

Environment

Woman farmer continues dream on her own

by Rayshaan Miller

As a child, you plan your life the way you think it should go. Sometimes you achieve your goals and make the most of life, but sometimes that dream isn't as fulfilling as you had hoped it would be. For Susan Selby, life on a farm beat the city life that she thought she wanted.

Susan Selby never set out to be a farmer. The Mars, Pa. native, now living in Butler, Pa., acquired a love of gardening from her parents who owned a garden while she was growing up. Her love of dirt and plants continued to flourish as a hobby but her goal was to live in the city and work in radio after she graduated from Columbia School of Broadcasting. Selby thought that radio would be her big break. The communications field was her passion and led her to her husband, Erik Selby, whom she married in 1991.

Selby achieved her broadcasting goals and worked as traffic director of KQV all news radio in Pittsburgh. She and her late husband Erik, who passed away suddenly in April 2009, were both working at the radio station when they realized that city life wasn't enough.

"Before farming, my husband and I

Soil health flourishes with

by David Ruggiero

Farming without man-made chemicals has long been viewed as the domain of hippies and peasants—people that were too poor to buy fertilizer, too ignorant to use it or too attached to romantic notions of simplicity to make use of convenient chemical solutions. But as more information about the costs of fertilizer overuse have become available, scientists have grown increasingly worried about the environmental and health effects it poses, and farmers have begun to question the wisdom of purchasing more and more chemical answers for their problems.

"We eventually started to realize that farming the way we were [...in the 1970s, with synthetic fertilizers]...makes absolutely no sense," said Larry Breech, of

"We found our place to call heaven and just made it work."

--Susan Selby

would say that we were just putting in time in this world. Life really started after we got the farm," said Selby.

Selby's hobby of gardening led her to the farmer she is today. After joining a garden club, Selby heard a farmer speak at one of her meetings. The farmer spoke of being a community builder and a part of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Susan was hooked. She and her husband later joined a CSA and realized that they wanted to be the people that the community entrusted with their food. In October 2007, Susan and her husband bought five acres of land and began to work. They brought along her father, who had been a blacksmith for over 50 years, to help set up their dream.

"We didn't have a farming background so we started from scratch. We found our

Millville. Now retired after more than 30 years in the field, Breech not only used conventional farming practices early in his career, he also sold pesticides and fertilizers with his father. But eventually, he started to doubt the benefits of farming by these modern methods.

Modern agriculture, and the fertilizer industry that supplies it, relies heavily on the measurement of three elements—nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—necessary for plant growth. Even a bottle of Miracle-Gro will, by federal law, be labeled with the proportion of these three elements it contains—for the Miracle-Gro it's 10-10-10 or 10 percent each by weight of those three nutrients. Traditionally, farmers would send a sample of their soil to a local laboratory every year, along with a description of what crops they wanted to grow, and the lab



Photo by Erik Selby

Susan Selby of Meadow Rock Farm specializes in heirlooms on her non-certified, organic farm.

place to call heaven and just made it work. It was a lot of work to get the equipment and the crops, but it was definitely worth it," said Selby.

Selby's farm, Meadow Rock Farm and Gardens, is a non-certified, organic farm where heirlooms, crops that are grown from

seeds as old as 100 years, are the specialty. The farm also has a large herb garden and free range chickens. It serves as a CSA which has 38 members and is still growing.

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more natural nutrients

would send back a recommendation. If you need 200 pounds of nitrogen per acre, and 100 pounds each of phosphorus and potassium, you get a fertilizer company to mix you up some 20-10-10 and till in half a ton every year.

That sounds simple enough, but scientists are increasingly sounding warnings that farming based just on soil tests and N-P-K ratios (named after the chemical symbols for those three nutrients) is not enough to keep plants and soil healthy.

Nitrogen, for instance, is most useful to plants when it's part of a negative charged molecule, but since most soils also have a net negative charge, and similar charges repel one another, it's very difficult to keep nitrogen in the top foot or so of soil where plants can reach it. Instead, it tends to leach down through the soil into the groundwater,

where it can contaminate drinking water supplies, or it can flow out to sea after leaking into streams and rivers.

