

## **Title: Darleen Krisher-Meehan: Getting the Whole Picture of Soil Health**

Despite growing up on a 200-cow dairy, Darleen Krisher-Meehan wasn't involved in the operation and didn't envision working in the industry. After graduating from high school, she worked for a moving company until her brother drew her back to agriculture. He purchased a feed mill and needed a secretary, and she agreed. When he sold the business in 1999, the new owners offered Darleen a position but closed the mill five years later.

"Suddenly, I was out of a job," she said "My husband was cash cropping and we decided to open our own store. I didn't want to purchase the other business because I didn't want to get into bulk feed."

The couple purchased 15 acres of vacant ground, started selling out of their house while building a small store. Country Crossroads Seeds and Feeds officially opened in January 2004 selling seeds (forage, cover crops, corn, etc.), fertilizer, and bagged animal feeds. Services include bulk lime spreading, free pH testing, and non-restricted chemical sales.

She soon discovered that she particularly enjoyed the agronomy side of the business, eagerly asking questions of customers and seed and fertilizer reps to learn about soil health and efficiency. Participation in the 2015 Empire State Food and Agricultural Leadership Institute, or [LEAD New York](#), program further fueled her interest in soil health.

In 2018, she read an article calling for applicants to participate in the "Practical New York Soil Health Specialist Training" program. Jointly hosted by American Farmland Trust, the Cornell's Comprehensive Assessment of Soil Health program, in partnership with the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, the training is creating a network of agricultural service professionals who can support and educate farmers on improving soil health.

"I was fortunate enough to get accepted. It has been another great tool in my toolbox, a good resource to have," she said. "I can reach out to anyone from the program with a question that I can't answer for a customer."

The two-year program brought the group together at six different farms focused on supporting soil health. The group walked the farms, looked at soil profiles and plots, talked with the farmers and equipment operators and heard from leading researchers in the region.

"Getting to see the equipment and how it influenced soil health brought it all together for me," she said. "I'm not involved with the equipment on our farm, and I realized that sometimes that created a disconnect."

Not only was Darleen eager to share the newfound knowledge with customers, but it also supported her interests in cover crops on the family farm. When she suggested giving them a try, her husband countered that it was too expensive or that they didn't own the right type of equipment. The Practical New York Soil Health Specialist Training armed her with the information to change his mind.

“He was that classic, traditional farmer,” she said. “I was able to convince him to try it with a small area. Last year we had 35 to 40 acres planted in cover crops, and he said he is seeing that it has made a difference in the soil.”

She is eager to share her knowledge with others. In 2019, they planted 15 plots of cover crops and hosted a gathering where farmers could see soil samples at different locations on the farm. She looks forward to hosting another event in July 2021.

“My seed guys have been talking to me about cover crops for five or six years before this program, but they really didn't catch on,” she said. “In the last two years, they've gained a lot of momentum.”

Darleen currently serves as President of the Allegany County Farm Bureau. She is also a P&E representative on the NY Farm Bureau State Board and secretary for the Allegany-Steuben Holstein Club. As a teenager she never imagined her life's work would follow in her parent's footsteps but agriculture, and agronomy, have become her mission.

She has passed along her love for the industry to her children. Nathan is involved with the cash crops and her daughter Mackenzie is returning to agriculture too, so the family purchased a second seed mill for Mackenzie to run. Darleen credits the Soil Health Specialist Training Program with giving her more in-depth knowledge about soil health and utilizing soil sampling to get maximum yields for both her customers and her own farm.

“Through the Soil Health Specialist Training Program, I have gained more in-depth knowledge about soil health and utilizing soil sampling to get maximum yields for my customers and my own farm,” she said. “It brought me from just being a seed salesman to the whole picture. With that knowledge, I'm able to sell more, because I'm able to do my job better.”

To find out more about the Soil Health Specialist Training program, please visit <https://farmland.org/project/new-york-soil-health-specialists/>