

Environment

Women farmers take to the fields, naturally

by Nicole Stern

“Now, you want to make sure to breathe out when exerting pressure,” instructed Shane LaBrake as he pushed on a large wrench to loosen a bolt on a tractor.

“Oh, just like during labor!” added a voice from the group, inducing a roar of laughter.

The farmers who stood around a group of tractors and learned to change oil, filters and spark plugs in the Snider Ag Arena Feb. 2 were not what one would expect. The 12 women, ranging from college student to grandmother, spent the day getting their hands dirty while learning equipment maintenance at one of three pre-conference workshops within the Women in Agriculture track at the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture 15th annual conference, held at Penn State’s University Park campus.

“I enjoy working with women because of their willingness to ask questions and make mistakes, unlike most men,” said LaBrake, an agriculture consultant experienced in new farmer training.

While some women changed oil filters, another group sat in a conference room of the Penn Stater to learn about business management from Amber Lockawich, an income opportunities educator for Penn State Cooperative Extension. Lockawich led discussions on types of business models, characteristics of success, the role of planning and other topics that would help these women start or improve upon their agricultural enterprises.

Attendee Nancy Dickson hoped to learn more about business planning in order to help turn her farming hobby into a profitable business. She recently purchased farmland that has been fallow for ten years but hopes soon to be marketing organic vegetables to local restaurants in York County.

Equipment repair and business management are just two of the in-demand topics for women in agriculture, who still struggle to find educational resources, according to Amy Trauger, postdoctoral researcher in rural sociology and sustainable agriculture. Trauger found in her research that when it comes to educational opportunities, women in agriculture are not only lacking content, “but also not getting the right context.” For example, a typical equipment safety class is usually offered only for 14- through 16-year-olds, not for adults.

Carolyn Sachs, a professor in the Rural Sociology and Women’s Studies Dept. at

Penn State, noted that even women who grow up on farms are often not taught the same skills as their brothers. Many programs cater to men and create an atmosphere in which women feel uncomfortable and out of place. Trauger’s and Sachs’ recognition of these education needs was part of what led them to start the Pennsylvania Women’s Agriculture Network two years ago.

Many of the women who are now in PA-WAgN met through PASA. Six hundred people attended the Feb. 2 pre-conference, and 1,500 registered for main conference events held Feb 3 and 4—a roughly 8 percent increase over the previous year. Conference organizer Heather House said the group has seen steady growth in attendance every year.

While PASA hosts some woman-oriented events, the founders of PA-WAgN realized there was need for a more woman-focused network. Organizers send out surveys and perform regional focus group interviews to identify needs not met by the existing system. The feedback is then used as a basis for future workshops, conferences, meetings and other networking programs.

“I wanted to learn how to rehabilitate pasture and use equipment,” said Sandra Miller, a member of WAgN for the past year and a half. “The women in WAgN . . . want to learn about farming,” she said, in contrast to some women’s groups Miller has attended, which were “farmers’ wives quilting, not running tractors or [doing] hands-on farming.”

Miller currently raises goats for ethnic markets in Cumberland County. In 2000 she bought a piece of land that had not been farmed for 50 years. Even with her 20 years of experience with cattle ranching, horses and orchards, she realized this new venture was going to take a lot of work, she said. The support and information provided by WAgN and PASA have been invaluable to her.

“The women of PA-WAgN have a real desire to learn,” said Carolyn Sachs. “They are networking, cooperating and learning together.”

The women in WAgN agreed that female farmers tend toward organic and sustainable methods, small- and medium-sized farms, and direct marketing of diverse products to new markets.

Amy Trauger said she has found that there are more resources and support available for women in sustainable agriculture than in conventional farming. Current con-



Photo by Amy Trauger

Instructor Shane LaBrake, right, who conducted the Introduction to Equipment Maintenance and Repair workshop, shows a group of women how to change the oil filter on a tractor. The class stressed instruction and hands-on practice in general farm machinery maintenance.

ventional agriculture has become so large and capitalized that it has alienated women farmers as well as small-scale and new farmers in general.

Sandra Miller said that when she first bought her farm, she looked for information on what she needed to get her land ready for use.

One male farmer told her to apply a series

of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, which would have cost thousands of dollars. Instead, she bought goats and fences. The goats ate the weeds, provided natural fertilizer and yielded the same land rehabilitation in three to four years.

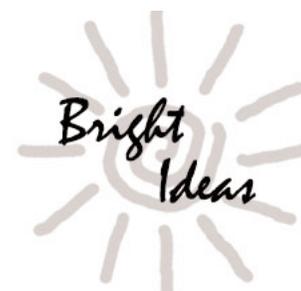
“I put my investment in time instead of money,” Miller said. “Women are much more patient than men.”

Notes from a neo-Luddite

by Andy Lau

I am a neo-Luddite. Like the Luddites of early 19th-century England, I question and resist new technologies that will supposedly make life better—easier, less expensive, more efficient, more varied, etc. Just how much easier can my life get? How much inexpensive stuff do I need to live a good life? I jokingly tell students that if my life were any easier I would even more resemble Jell-O. As a 50-year-old professional engineer, I have long ago amassed enough stuff, though far less than is typical, it seems.

Does questioning technology mean that I’m hypocritical when I rely heavily on my laptop computer? I don’t think so. Yet I wonder. . . . The original Luddites were textile workers accustomed to weaving in their homes in what was literally a cottage industry. They worked alongside their family members at a pace that allowed for conversation and human interaction. They certainly used technology—spinning wheels, hand-looms, horse-drawn carts—but their work



was convivial in the sense described by Ivan Illich in *Tools for Conviviality*. Convivial work is exemplified by its reliance on craft and creativity, nurturing human relationships, and providing ample rewards through products well made and the satisfaction arising from the important role of the crafts-person. Convivial technologies, like a hammer or a loom, facilitate the work to be done but do not usurp the power and humanity of the users. Textile workers formed a sect called the Luddites in response to the introduction of textile factories mass-producing products similar in appearance but with strikingly dif-

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