The Union of Concerned Scientists, a nonprofit research group dedicated to objective environmental research, lists this overabundance of nitrogen in our rivers as one of the major drawbacks of modern agricultural methods.

In a recent report (No Sure Fix, published in December 2009), the UCS states that over half of all the nitrogen added to American farms is lost rather than being taken up by crops. Not only is this missing nitrogen a drain on farmer's pocketbooks, but it's "the largest contributor to the 'dead

see [Soil health](#), pg. 16

from Dream, pg. 13

During the 21-week process of the CSA, members are prepared a basket of freshly grown produce which they can pick up every Wednesday. Selby created the CSA because of America's fixation on processed and fast foods. For the community, the farm serves as a name and face to the food that is eaten as well as a family atmosphere for getting healthy.

"My husband used to say 'Everyone needs to know their farmer.' You need to know your farmer because it gives you a footprint of where you know your food came from. We love healthy food and we wanted to share that with the rest of the community," said Selby.

Selby has been running Meadow Rock on her own since her husband passed last year. Since then, she also picked up a retail job at McGuiness Sisters grocery store to help pay the bills and expenses she has acquired with his passing. Although she has no children,

she still cares for her father and supports him.

"With running everything alone, you realize that you're stronger than you think you are mentally and emotionally. You don't need a man to do everything for you. It's a great accomplishment and nothing makes me happier to know that people are still going home and eating great food," said Selby.

As for the future of Meadow Rock Farm and Gardens, Selby hopes she can keep maintaining it as a sustainable community farm providing families with healthy food and bouquets of fresh flowers. She upholds the community aspect of the farm and her appearance as a female farmer to the people.

"There is no place that I feel happier than down on the field. It feels good that I am changing the face of the old man in overalls. I put my hands in the dirt and I like getting dirty, but I'm still lady-like and I still get manicures," said Selby.

Game Commission joins Rockview debate



Photo by Jill Gomez
Bill Capouillez, Bureau of Wildlife Habitat Management director, presented the PA Game Commission's stance on Rockview land stewardship on January 28. Other groups at the Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science & Technology were the Penn State School of Agriculture, the Spring Creek Alliance, ClearWater Conservancy and the PA Fish and Boat Commission.



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Caring for our Environment.

Song sparrows gleefully remind that spring is on its way

by Alice L. Fuller

In his field guide to birds, Roger Tory Peterson notes that the song sparrow's song is "familiar to everyone." I hope it is. It is a happy song.

Even so quite possibly many Voices readers are not acquainted with the talents of this small bird but would find it well worth their time to search for and listen to the song sparrow's early salute to spring. This is a song guaranteed to brighten any early March day—a day when a sharp wind cannot detract from the new, strong sunshine—or a day when snow flurries suddenly take us two steps back into winter.

The bird is often found in the backyard or garden and a person does not have to go far to search out this friendly, modest member of the sparrow clan and listen to his vocal efforts. It is a species most appropriately named. For its common name this bird is

BIRD
WATCH



the "song" sparrow, while the scientific label is *Melospiza melodia*.

Although retiring by nature, here is an irrepressible songster. The male perches on top of a forsythia shrub or other bush of medium height, throws back his head and lets his melodies bubble forth. The song sparrow sketched by Dorothy Bordner has burst into song on a blossoming pussy willow.

The song sparrow has a complicated song not easy to describe and each individual bird may sing a slightly different variation of the same theme. W. E. Clyde Todd writes in "Birds of Western Pennsylvania" that "never have I heard two individual songs

exactly alike; yet in spite of this diversity, the songs are very similar in form and pattern and are not easily confused with those of any other species.

Perhaps one more often hears than sees this friendly bird of brush and brier. "Neat but not gaudy" might describe his attire. It is a handsome sparrow with heavily streaked breast, distinguished by a dark brown, central spot. The breast spot is a useful field mark and distinguishes the song sparrow from other streaked relatives such as the Lincoln's or Savannah sparrow or female purple and house finches.

