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# A network of Wisconsin women farmers preach the value of sustainable agriculture and living connected to the land — and each other



Lisa Kivirist had never planted a seed in her life.

But she felt trapped in Chicago, dealing with the ennui that can afflict young adults who begin a career and then find themselves asking: *Is this it?*

She and her husband started escaping their advertising jobs for rural Wisconsin on weekends, and found themselves increasingly drawn to the land. By 1996, they had scraped together enough money to buy a couple of acres, and decided to make a go of it.

After moving to Browntown, just west of Monroe and north of the Illinois border, she began practicing sustainable farming, and found herself wanting to connect with other like-minded women farmers.

"I knew there should be other people," she said.

In 2009, Kivirist looked up names and invited women within an hour's drive to come for a meeting at her home. Twelve showed up.

The Soil Sisters were born — the name the women gave themselves as they nurtured a network of like-minded and self-taught women farmers who aim to reconnect people to their food and their communities. From sharing stories to swapping goats, from launching water-quality experiments to lobbying for legislation that gives them more operating independence, the women are “making things happen,” Kivirist said.

Some were attracted to the idea of being closer to their food and further from the chemicals and preservatives they associate with "Big Agriculture." Others had health issues in their families they suspected were, in part, the fault of what was in their water and soil. Many were already in concert with the land, but wanted to connect with neighbors.

"The ‘culture’ in ‘agriculture’ has been stolen, and we need to get that culture back," said April Prusia, a sustainable farmer from the area who wanted to try her hand at raising pigs humanely.

Today, the network is 250 members strong, all living in and around Green County in southwestern Wisconsin. And yes, men are allowed. Soil Sisters is now affiliated with [Renewing the Countryside](#), a nonprofit organization that champions and supports rural communities, farmers, artists, entrepreneurs, educators, activists and other people interested in sustainable initiatives.

For the past decade, Soil Sisters has hosted a weekend of culinary and educational workshops to share experiences, provide support and offer advice to farm-curious novices who want to live and work sustainably. This year's gathering, with 20 workshops, begins Friday and runs through Sunday.

## **Different topics, one theme**

The topics, like the women and their families, vary but have a unifying bond.

Kivirist and her husband, John Ivanko, are hosting a workshop called "[Sustainable Living Simplified](#)," which is essentially their personal story.



When they moved to their farmstead 26 years ago, they had a vision in mind and none of the experience to make it happen.



They couldn't even germinate zucchini, "which is both indicative and embarrassing," Kivirist recalled with a laugh, thinking back to their many failures early on.

"You have to fail," she said. "Sometimes, things come out in ways you don't expect."

Now she and Ivanko run a small-scale farm that produces 75% of their food needs. They also run [Inn Serendipity](#), powered entirely by renewable energy and considered a "carbon negative" operation, meaning it captures more carbon dioxide annually than it emits. Guests take showers "complements of the sun," Kivirist said.

Kriss Marion — co-founder of [Circle M Farm](#) in Blanchardville — never thought she would be a farmer. Bedridden in Chicago with chronic pain, she couldn't imagine ever being able to use her hands, let alone farm.

Now, as a testament to the "healing landscape of the Driftless Region," she runs a successful bed-and-breakfast farmstead, hosting guests in three trailers that she retrofitted herself, powered completely by solar energy.





Marion's workshop "[Got a Spot? Host a Farm Stay Your Way!](#)" will empower people to "start where they're at," like she did when she founded her farm hospitality business. She'll ask attendees: "What is your dream? How can we get you there?"

Bethany Storm also had no background in farming or any connection to agriculture. Like Marion, she lived in Chicago. She noticed a metallic taste in her mouth, and concluded it was from the chromium used to treat the animal hides she used as home accessories. She decided to change the tanning industry, or at least her small corner of it.

"Just like anything in my life, I said, 'Well, I think I can do this myself because (tanning's) been done for thousands of years. So why not?'" She had never tanned an animal hide. Now, she and her business partner, Danielle Dockery, run a tannery in Argyle.

She will host the workshop "[Coffee Talk with Driftless Tannery.](#)"

Jesse Wellington uprooted from the manicured suburbs of Vancouver, British Columbia. Before moving to Wisconsin, she and her husband "knew less than nothing," and had to "learn everything from scratch."

Today, they own [Red House Farm](#) in Monroe, living off the land.

Wellington, who will host the workshop “[The Homesteading Year](#),” still calls herself a “newbie” after 10 years of experience. This will be her first time teaching a workshop, which will focus on the cyclical, seasonal nature of living and working on a farm.



And then there is Prusia, who grew up in Iowa, had been farming in southwestern Wisconsin, and wanted to eat meat that was humanely raised and sustainably processed. She had never raised a pig, but now has 50, operating [Dorothy's Range](#) entirely on her own.

“I’m not an expert, but I definitely learned some tricks of the trade,” Prusia said about her workshop “[Prepping for Pigs](#).”

The workshops will be framed in a way that reflects the Soil Sisters network: sharing information, rather than lecturing.

“We are a group of women coming from all walks of life, first generation farmers ... who really want to live rurally ... and help each other succeed. And I think you can see that it's possible for people to collaborate instead of compete,” Marion said.

