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Tucker Kautz: Embracing Soil Health Personally and Professionally



Protecting the environment has always been important to Tucker Kautz. Growing up on his family's 150-cow dairy in the Finger Lakes Region of New York encouraged an early passion for being a steward of the land. Milking cows wasn't in his career plan but he knew he wanted a job that would allow him to work outside, focus on conservation, and interact with farmers.

"I went to SUNY Oneonta for environmental studies. I graduated with a degree in geography. I didn't know what I wanted to do after graduation," he said. "I was working as a utility locating technician in Massachusetts and saw a posting for a soil and water conservation district job back in New York. The job was field-based environmental work conducted on farmland. I was too young to know what I was getting into but there is nothing that would be

Today, Tucker is well settled into his current role as a Sr Technician at Ontario Water Conservation District, and loves the workload diversity that agriculture Finger Lakes provides. "Soil and Water Districts in New York are small in size, conservation we get on the ground is impressive. We have tremendous support from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets in the Agricultural Environmental Management Program, and this allows me the confidence needed when bringing projects to our local farmers".

Initially, his work focused on planning and implementing traditional structural management practices on agricultural lands. Over his 13-year career with Soil Conservation Districts his work has expanded to include soil health management. Mainly, he works with farmers to encourage them to embrace soil health management practices such as cover cropping, reduced tillage and adaptive nutrient management.

As his passion for soil health grew, he began collaborating with the New York Working Group. The joint project is supported by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, Cornell College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and American Farmland Trust.

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“It was a chance to meet with other like-minded individuals and see that not everybody does things the same way, but we are all trying to reach the same goal, keeping our farmland sustainable and productive,” he said.

The “Practical New York Soil Health Specialist Training” is jointly hosted by American Farmland Trust and Cornell’s Comprehensive Assessment of Soil Health program, in partnership with the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program. The program’s purpose is to create a network of agricultural service professionals who can support and educate farmers on improving soil health.

The two-year course included multiple field days at farms across New York state. Tucker was eager to see how soil health technical experts use different strategies based on their geographical location and the region’s agricultural focus.

“Here, in Ontario County, there is a lot of big ag—large dairy and crop farms. Through the program I got to see how organic and smaller-scale farms are approaching soil health,” he said. “That was really helpful because not every soil health principle works for every single farm. By broadening my network and seeing how other operations are approaching it gives us options to consider.”

He was also eager to glean ideas to expand upon the annual workshop he produces as part of his role as a Senior Water Resource Technician for Ontario County Soil and Water Conservation District. The inaugural workshop held five years ago drew 200 participants and featured soil health expert speakers from across the country.

“We started with just a small idea. At first it was focused on getting farmers together to talk about ideas relating to soil health,” he said. “A few new farms join us every year and we’re starting to get more participation from the Mennonite community, which doesn’t participate in county, state, and federal programs like other farms, and that sometimes limits their opportunity to hear about erosion control and nutrient management.”

During the Soil Health Specialist Training, Tucker found multiple opportunities to bring new ideas to the topics discussed at the workshop. He incorporated new information and invited new contacts made through the network to expand the already well-attended event.

For example, during the 2020 workshop, the topics concentrated on adding new species into the cover crop mixes. Instead of limiting it to two, considering a blend of three to four because of what the root biomass can do for the soil. The talk also focused on why interseeding is working for some farms and not others by asking participants about the challenges. Most often the farmer’s finances, availability of equipment, and timing influenced their cover crop interseeding.

“We showed the costs breakdown that goes into cover cropping. It has been about the money side of it and how prioritizing soil health pays off in ways of your own hand,” he said.

Soil health is more than Tucker’s professional passion. He works hard to implement soil health strategies he teaches into the management of his own small beef farm in Ontario County. Along with his wife Courtney and 1-year-old daughter Madeline, Tucker is transforming his 30-acre homestead from an untamed wilderness into a productive farm. He spent the last two years clearing invasive species, planting high quality cover crops, and designing rotational pastures for his herd. “There was no grass at first...just 15 honeysuckle and goldenrod. Now, after pattern bale grazing hundreds of cows over the pasture, almost every nutrient and forage seed that has entered this farm has spread across the pasture, and it’s booming. The grass got so deep this spring that I was having trouble seeing the cows.” Practicing what he preaches gives him first-hand experience with results that can be shared with other farmers in casual conversation and during farm visits.

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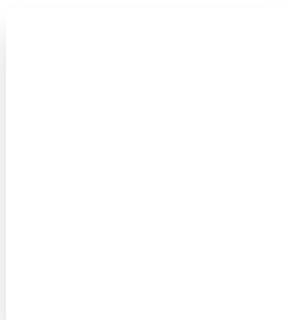


His thriving farm is a testament to that hard work as he strives to develop a legacy of environmental stewardship. His willingness to experiment and try newly evolving soil health management practices on his farm serve as an inspiration to other farmers in the region to do the same.

Learn more about the [New York Practical Soil Health Specialists Program](#).

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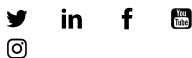
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