” meetings – informal, peer-to-peer

gatherings where women share with one another their experiences, challenges and goals as landowners who want to be good stewards of their land. We provide them with resources and contacts to help them reach those goals.

Women who attend appreciate these meetings, and often ask us when we are coming back to their community again. This newsletter, *Patchwork*, will be our way of continuing to provide you with information and resources until we are able to meet again in person!



***Beth Cathcart has created a way to fuse two of her passions – raising livestock and making pottery – on her Linn Grove, IA, farm. Read a profile of Beth and Rocking M Farm inside.***



Beth walking the pasture with partner Brian Fulton, grandson Freddy on her back.

## Landowner Spotlight: **Beth Cathcart – Rocking M Pottery and Premium Grassfed Beef**

BY SARAH BURKE

Raising beef and making pottery might seem like an unlikely combination, but for Beth Cathcart, owner of Rocking M Pottery & Premium Grassfed Beef in Linn Grove, IA, it's a natural fusion of her passions.

"It's all about creativity," she says. "I'm an artist who loves animals, being outdoors, and having my hands in the soil." Whether building fence, moving cattle, tending her garden, or glazing stoneware in her studio, Cathcart allows her artistic energy and vision to shape everything she does.

Farming is a family tradition dating back to the 1870s, when Cathcart's great-grandparents settled in Linn Grove and began raising Hereford cattle. Two generations later, Cathcart's father engaged in innovative

conservation practices to improve the farm's health and diversity, building a pond, planting shrubs for birds, tending the native prairie, and using terracing and contour farming.

In Cathcart's family, "women didn't work in the field or with animals. And we were raised to leave the farm for an easier life." She pursued her lifelong artistic interests, moving away from home, earning a bachelor of fine arts degree from Wayne State College (NE), and working in the commercial arts industry in Omaha after graduation.

As her father aged, however, he grew concerned about the future of the land, the soil, and the animals he had cared for all his life. After years of worry, Cathcart remembers, he finally conceded. "'You're the farmer,'

## More Resources

*Curious about how to manage your pasture and grassland more sustainably? ATTRA can help.*

Visit <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/livestock/pasture.html> for a comprehensive list of free and low-cost publications on a variety of pasture and grassland management topics, including:

- *Pasture, Rangeland and Grazing Management*
- *Pastures: Sustainable Management*
- *Rotational Grazing*
- *Converting Cropland to Perennial Grassland*

Some cost-share funds are available through the **NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** for grassland and pasture improvements. Contact your local NRCS office for details. In Iowa, you can find your local office here: <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=ia>

Also, **Practical Farmers of Iowa** ([practicalfarmers.org](http://practicalfarmers.org), 515-232-5661) has lots of information on managed grazing.

## Hooping It Up

If you are curious about hoop buildings for livestock raising, here is a link to several publications from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Iowa State University.

[www3.abe.iastate.edu/hoop\\_structures/](http://www3.abe.iastate.edu/hoop_structures/)





he said. 'Yes, I am,' I replied. And that was about all that was said."

After her father's death, Cathcart returned to the family farm and continued his legacy of conservation and stewardship. She uses minimal equipment and the cattle's natural grazing habits to decrease her reliance on fossil fuels. Her animals graze on fresh pasture forage. During the winter, they are fed stockpiled grass on crop fields, spreading fertilizer to build healthy tilth. She expresses pride and satisfaction in raising animals naturally and providing food for others. "Nothing gives me more pleasure than to sell meat direct to customers who are



Beth's pottery studio.

knowledgeable, appreciate healthy eating, and who consciously support small farming endeavors."

Cathcart describes farming as an ongoing process of hands-on education and discovery. "I have learned by doing, studying, observing, and access

to the priceless mentoring of neighbors and this community."

Connecting with like-minded people is an integral part of her conservation practices, and she urges other women landowners interested in conservation to seek out help and support from professionals and other farmers through organizations like the DNR, SARE, and WFAN.

Cathcart has a 70-year plan for her land and hopes that her vision and goals will keep the farm healthy and sustainable well into the future. Long-term projects include restoring native warm-season grasses to provide sustenance during drought, building rich soil, and reducing water runoff and flooding.

She is also working to restore native oak savanna to create wildlife habitat. Recognizing that her 240-acre farm could easily be absorbed by a larger operation, Cathcart describes her approach to keeping Rocking M viable: "I am building a family economy that



The garden at Rocking M.

will sustain operating costs and allow family members to live here long after I'm retired."

Cathcart sees her work at Rocking M as a way to connect with her ancestral roots while also improving the land for future generations. "This area offered [my great-grandparents] a way of life," she says, "just as it does for us today. I would like to think that my grandchildren and their children will have access to privately owned land."

In addition to drawing inspiration from past, present, and future generations, Cathcart continues to draw inspiration from the land itself: "After the day is done and the evening's sun is setting, I can be at peace knowing that I did what I could for that day. Then the lure to create draws me to the pottery studio, where I observe the changing light as it transforms the landscape."

Learn more about Beth's work at [rockingmpottery.com](http://rockingmpottery.com).

## Other Helpful Resources

If you would like to permanently protect your farmland, timber, prairie, or stream for future generations, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) is a private non-profit organization which can help you. Their informative booklet, *Landowner's Options*, is available free of charge and at no obligation on-line at [www.inhf.org/landowners-options.cfm](http://www.inhf.org/landowners-options.cfm)

To receive a free printed copy of *Landowner's Options* sent by mail, send an e-mail to INHF requesting "The LOO book." Be sure to include your name and mailing address.

