



## Cultivating Connections

**Deepen your friendships with collaborations among generations of hobby farmers.**

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### Offer to Help

Given the busy nature of farm life, offer to help your potential mentor as a means of connection. I often get calls from someone who wants to stop by our Wisconsin farm and bed and breakfast, Inn Serendipity, for a tour of our gardens and renewable energy systems. While I love giving farm tours, my schedule is packed with B&B duties, article deadlines and farm chores. I've realized I can't accommodate every tour request, which typically lasts several hours. However, if someone says they want to talk to me about how I got started in freelance writing related to rural issues and they are happy to help me weed while we chatted, I'd be much more likely to connect.

Offering to help could lead to other opportunities, as well. A few years ago, I noticed that a senior friend in town, Mary, had a huge pear tree in her backyard, branches weighed down with ripe fruit, so I offered to help her pick. She was very appreciative because her age prevented her from climbing ladders to harvest. Plus, she didn't need many pears and felt terrible to see the fruit go to waste. Mary not only let me take as many pears as I wanted, she happily shared her amazing bounty of gardening knowledge while I picked.

### Be Open

Remember to be open to serendipity when seeking a mentor. While you sometimes intentionally seek a connection with a certain person, other times someone unexpectedly enriches your life in ways you never imagined.

Shortly after we moved to our farm, a non-descript white van pulled up our driveway. That day launched the start of an incredible friendship with our neighbors down the road, affectionately known as Uncle Phil and Aunt Judy. These local seniors saw the newly installed solar panels on our roof and stopped by in open curiosity. It turned out, this couple ran a renewable energy business back in the 1970s and had a wealth of knowledge on the exact things we wanted to learn and do on our farm.

Today, I tease Judy that she is my "kitchen encyclopedia on call." In all sincerity, she ranks as my primary source of information on homesteading skills, from canning to culinary advice. These skills she learned growing up in the 1950s and practiced her whole life—experiences she is always willing to share with me.

### 5 Tips to Keep Connected

In our busy world, prioritizing friendships can be a challenge. Here are some tips on reaching out and connecting:

#### 1. Connect on HobbyFarms.com

Check out the "My Farm" section of HobbyFarms.com, where you can set up a free listing of your farm and connect with other farm women. Come visit me at my listing!

#### 2. Think Seasonally

When farm duties slow down in the winter months, catch up with friends through letter writing, phone calls and visits. If you're on a cell phone plan with monthly long distance minutes, keep a tally of your extra minutes at the end of the month, and optimize your calling plan with a designated evening to use up the time by ringing a friend.

#### 3. Tap into Social Networking

Social networking sites like Facebook enable you to quickly communicate with a variety of people you choose to "friend" online. You can share photos and videos as well as post messages on friends' walls. Best of all, the technology is free and increasingly easy to navigate. Don't forget to become a fan of Hobby Farm Home to keep in touch with other readers.

#### 4. Share a New Skill

Prioritize both spending time together and learning something new by taking a class or attending a conference together.

Farming conferences tend to happen during winter, the perfect time to get off the farm for a dose of friendship and new ideas. The Organic Farming Conference by the Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) takes place every February in LaCrosse, Wis., and is the largest gathering of its kind in the country, packed with great



workshops and plenty of opportunities to connect.  
Initiate Regular Gatherings

Start a local social group of women that meets regularly at your place. Consider starting a book club that meets the first Sunday of the month and focuses on books that showcase rural issues and farm skills.

#### 5. Cook in Community

Don't spend the whole day shelling peas or canning tomatoes alone in your kitchen. Make it a regular habit to gather with other women to share these tasks together. You can converse and cook at the same time. Did I seek out Aunt Judy? No, in my case, she drove up my driveway. In today's world, unfortunately, such situations are increasingly rare as we tend to shy away from people and things we don't know. Fortunately for me, Judy and Phil reached out and we opened our doors and hearts, expanding our journey toward our "good life" on the farm.

#### Express Thanks

An extra effort to show appreciation goes a long way in befriending a mentor. A hand-written thank-you note is always appreciated. Another easy way to say thanks is to share whatever you have "created," thanks to their tutelage and advice. After Mary let me pick her pear tree, I soon returned with a pear pie as a token of appreciation.

Seniors typically love receiving food gifts. These country folks often baked extensively and in large quantities their whole life, but now might be living alone or in smaller households and don't cook as much. I recycle the tin take-out containers from restaurants and use these when delivering food gifts. I've also learned to ask about dietary restrictions before delivering food gifts, as senior folks sometimes have diabetic or other food needs that I can readily accommodate if I know.

Our neighbor, Burnette, has a sweet tooth, and I'm always dropping off baked good samplers for him. One day last month he showed up unexpectedly with a smile on his face. He brought over a brand new trellis he made for my garden, a total unexpected surprise that gave me a grin.

Sometimes you can find a unique, even quirky, way to express your appreciation for a mentor's friendship. Aunt Judy loves to read romance novels, so I always keep my eye out for library book sales where they will often sell a "bag of books" for just a couple dollars. I load up on a selection of reading material for Aunt Judy, always bringing a smile to her face and chuckle between us.

#### Be a Mentor

Whatever stage you are at on your hobby farm journey, you can always share a slice of your life and experiences with other kindred spirits on similar life paths. Sometimes this involves sharing a skill or talent from a past life, such as your career prior to hobby farming. I worked in advertising prior to switching to my rural-based livelihood. At first glance, these might seem like disconnected skill sets, but I've been able to help other farm women come up with ideas to market their farm ventures, write business plans and create advertising materials.

In addition to sharing skills, you might have extra resources to share with someone just starting out, perhaps barn space or land. We had a few extra acres on our farm that we weren't using for anything and connected with the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, a Wisconsin nonprofit organization that trains new organic farmers. We agreed to provide land for someone who wanted to run their own farm business but who weren't in a financial or life position to buy their own place quite yet. That offering brought Amy Kremen to our land for two summers, sharing her youthful, post-college exuberance with our family and local community as she ran a cut flower business and small CSA.

Emotional support goes a long way in mentoring others. Realizing there are other women out there like you provides strong inspiration for new women farmers passionate about starting agriculture ventures but perhaps feeling isolated and alone in their endeavors.

"I often feel like a renegade in my community as a young female farmer," explains Erin Schneider, a beginning farmer in Wisconsin. "When I meet other women seasoned in the field, I get inspired and feel connected to a larger community of people who share my vision for sustainable agriculture. I realize I have much to learn, but I really appreciate when someone also picks my brain for ideas and information as I feel like I have something to contribute."

This reciprocal exchange, respect for the opinions and offerings of all women wherever we may be on our hobby farm journey, forms the crux of fostering friendships of various generations and experiences. Together, we farm women can enhance our lives and transform our food system and the world, one connection at a time.



About the Author: Lisa Kivirist writes from her farm and B&B, Inn Serendipity, in Wisconsin. She is co-author of *ECOprenuring* (New Society Publishers, 2008) and *Rural Renaissance* (New Society Publishers, 2004) and is a Kellogg Food & Society Policy Fellow.