

# Caring For The Land

## Workshop Focuses On Women's Role In Ag Sustainability

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ST. JAMES, Neb. — When women own farmland and have to deal with renters, usually men, they need to be knowledgeable. A recent work day at the St. James Marketplace was attended by women — some of the landowners — but all individuals who cared for the land. It was a day for women and agriculture and sustainability.

The “Women Caring for the Land” event offered a place for women to talk to women about agriculture and share one-on-one farming experiences. Healthy soil and conservation were the topics of the day led by two Iowa women, Jean Eells and Carol Schutte.

Almost half of farmland in the Midwest is owned or co-owned by women but it is still a predominantly male world. The morning discussion allowed all participants to share their life experiences and then moved into two eye-opening demonstrations for healthy soil.

“We have found women to be an underserved group when local professionals talk to them about the land they own,” said Schutte.

Women are often not included in the hard decisions of farming and not knowledgeable about farm programs, Farm Service Agency policy or crop insurance but there are many resource people who can give words of wisdom.

Schutte said the meeting would focus on sustainability and the women would be introduced to new practices to sustain their land and increase profitability. Conservation can be very useful for improving the soil and increasing profitability so when it comes time to transition to the next generation, the land is healthy and profitable.

It was commented during the sharing segment of the day event, men who are assertive are considered strong but women who are assertive are considered pushy for want of a better word.

Women are concerned with the health of the soil and passing it on to their children. They are often found to be more dedicated and better long-term investors – in it for the long haul. It was time for a discussion about cover crops and the benefits to soil.

“We have concentrated on genetics and chemistry in the past to increase yields but ignored biology,” Schutte said. “We need to create a structure with three circles, one for each aspect of farming including biology, and that point where they all converge, that will be the sweet spot for successful sustainable agriculture.”

After 30-40 years of farming with a corn/soybean rotation, farming specialists are finding the soil is alive and has a world of micro-organisms which



Jean Eells leads on demonstration on soil quality during a recent workshop on agricultural sustainability for women, held at the St. James Marketplace.

PHOTO: LINDA WUEBBEN

### Cover Crops and Sustainability:

- Prevents Erosion
- Holds nutrients
- Retains water
- Breaks up compaction
- Acts as blanket and increases early soil temperature
- Fix an erosion problem

survive and keep it healthy. Farming practices need to adjust to keep those micro-organisms alive and working so they can do their job — keeping soil healthy.

Eells presented a demonstration that women can complete in their kitchen. She took three quart jars, filled them water, covered with a plastic net cut from a potato bag or something similar and placed three chunks of walnut size dirt on the netting. The dirt was taken from different farm areas. One sample was bad dirt taken from an area which is land sacrificed as a driveway; one sample was good dirt, taken from a grassy area not farmed like in a fenceline near where

the bad dirt was collected so the soil composition is the same; and one sample is from current farmland. She described better quality soil is like the consistency of bread or cake crumbs and poor soil is fine resembling flour or cocoa

For Eells' demonstration, she only used two jars, one with good dirt and one with bad. The good dirt sat in the netting. The bad dirt quickly sifted through the water in the jar to the bottom. She explained the living roots in the grassy soil where the good dirt was collected from provided a healthy environment for the micro-organisms and the soil was able to hold the water. In the case of the bad dirt sample, taken from farmland currently farmed, it was proof positive there wasn't anything to hold the water in the soil and it quickly ran away like in a heavy rain where gullies and deep ditches are created.

A second demonstration with the good and bad soil reinforced how water filtration was controlled better by the good soil, which adds to crop performance and profitability. In bad soil, rain water can often stand, called ponding, because the water is not absorbed into the soil and if it cannot run away, it collects, not contributing to a healthy crop.

The good soil has a cover crop — the grassy area under the fenceline. Cover crops encourage biological activity and nature a living community in soil. The healthy living roots bond together with nature's glue from the micro-organisms through their natural life process allowing dirt to bond and build up organic matter.