I recall once, though, that I was quite disconcerted by being ready to band a trapped bird and not being able to find "the spot." Accuracy is a must in bird banding so I rushed the bird to a more experienced bander. As soon as my bird was transferred to other hands and moved a few feet away, the spot fairly leaped into view.



Another help in identifying the song sparrow is its flight. If the singer is disturbed on its prominent perch, it will quickly hurry to thicker cover and give itself away by "pumping its tail in flight."

While many song sparrows migrate farther south in the winter, a number often

see Sparrows, pg. 16



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Stephanie Miller

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CLOSED MONDAYS

from **Soil health**, pg. 13

zone' in the Gulf of Mexico...in which excess nutrients have caused microbial populations to boom, robbing the water of oxygen needed by fish and shellfish."

Nitrates in drinking water are also dangerous, especially to pregnant women and children. When Larry Breech first moved to Millville, the water on his farm was nearly undrinkable—within 1/10 ppm (parts per million) of the state's allowable nitrate level for drinking water (currently set at 10 ppm). The risk to his family's health was one of the main reasons for his decision to change the way he farmed—but eventually he became convinced that abandoning synthetic fertilizers was better for his bottom line, too.

"The way the universities do soil testing is almost a sin," says Breech. "It's like looking at a trust fund that you can't access until 2020, instead of looking at your cash flow statement...you need to know what's there for this season, in a plant-available form." Instead of applying conventional fertilizers based on Penn State recommendations, Breech now uses a carefully-tailored mixture of natural ingredients such as molasses that he claims will slowly release nutrients at the correct rate for his crop. Using this method, he says, he is not only growing productive crops (over 100 bushels/acre of corn, for instance), but he had almost no weeds in his fields, and no need to cultivate for weed control. And he's built up the health of his soil and avoided wasting money on excess nitrogen that would otherwise just end up in his groundwater.

"Weeds are a symptom of a nutrient defi-

The Union of Concerned Scientists, a nonprofit research group dedicated to objective environmental research, lists this overabundance of nitrogen in our rivers as one of the major drawbacks of modern agricultural methods.

ciency," Breech says. Just as corn, alfalfa, or soybeans have their own particular nutrient demands, so do weeds, and his secret for weed suppression is neither chemical herbicides or the tractor- or hand-powered mechanical cultivation used on many organic farms. "Just find out what weeds don't like, and give it to 'em," he says.

The Union of Concerned Scientists also recommends a variety of other methods for building soil health and fertility besides the soil testing system Breech advocates. One of the most common is cover cropping, which consists of growing plants not for their cash value but solely for their benefits to soil health. Some cover crops add nitrogen to the soil—growing clover, for instance, is the practical equivalent of adding 90 pounds of pure nitrogen an acre (that's like saving 900 pounds of Miracle-Gro). Others, such as rye, will take up excess nitrogen, storing it for future breakdown in the soil instead of letting it escape into the water supply. This sort of approach—a carefully-adjusted nutrient plan and series of rotated crops, selected to account for an individual farm's particular collection of weeds, crops and soils, designed to deliver just the right amount of fertilizer at the right time, is far more difficult to summarize than the earlier methods

of just adding enough fertilizer to make up for deficiencies found in a soil test. But, as Tim LaSalle of the organic Rodale Institute recently wrote, "Yield data just by itself makes the case for...regenerative organic farming systems. When we also consider that organic systems are building the health

from **Sparrows**, pg. 15

remain in the Northeast. It is a frequent visitor to bird feeding stations, although not in the numbers of such relatives as the tree sparrow and junco. This past winter we had at least one song sparrow that was a regular visitor in our back yard, most often on the coldest, snowy days.

Perhaps this is the individual I hear when I step outside for a moment. Yesterday he joyously greeted a bright, sunny day. His clear, liquid solo was performed with a musical background composed of the twitterings of a flock of goldfinches and the soft warble of a purple finch, apparently practicing a bit before bursting into full song.

Some of the song sparrows singing now may be winter residents or possibly they have just arrived from warmer climes. Song sparrows should arrive now in numbers as well as robins, red-winged blackbirds,

of the soil, sequestering CO2, cleaning up the waterways and returning more economic yield to the farmer, the argument for an organic green revolution becomes overwhelming."