It’s a sisterhood where “everybody just says yes,” Strom added. When called upon, Soil Sisters provides support that “always comes back tenfold.”

## Science mixed with sisterhood

The Soil Sisters see their success in agriculture in relation to the community as a whole. Beyond being businesswomen, many are in local government, serving on community and county boards, lobbying for environmental conservation and restoration.



Prusia, Storm and Marion routinely get together to work as "citizen scientists," monitoring stream health in their watershed. Using a trout stream on Prusia's land as one of their data points, they measure phosphorus levels, dissolved oxygen, turbidity, and temperature to analyze how these values change over time.



They've been doing this work for six years, noticing patterns and sending their findings to the Department of Natural Resources. "The DNR always answers our calls," Storm said.

They've seen some troubling numbers in recent years.

Despite the sustainable methods they practice on their own land within the watershed, they cannot account for what happens upstream and downstream.

"Water connects everybody and you can't (fix it) as an island," Marion said. "You can't keep water clean as a single person. We've got to work together."

Because soil and water health depend on what other farmers are doing nearby, Marion and Prusia described the importance of knowing their neighbors.

"I think it's really hard at this point to farm in a vacuum; I don't think it ever was that successful," Marion said.

## **Pandemic created 'wake-up call'**

Prusia brings the same philosophy to her operation.

"The (meat) you see in the butcher shop in the front case of the Piggly Wiggly ... all that left here," she said, referring to the practice of shipping Wisconsin meat out of state for processing and then trucking it back into Wisconsin for sale. "Why did it leave here?"

As president of the [Meatsmith Co-op](#), Prusia is working to shift the industry to bring more of a connection between producers and consumers. This includes reintroducing the "little butcher shop that actually has local meat behind the counter" to communities.

Rampant meat shortages that occurred in 2020 served as a "wake-up call," alerting people to the flaws in unsustainable meat practices, she said. "I think we've all seen the strain on the system and just how vulnerable we let ourselves be in the name of efficiency."

Kivirist, too, reflected on how the pandemic changed her perspectives on small-scale farming. She saw her farmstead as a source of empowerment in the community, providing a sense of security that "Big Ag" can't consistently supply.

"(The pandemic) taught us that you need to know your neighbors, and you need to be self-reliant within a community. We don't want to be so independent that we're isolated. We are connected with other people."

As someone in the hospitality industry, Marion agreed that relationships between neighbors help the community succeed. She wants her guests to know "the guy down the street who grows (her) honey."

## **Climate realities spur cooperation**

Such a connection to each other has proven to be important when addressing any issue, and this continues to be true as farmers and consumers face the realities of a warming planet.

Farmers — especially those who live and work sustainably — have a direct connection to the land, which means they contend daily with the effects of climate change.





“Farmers are really paying attention to climate change because they have to,” Storm said. “They own the most land, so they can make the biggest impact with their decisions — negative and positive. ... Everyone of us recognizes it. Not one of us has their head in the sand about it.”

"If you're not living on the land, you just might not sense it," Kivirist explained. But when it comes to seeing the signs of climate change, "They are here," she said, “And that's going to affect our agricultural system much more than we realize.”

As an example, Wellington described how difficult it is to keep bees alive on her land.

She has a “bee oasis,” with 25 acres of plants and flowers on prairie land. “If we have a hard time keeping bees alive, how is anybody else going to?” she said.

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Marion was particularly devastated when the monarch butterfly made the endangered species list two weeks ago. “It really threw me through a loop,” she said. “Who doesn’t want to do their part if something that visible can fail. I mean, we haven’t failed yet ... but can we pull together ... to turn this thing around?”

The reality of the climate crisis is forcing farmers to change their ways.



“Younger generation farmers want to do better,” Storm said. “They’re not given a choice whether to do better or not. They know they can’t do it the way their grandfather did it. They have to (change). Or we will all suffer the consequences.”

Marion wonders if they can do enough, quickly enough.

“But if it’s going to happen,” she said, “it’s going to be through cooperation.”

## **'Life begets life'**

Marion sees Soil Sisters as “an island of hope in a sea of (farm) foreclosures” because of what it represents: commitment to soil health, water health, and healthy food.

“Hope grows when you’re with other people on the same track. And that’s where community comes in,” she said, referring to the Soil Sisters.

"Hope is a renewable resource," Kivirist said, "But we need to keep it fueled."

That’s why the workshops are so important to the Soil Sisters — while educational, they are meant to renew and sustain hope.



When Wellington reflected on sources of hope on her farm, she described what it felt like to watch life return after burning the prairie, an annual spring ritual.

After burning, "the whole area is black ... there's nothing there. And we'll get a rain after that happens. And you get this most incredible smell when the rain hits — it's almost like the smell of green before it's actually green. ... Hours later, it's almost like you can see the grass start to come back and start to bloom. You've got that killing fire, but it brings back life."

Life returns in new and unexpected ways, she said.

"Sometimes, when one thing dies, something else pops up in a place you didn't expect. Life begets life in surprising ways."

*"A Celebration of Wisconsin Farms & Rural Life," the annual Soil Sisters event, runs Friday, Saturday and Sunday at different locations in Green County. For a schedule and map of events, and to order tickets, go to <https://soilsisters.wixsite.com/soilsisters>.*