If you have questions about the book or would like confidential, no-obligation information about protecting your land's natural resources, contact INHF's staff at 515-288-1846.



Ed Cox, Drake Ag Law Center

## Resource Spotlight: Drake Resource Can Help You Use Your Farm Lease to Protect Your Farm's Soil

BY SARAH BURKE

For a landowner exploring natural resource conservation options, the web can offer a wealth of guidance and support. The website [SustainableFarmLease.org](http://SustainableFarmLease.org) seeks to empower landowners to improve sustainability on leased farmland by providing information on conservation issues and the social dynamics of developing lasting, profitable relationships with tenants.

This website is a joint educational project of the [Drake Agricultural Law Center](http://Drake Agricultural Law Center) and the [Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture](http://Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture) at Iowa State University. Edward Cox, a Drake Agricultural Law Center Fellow, says, "The first and most critical step for landowners is simply knowing that it is their land, that it is their legacy which is attached to the land, and that they have the right to ensure its proper stewardship using a lease document."

He recommends the site's [Landowner's Toolbox](http://Landowner's Toolbox) as a promising starting point for research. After landowners review the basics of farm leases, Cox suggests visiting the section on [Determining Priorities](http://Determining Priorities), or going directly to Chapter Five of The Landowner's Guide, [Key Considerations for a Sustainable Farm Lease](http://Key Considerations for a Sustainable Farm Lease). "This is the real meat and potatoes of the guide, and has a variety of sample lease provisions with links explaining their legal consequences," he says.

[SustainableFarmLease.org](http://SustainableFarmLease.org) also offers videos exploring the various forces shaping agricultural land tenure and stewardship in Iowa. Cox says, "I think the videos on the site are one of the most enjoyable resources. Probably the keystone video is 'Iowa's Land Tenure and Stewardship Policy.' It examines the duty of stewardship established by Iowa's courts and legislature, and also explores the role of landowner, farmer, and the public in promoting sustainable agriculture."

More than 10,000 people visited [SustainableFarmLease.org](http://SustainableFarmLease.org) last year, and Cox has received a great deal of positive feedback from users. He says, "I think the most rewarding success stories are from landowners who said they had concerns about the way their land was farmed but didn't know they could require conservation practices in their lease. I hope the resources provide a way for landowners and tenants to bring the needs of the land and the rural community into their lease negotiations."

Questions? You can reach Ed at [edward.cox@drake.edu](mailto:edward.cox@drake.edu), or 515-271-2205.





## Agency Partner Spotlight: **Kathy Koskovich, Iowa DNR**

Kathy Koskovich has been working as a private lands wildlife biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for the past 11 years, but her passion for land stewardship goes all the way back to childhood.

"I grew up an Iowa farm girl with an interest in nature and conservation," she says.

Koskovich, who holds a master's degree in animal ecology from Iowa State University, now



American woodcock, also known as the "timberdoodle."

offers wildlife habitat assistance to landowners who wish to integrate conservation practices into their farming operations.

"Helping a landowner interested in conservation is all about listening to what they want to see for their land. Oftentimes, they are very surprised that someone from a natural resource agency can actually come out to their farm and walk the land with them," she says.

If a landowner feels overwhelmed about options and resources, she often recommends taking small steps. "While it is best to always consider a whole farm approach to conservation planning, starting with one key conservation program can be the best way to begin and not be too overwhelmed," she says. "No matter what program may be used, I will assist a landowner through the whole process from beginning to end."

Koskovich's extensive knowledge and tireless dedication make her a strong agency partner for women landowners who want

to strike a balance between agriculture and natural resource conservation. Building lasting relationships with landowners is one of the most rewarding parts of her job.

"I don't just go away after the conservation project is done. I have several women who continue to contact me on both a professional and a community basis. I find these women inspiring."

Overall, Koskovich views her work as a vital and fulfilling service with the potential to leave a lasting impact.

"Personally, working as a conservation professional is a way to give something back to the land and to future generations."



Kathy Koskovich, wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

### How are your mussels?

Most of us call them all clams, but a 2011 DNR survey found living representatives of 34 species of mussels in Iowa waterways. Mussels are an indicator of water quality, so take a closer look at the "clams" you find in the creeks

and rivers near you. Mussels have pretty interesting names. Here is a sample of what the surveyors found:

Paper pondshell  
Giant floater  
Cylindrical papershell  
Creepers  
Elktoe  
White heelsplitter  
Fluted-shell  
Creek heelsplitter  
Pistolgrip  
Butterfly  
Hickorynut

Deertoe  
Fawnsfoot  
Fragile papershell  
Pink papershell  
Lilliput  
Black sandshell  
Pondmussel  
Ellipse  
Yellow sandshell  
Fatmucket  
Plain pocketbook  
Higgins' eye pearly mussel (pictured)



Photographer: Mike Park, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

## Meet Members of the *Women Caring for the Land*<sup>SM</sup> team!



**Laura Krouse** is a farmer and soil commissioner near Mt. Vernon, IA. She organized and facilitated the 2009 WCL pilot series.



**Jean Eells, PhD,** has farming roots in central Iowa and works with WFAN as a subcontractor generating and evaluating programs, including WCL.



**Chris Henning** is a conservation farmer, a sustainable agriculture activist and community advocate in Greene County, IA. She facilitates many of our western Iowa meetings.



**Lynn Heuss** is WFAN's program coordinator, and organizes and facilitates WCL meetings all over the Midwest. She lives in Des Moines.



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WFAN  
PO BOX 611  
AMES, IA 50010-0611