Both the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Rodale Institute have a wealth of information available online at

<http://www.ucsusa.org/> and

<http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/>, respectively.

Readers interested in learning more about Larry Breech's farming methods should begin with an organization called Acres USA, which he says have most of the resources he used to learn about farming without conventional fertilizers.

grackles and cowbirds. Our streams have broken their bondage, but most of the lakes and ponds are still sealed with ice. Around the edges the ice is slowly being pushed back by advancing water. Still the ice has not stopped some eager migrants. My husband Ted and I saw a flock of approximately 18 ring-billed gulls resting on the ice of Colyer Lake. Common mergansers, ring-necked ducks and pintails are species of waterfowl taking advantage of a bit of open water.

One of my favorite harbingers of spring is also beginning to arrive—the bluebird. Ted and I counted six bluebirds along country roads south of Colyer Lake. My daughter and I observed three perched on wires in the vicinity of Raystown Dam. If the bluebirds are beginning to arrive, it is time to erect bluebird houses and also to put up houses for other species such as house wrens and tree swallows which probably are not far behind.

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Discover ways to reduce paper usage in your home

by Heather Simmons

It is common knowledge that paper production, use and disposal is harmful for the environment, but on the other hand paper is an integral part of our everyday existence, and we use it in almost every aspect of our daily lives. We use paper for communication, storing information, packaging, cleaning, construction materials and even our currency is made from paper. So it is not surprising that according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) every year each American consumes the equivalent of one 100-foot Douglas fir tree in paper and wood products.

Not only does paper production contribute to air and water pollution but it also utilizes enormous amounts of water and energy. In fact, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration the paper industry uses approximately 11 per-



cent of the energy generated in the U.S. Paper waste, is a significant contributor to the landfill problem in the U.S., and according to the EPA paper and paperboard products account for 31percent of municipal waste (which amounted to 77 million tons in 2008).

Although the paper industry claims to plant more trees than they cut down it should be noted that tree farms do not supply the same environmental benefits as a natural forest. The first thing to consider is that not all of the trees that are planted even survive to maturity due to thinning, and those that do survive constitute a farm or a crop rather than a forest with the result that

biodiversity is lacking. This is because a crop of trees that are all the same is unable to support as wide a diversity of organisms as a natural forest.

So what can you do as an individual to reduce the environmental impacts of paper? The two main things that you can do are; recycle your used paper products and make smarter consumer choices about your paper purchases.

Not only does recycled paper generate 74 percent less air pollution, but according to the EPA recycling one ton of paper (1/77 of the amount of paper that was trashed in 2008) would save 17 trees, 7,000 gallons of water, 2 barrels of oil, 3 cubic yards of landfill space and 4,100 kilowatt-hours of electricity.

Ways that you can reduce your paper usage:

- Opt out of receiving junk mail. This can be done by going to the Federal Trade Commission list:

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt063.shtm>

- Say no to unnecessary paper receipts.
- It takes one tree to generate 700 paper bags so take your own reusable bag to the supermarket.
- Buy recycled paper products.
- Use washable dishes and dishtowels

According to the EPA, every each, each American consumes the equivalent of one 100-foot Douglas fir tree in paper and wood products

instead of disposable paper dishes and paper towels.

- Whenever possible use both sides of a piece of paper for printing and writing.

- Reduce the margins and image sizes on your documents before printing.

- Pay attention to packaging and buy the largest available container size.

- Reuse paper packaging such as envelopes and cardboard boxes.

- Choose to receive your catalogs electronically instead of by snail mail.

A useful site for this is <http://www.catalogchoice.org/>

- Sign up for e-statements and pay your bills online.

- Choose digital subscriptions of your favorite magazines and if they are not currently available write to the company and request an online version.

- Pay for downloaded music online instead of buying CD's.

- Check out books from your local library, or buy used books instead new. Alternatively you could use electronic devices such as kindle.

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If you have any suggestions, comments or additional tips please post them at www.voicesontheweb.org

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