Better soil health will be profitable because there will be less need for fertilizer and even pesticide. There is a lot of risk in farming with only a narrow margin of profit but sustainable agriculture when practiced not one year but several years will reduce the input costs. It probably will be noticeable after three years of good farming practices and very evident after five years.

After seeing this demonstration, a woman can stand in her kitchen, show the renter what happens and use the visual proof to present a solid case for sustainability. Then the owner can say she wants her farmland to be healthy like that.

The Center for Rural Affairs sponsored the event through a Conservation Innovation Grant from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

## Extension: Adding Options With Annual Forages

BROOKINGS — In many areas of South Dakota, the pasture acres are in short supply. This, coupled with the fact that precipitation so far this growing season is below normal has cattle producers looking for additional feed resources.

Annual forages provide a viable option for cow/calf producers to consider, said Warren Rusche, SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist.

“Additional harvest options annual forages provide include grazing, haying, or silage, depending on the crop,” Rusche said.

He explained the two broad categories of annual forages include cool-season and warm-season forages. “The key difference between the two is when they are ready for harvest,” he said.

### COOL SEASON FORAGES

Cool-season forages are typically small grains planted either alone or in combination with a cool season legume such as field peas. “These are planted in early spring and will be ready for harvest by early summer. Because they avoid the peak summer heat, their moisture requirements are not as high as some longer season crops,” Rusche said.

If moisture conditions

improve, Rusche said warm-season annuals could be planted after harvesting the cool season forage as a double-crop.

**WARM SEASON ANNUALS**

Warm-season annuals perform best during the warmest part of the summer. These crops are typically planted in June or July. “The most common warm-season annuals planted in the Northern Plains are the hay millets, pearl millet, sudangrass and sorghum-sudan hybrids, and forage sorghums,” Rusche said.

He explained that each of these crops has advantages and disadvantages - depending on the environmental conditions and the planned usage.

Hay Millets: As the name implies, these crops are best suited to be harvested as hay rather than grazed or cut for silage. These plants have finest stems and cure the easiest compared to other summer annuals. Hay millet is most drought-tolerant and can pro-

duce forage in as little as eight weeks after planting.

Pearl Millet: Pearl millet offers more production potential than hay millets. Pearl millet has the ability to re-grow, making it a better option for grazing or for multiple cuttings at any growth stage. Pearl millet has coarser stems than hay millet, making curing for baled hay more challenging. Unlike sudangrass, sorghum-sudangrass and forage sorghum, pearl millet doesn't accumulate prussic acid, which means that cattle wouldn't have to be temporarily removed because of an early frost.

Sudangrass and Sorghum-Sudangrass Hybrids: Because of the thicker stems for these crops, they are much better suited to be harvested as silage compared to hay. These also work well as supplemental summer grazing.

Prussic acid can be a concern when grazed. The greatest risk for prussic acid poisoning occurs under drought conditions, when plants are damaged by frost,

or when livestock graze short regrowth. To minimize risk defer grazing until sudangrass is 18 to 20 inches tall and sorghum-sudangrass hybrids reach 24 to 30 inches. Remove livestock for 5 to 6 days if these plants are damaged by a killing frost so that the plants can dry out and the prussic acid can dissipate.

Forage Sorghum: This crop is the latest maturing and has the most production potential. Forage sorghum is best suited for silage production.

Other factors to keep in mind:

- As with all forages, maturity at harvest determines quality. Harvesting earlier results in higher quality for-

age. Delaying harvest tends to increase dry matter yield.

- Consider prior crop history. Herbicide use history, especially for products such as atrazine can affect stand establishment. Soil sampling and testing is also important to determine proper fertilizer application rates.
- Before planting an annual forage crop, consult with a crop insurance advisor to avoid jeopardizing coverage.
- Be cautious when applying high levels of nitrogen fertilizer to a planned forage crop. Small grains are notorious accumulators of nitrates and excessive nitrate levels could render the forage useless.

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