

Blue Star Farm

Sue Decker - Journey into Farming

STUYVESANT



"In 5th grade, I started my egg business, and sold mostly to my neighbors and teachers. That was my first introduction to caring for livestock."

EARLY INFLUENCES

"My grandfather on my mother's side was a farmer, and they did chickens and had sheep, and a lot of field crops. My grandfather on my father's side had a dairy business. My dad had a restaurant that was based out of the dairy business, selling ice cream. There is farming in my background... I grew up as a little girl with large family organic gardens, and I was involved in 4-H as well...my favorite thing to grow as a little girl was carrots. My dad grew hay and corn for the animals. We didn't really sell things commercially, but it was for our own family, for the animals that we had, and I grew up with animals all my life. I was always very interested in the outdoors, and in growing things and having access to a garden. That just was kind of normal for me, but I didn't really consider being a farmer."

A BUDDING INTEREST IN FARMING

"I was actually more interested in art, went to school for fine art photography, and then worked in New York City in various different careers. Towards the end of that time, I got involved with CSAs, and I became a core member in the Brooklyn Park Slope CSA. Part of my responsibilities were to talk to the farmer every week and find out what was coming, so I got to know Ted Blomgren, from Windflower Farm, who was our farmer at the time. My attention was turned more towards health and living a more natural life, and I felt that the things that I was doing with [my career] weren't productive in the world, and I really wanted to change that... The farm became really attractive to me, so I decided to pursue farming and give it a try."

Farming Journey

Originally from: Pennsylvania
Type of Training: Internships and on-farm employment
Land Search Length: 6 years
Land Source: Purchased and leased land

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First Year: 2010
Location: Stuyvesant, NY
Land Base: 14 acres (some owned and some leased)
Markets: Farmers' markets (Hudson and Red Barn Roadside Market), restaurants, local retail outlets, and other wholesale accounts
Products: Vegetables, fruits, herbs, cut flowers, and canned products

LEARNING TO FARM

"Ted offered me an internship [at Windflower Farm], so I disbanded my business and said, 'Okay, I'm going to give this a shot for a year and see what it's all about.' And I did, and I really loved it. It was quite the learning experience for me. I was able to see a lot of different aspects, and I was the main full-time employee. It was challenging, and it was a lot of hard work, and I really loved everything about it. After that I decided I wanted to continue with this. I didn't know quite where to go with it, but I knew I needed more experience, so I looked for another internship on a different farm. [An internship] in Pennsylvania became available, at Charlestown Farm, and the opportunity there was to intern with the opportunity to take over management at the end of that [season]. The family that owned the farm were incredibly dedicated to farming, and really interested, and wanted to be on the cutting edge of things, and had the money behind it to really just lift that farm incredibly, so I had at my disposal lots of different equipment [and infrastructure]. It was really a unique place, and that was a fabulous, fabulous experience. I developed really deep relationships with the people there."

STARTING A FARM

"[My husband and I] wanted our own place. We wanted to give it a shot, to have our own farm, so we looked for a long time in different areas, and we really liked the area of the Hudson Valley a lot, and we finally settled on purchasing property here in Columbia County. So in March of 2009, I came here, and I was quite exuberant and ready to go. That happened to be the year of years that was the worst rain in 100 years, and I had very heavy clay soils here. It really became prohibitive to do anything without the proper equipment here, and I realized that I needed to be concentrating my efforts on something else. So I packed in everything, cleaned up for the year, and went and got a job at Beth's Farm Kitchen. That was actually a good move for me, because it allowed me to network with people in the community, people who had been in the food community for 30 years in this area, and it was nice for me to start to develop a community. I was able to complete construction on my greenhouse and get things into cover crops and get prepared for the following year."

GROWING A FARM

"The land speaks to you and your markets speak to you...it's more about listening to where the business wants to go as opposed to me having a set idea. You can have a set idea of what you want to do, but it's the markets that become available to you and the ground that you're working with that are really going to tell you what you're going to do... Because of [the initial experience with a very wet year and clay soils], I couldn't go down the road of CSA, because it wasn't reliable enough. So understanding that, I needed to develop strong farmers' market and strong wholesale markets. I started in 2010 in the Chatham and Saugerties markets, and those were both great experiences. I did very well at both of them, and started to establish myself as a grower in the area. In 2010, I started an acre of winter squash on rented land in Kinderhook. The soils are amazing, class A farming soils. They're light, loamy, kind of sandy soils that drain very nicely. In 2011, I expanded there, and took on two additional acres."



Leased land in Kinderhook has enabled the farm to expand.

CONTINUING TO LEARN

"I've come to farming kind of late, and I think that I will always be learning, and I don't know when I will feel experienced. So it's always in the background of my mind to seek out people who have a lot to offer experience-wise, because for me that's one of the best learning experiences, is just to be talking with another farmer who's familiar with the area and the weather and the soil and just the practical approaches to growing things... All the experience that you bring to it is very valuable, but some of it might not really be applicable to your current situation, so it's just a big learning curve."

FINDING BALANCE

"How do you balance yourself against burnout? I don't have a good answer for that, really. I am the type of person that's very driven, which is to my advantage in farming, but a goal for me this year is to at least be able to cook one good meal [per day] of the things that you're growing, because you should be able to enjoy that and savor that... I am interested in developing a workforce that will continue with me on a regular basis, and I would like to be the type of employer that can roll with all [that life brings]. I want to have a good balance for me and also a good balance for the people that I employ."

WHY FARMING?

"I love what I do. I just love what I do. I feel incredibly privileged to be doing what I love to do and to have the support of my husband, who really understands that and encourages it. I still, to this day, am fascinated by the idea of putting a very small tomato seed in the ground and then getting pounds and pounds of fruit from that. It just is amazing to me, to be in touch with that, viscerally, on a day-to-day basis. I just love growing things. To be able to do it successfully, and in a healthy way, and to have all that vibrancy around you, it's just a really great feeling. It puts things in good perspective. Everyone should grow something, because it grounds you, literally."

Relationship to the Land



"You can have an idea in your head, but the land will tell you what it wants to do, so you really have to be open to listening to it... It's just an ongoing dialogue. Hopefully year after year you listen better and better, because it's always talking, it's just a matter of you being able to interpret and listen to what it's saying. So, in 20 years, I should have a pretty good dialogue going."

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Winter Growing: "In 2011, I decided to put in a high tunnel, to try and make this land here a little bit more productive [during the winter months]." Above, Sue offers carrots from her greenhouse in February.

Customers: "It's so rewarding to go to a farmers' market and receive compliments about the produce. That keeps me going. That's very motivating for me, and I want them to be pleased. I want them to keep coming back, and to be excited about trying new things or sharing recipes. It's been nice to get to know regular customers."



Support: "My husband is undauntedly positive and supportive, and I am grateful every second of every day that he is like that."



Future Growth: "I'm interested in doing fruit, as another diversification, so I'm starting to build that, and that takes time. But this year I will start planting asparagus and rhubarb and raspberries, and we will also try fig trees and pecan trees."