



Cultivating Connections

Deepen your friendships with collaborations among generations of hobby farmers.

Female hobby farmers can gain valuable experience and homesteading skills by cultivating relationships with women from other generations. You probably put great effort and care into nurturing your garden, from seed planting to harvesting. Not a day undoubtedly goes by where you don't in some way connect with this vital part of your farmstead life. Just as your carrots and cabbage need care, there's another important "garden" for us farm women that needs tending: our friendships with other kindred growers.

Like our garden, our hobby farm lifestyle thrives when we plant a diversity of friendship "seeds," cultivating relationships with women from a variety of backgrounds, ages and interests but who also share our same love for the country lifestyle. Developing friendships with women both older and younger than us lets us dig deeper than in typical companionship; they can serve as inspiring resources for improving and strengthening your farming and homesteading skills.

On one level, developing these intergenerational, female farm friendships came about easier generations ago when we lived in closer-knit communities where family members tended to live and work closer together. Both hugs and information were exchanged everywhere from the general store to church. While doing everything from putting up food for the winter to nursing babies, these informal networks of rural women supported one another in crafting healthy, vibrant farm livelihoods for generations.

"Back when I was raising my family on the farm, we didn't have the Internet or all these new technologies to access information," explains Joy Rohde, a senior mentor of mine ever since we purchased our Wisconsin farmstead from her and her husband, Del, more than a decade ago. "We learned a lot by example, asking our neighbors and family members for advice, from sharing recipes to gardening tips. There wasn't any formal structure or plan behind anything, just women helping other women do what needs to get done."

Today's world gifts us with different challenges and opportunities when it comes to nurturing farm friendships. Many of us, like myself, came into the rural lifestyle by choice, often trading urban and suburban lifestyles and career tracks for a passion for farm life. We don't have that instant network of other women that farm families and communities fostered for generations; we need to create our own relationships.

On the other hand, we live in an Internet-linked world today, which opens unique doors of possibility to connect with other farmwomen across the country. Our world today also presents the challenge of a time-strapped society: We're busier than ever, juggling multiple jobs and responsibilities. As a result, nurturing new friendships can often fall low on the to-do list.

But with a dash of thought and initiative, you can develop friendships with a diverse group of rural women, adding up to a rich quality of life on multiple levels. One perspective is to nurture relationships with women from a variety of age groups, both younger and older than you. Just like the importance of planting diverse seeds in your garden, these "mentor" and "mentee" friendships stimulate our lives and add vibrancy in a variety of ways.

Find a Mentor

I re-read the "Little House on the Prairie" book series with my son Liam. Now, I can appreciate Laura Ingalls' viewpoints from both an adult and from the perspective as a female farmer. Laura learned her homesteading skills under the loving tutelage of "Ma," who learned from her mother and on it went. For practical reasons, generations of savvy farmwomen simply passed along their knowledge.

In contrast to generations past, you might not have a built-in family network of women wiser and older than yourself from whom to learn. Here are some tips on finding your own mentors:

Ask Questions

Sincere curiosity goes a long way in developing a friendship with a farm mentor. If you meet someone wiser and perhaps older than yourself who is chock full of the things you want to learn, take advantage of the opportunity to ask questions and pick her brain (perhaps over tea and fresh rhubarb-strawberry pie).

Remember standard etiquette when asking questions and be sensitive to this person's time. Do your own research beforehand, tapping into any books and websites for preliminary research first. For example, asking anyone "how to start a garden" without tapping into all the abundant resources out there first is not respectful of that person's time. A more appropriate question would be: "What do you do to deter squash bugs? I've tried picking them off and a soap foliar



spray but nothing seems to work.”

Sometimes a potential mentor might not live in your immediate area but can still serve as an inspiring connection. When I wanted to get more active in national policy work that supports female farmers, I read about Denise O’Brien, a Midwest farmer who founded the Iowa-based Women, Food & Agriculture Network. My first step was to read anything I could about Denise on the Internet and learned a lot, including her attempt to run for Secretary of Agriculture in Iowa, a race she lost in vote count but succeeded in pioneering a trail for women in agriculture to run for elected office.

I then e-mailed Denise, explaining why she served as such a strong source of inspiration for me and asked if she would be willing to talk and answer some questions. E-mailing and asking what is a good time to call is often a good idea because we all know how busy we get on the farm. Denise warmly and enthusiastically responded to my query and has evolved to be an inspiring mentor and friend ever since.

“Mentoring and supporting other women farmers is an important priority for me,” explains O’Brien, who runs a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) on her farm, Rolling Acres, in Atlantic, Iowa. “As the number of women farmers continues to rise, those like myself who have been doing this for decades need to share our advice and experience with those new to the agricultural lifestyle.”