A WOMAN FARMER PROFILE

A MASSACHUSETTS FARMER PROFILE SERIES

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Featuring

ELLEN DREWS

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When Ellen Drews started her first farming job in college, she felt an immediate and striking connection to the work.

"I remember cracking my eyes open at 5 or 6 a.m. and checking the weather, and having that kind of determine what my day was gonna be like," Ellen said. "And I loved that, and I would work days and days on end without weekends because I was so motivated."

But Ellen's enthusiasm for farming in itself couldn't spare crops from extreme climate events. While working at Brookfield Farm in Amherst during 2018, severe flooding drained much of the joy from Ellen's farming experience.

That year, "I felt like I couldn't continue farming if all of our plants were going to be suffocating underwater," Ellen said.

While dismaying to witness, these challenges didn't extinguish Ellen's passion for farming, or her determination to work around obstacles posed by climate change — a long-held interest in sustainability had, in fact, served as one of the driving forces behind Ellen's attraction to farming.

So **Ellen turned her focus to farming methods that could mitigate and combat these climate impacts**, with a focus on **no-till farming**. Through this method, **farmers can limit soil erosion, improve soil structure and nutrition, and cut back on greenhouse gas emissions**.

To pursue this goal, Ellen had to leave Brookfield — In ways a bittersweet departure, as the farm had served as her first exposure to Community Supported Agriculture, managing a crew, and involving community members in mission-driven farming.

INNOVATIVE FOUNDATION PROVIDES FERTILE GROUND FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Despite these positive experiences, Ellen recalls, she was "really ready to manage the soil differently" than Brookfield could support.

In 2019, Ellen found that opportunity at Astarte Farm in Hadley, an 3.5-acre organic, 100% no-till diversified fruit and vegetable farm that uses a variety of experimental approaches in the face of climate change. This approach proved an appropriate fit, with Ellen now serving as Astarte's farm manager.

"NO-TILL FARMING ALSO COMES WITH REWARDS THAT MAY NOT BE IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS TO FARMERS"

Astarte Farm, which is owned by electrical engineer Jim Meade, had already been a no-till operation for about five years by the time Ellen began working there. Previously owner Dan Pratt, who continues to provide guidance, had already established a foundation of sustainable practices at the farm, using techniques like cover cropping and biochar usage well before they gained mass popularity. After selling the farm to Jim, Dan suggested the transition to exclusively no-till farming.

Alongside the farm's strong training and management practices, as well as internal collaboration among workers at all levels, this history positioned Astarte as an ideal place for Ellen to develop her understanding of soil health practices, she says.

Though the transition still posed a challenge, Ellen proved herself as an adept learner: Jim generally takes a hands-off approach, with Ellen "making all the production decisions, and pretty much all the business decisions, too, with his approval," she said.

Ellen has now worked at Astarte for about the same amount of time that it had operated as a no-till operation prior to her arrival, and is confident she made the right decision in choosing her soil health focus. "I'm all about no-till," Ellen says. "**I'll never do tillage again.** Because first of all, it's doable, which I think is the biggest barrier for a lot of people."

While some farmers feel that they can't run an exclusively no-till operation due to time, labor, and financial constraints, Ellen has found that, though these concerns aren't unfounded, **no-till farming also comes with rewards that may not be immediately obvious to farmers**.

Growing tomatoes, for instance, requires a heavy investment in mulch at Astarte, but workers only need to pull weeds around the crops once or twice per year as a result. This practice also eliminates future labor needs by preparing a clean bed for planting shallots the following year. Meanwhile, practices such as leaving soil in place "definitely allows for spongy soil in extreme rain and extreme drought," Ellen says. "**And that gives me a peace of mind that I would never give up at this point**."

AN EVOLVING LANDSCAPE

Indeed, Ellen has witnessed no-till practices spare Astarte from the worst of the climate impacts that trouble area farms using conventional tillage.

"Our next-door neighbors are both conventional farms, and we've seen a river of water running through their (fields) while we're dry, like an island — literally, (we're) just up above the water," Ellen says.

The conventional-till farms also have more cracks in their soil after floods, which, combined with the conventional method's pre-existing tendency to promote erosion, creates an annual springtime "dust cloud in Hadley that happens after everybody tills," Ellen added.

But she's also noticed signs of improvement in local climate resiliency initiatives in her community, with more area farms updating their soil health management practices even if they don't prominently incorporate the methods into their missions.

Those smaller steps add up over time, Ellen says. For example, local soil testing by the Natural Resources Conservation Service found that even just using basic cover crop mixes created a significant, positive effect on soil structure — evidence that "**just doing one thing is a step in the right direction**," Ellen added. Anecdotally, Ellen has also noticed visible changes in the land over her approximately eight years living in the Valley. "I don't think Hadley looks the same anymore," Ellen said. "It's green, and people are intercropping … And I'm like, okay, I think I see reduced tillage happening." Ellen believes much of this action is driven by the ongoing climate crisis.

"I think the extreme weather is such a motivator, because it's totally out of control … And I think farmers have a lot of resilience (as to), 'Okay, that was that year, but we try again and get to restart every year,'" she said. "**But I don't think people are feeling that way anymore. It's kind of like, (we've) gotta change for our own survival**."

Despite variations in soil management practices, business models, and priorities, Ellen says that at the end of the day, farmers in western Massachusetts — and their customers — have created a strong, collaborative support network.

Farmers in Massachusetts "**certainly have enough challenges with just weather and biology**," Ellen says. "My experience with farming in the Pioneer Valley is that people are generous with their knowledge and equipment, and people ask each other lots of questions and (provide) lots of resources.

"I guess it just doesn't feel like competition really feels like we're on the same team … in this economy, wanting it to succeed," she continued.

Ellen consistently strives to contribute to this support network.

At Astarte, "I have so much privilege to be able to do this because of Jim having this off-farm income" through his engineering business, she said. And at 3.5 acres, Astarte's smaller size makes involved soil practices easier to broadly implement while remaining profitable.

"I also want Astarte to be **leveraging that opportunity so that we can figure out some things that then might be helpful and applicable to other people**," Ellen continued, "and that's always been a goal of the farm, so I'm continuing to dig in and figure that out."

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