

Food Tank - 2016

AGRICULTURE

## New Tools for the Shed: In Conversation with Green Heron Tools

---



As Ann Adams and Liz Brensinger began to expand their kitchen gardens into a full-fledged farm in 1995, they faced an unanticipated challenge: a lack of farm and garden tools that fit their bodies. Through conversations with other farmers in the Pennsylvania Women’s Agricultural Network, they soon realized the problem was widespread. There were no viable options for farm tools designed by women for women. In 2008, Adams and Brensinger founded Green Heron Tools, a company that develops farm tool specific to the needs of women farmers. Food Tank recently spoke with Adams and Brensinger about their work.

**Food Tank (FT): Your work focuses on women farmers working on small-scale farms and gardens. Do you have any stories to share about the roles women play specifically in sustainable or alternative forms of agriculture?**

Ann Adams and Liz Brensinger (AA & LB): First, a few general observations. Women-led farms tend to be smaller and less mechanized as well as sustainable and/or organic. This is not to say

there aren't women commodity farmers, but most of the women we encounter are producing food, not commodities. Mostly from anecdotes and our experiences, we'd say the importance of relationships is inherent in many women, and it tends to carry over into the ways that a lot of women farm. One way of describing sustainable farming is that it supports relationships—among soil microbes, among other non-human species, like pollinators and plants, between and among humans and other species, as well as the land itself. Sustainable farming means farming in a way that enhances the chances those relationships will remain strong into the future. We see this manifested in women-farmers' relationships with other farmers, with customers, with animals, and perhaps most fundamentally, with the land.

Many of the women farmers we know—ourselves included—got into farming through atypical ways and in some cases very circuitous routes. In other words, they did not grow up in farming families and then become farmers themselves. Take Morgan Hoenig of Mogo Organics in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. She started her organic farm in the midst of big-ag country in 2008. In April 2012, she told us that despite being an agricultural state, Iowa purchased most of its veggies from California and Florida. Before she started her farm, there was no real source of organic produce in her community. She told us, “I grow my products organically not only because I like to eat clean food, but because I am a strong environmentalist...All I can do is try to show my community how much food can be produced organically, and on a small scale, and try to encourage more farmers to do the same.” President Obama visited Morgan's farm in 2011.

**FT: What motivated you both to start farming? How did Green Heron Tools grow out of your experiences?**

AA & LB: Both of us had been long-time organic gardeners. Ann's son, Michael Adams developed the first true farm-to-table restaurant in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, where we live. This was in the mid-1990s, and he was having trouble finding some of the heirloom produce varieties he wanted. He asked us to expand our garden, and we did—enough that we were able to supply his restaurant in part, plus sell at farmer's markets. We loved being market growers, but we were doing it at the same time that we were working as consultants to nonprofits in our community, and we couldn't produce enough to make farming an economically viable way to support ourselves.

Green Heron Tools grew directly out of our unique combination of experiences and expertise—not just as small-scale farmers having to wrestle with the same tools and equipment as other women, but also as professionals with backgrounds in nursing, public health, research, and program development. We understood the connections between tools, health, and safety that seem to have escaped traditional tool companies.

Through the Small Business Innovation Research program of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), for the first time, we were able to use the skills we'd developed working in the consulting and nonprofit worlds to support work we were doing!

And finally, we'd both been involved in the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s and found it appalling that despite the huge role that women play in food production worldwide, as farmers and as gardeners, we'd had to "make do" with tools and equipment designed for men. When we did our initial research, India was the only place where serious conversations were happening about modifying tools to work better for women. That some companies in the U.S. sold "ladies' tools" that were flimsy and pink or flowered made matters even worse.

We see our business as part of the whole cycle of sustainable agriculture, local food, slow food, community building, and Earth-tending that we are both so passionate about.

**FT: Green Heron Tools focuses on providing technical support—by way of tools and resources—to women farmers. How can we encourage more conversations about gender in agriculture, more specifically, the crucial roles women play throughout the food chain?**

AA & LB: Those conversations are happening to some degree. Women's agricultural networks in a number of states, organizations like the Iowa-based Women, Food & Agriculture Network, and women's veteran farmer groups are playing a prominent role. The University of Vermont is coordinating an ambitious national grant-funded project to support women in agriculture. And USDA itself started an Agricultural Women Lead initiative within the past year or so. It's unclear, though, the degree to which this work is filtering into the larger national conversation. Resources like Food Tank—that talk about agriculture in the context of broader missions/worldviews—can play a major role here in getting more people involved in the conversation. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, there's the from-the-ground-up work being done by women farmers in their own communities who see education and community-building as

part of their roles. They are not necessarily directly addressing the role of gender, but by their very existence and examples, they're highlighting it.

**FT: Can you talk about some of the challenges you've faced, both at Green Heron Tools and as women farmers? What are some of the challenges you see for women in agriculture more generally?**

AA & LB: We've faced significantly more challenges as women entrepreneurs than as women farmers. Many of them deal with entering the world of tool/equipment manufacturing, historically a very male-dominated world. Some of the men we dealt with, especially early on, didn't get what we were doing and didn't seem to respect us. Sometimes being understanding and trying to build relationships gets misinterpreted as weakness.

We are committed to sustainability, to manufacturing in the U.S., to slow and steady growth as opposed to wild, uncontrolled growth—we want to be sure our tools are where they need to be quality-wise before we try to sell them. There are others who take the same approach, but it still seems to be a bit unusual. To do this work, we still need to be financially successful, and it's a challenging balancing act sometimes. We've also had some challenges persuading consumers that we are what we are—honest, ethical and genuinely trying to create products that will make women's lives easier. There are so many substandard products on the market and so much advertising it's wise to be a cautious consumer, but that makes the bar higher for earning trust.

Some farmers—especially ones who've been farming a long time and making do with existing tools & equipment—have been resistant to or dismissive of the idea that they might benefit from tools/equipment designed for them. That's one of the reasons we say over and over again; women are not less than, but we are different! And we deserve to have tools and equipment that build on our strengths.

As to challenges for women in agriculture, we just finished up our third USDA-supported project, focused on women livestock farmers. The project highlighted two challenges: 1) High rates of injuries and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), many growing out of high-risk activities like repeatedly lifting and carrying heavy materials like feed bags, hay bales, full water buckets, and more. Animal handling itself is also another risk. 2) A few of our interview subjects discussed a situation where women farmers and ranchers are still expected to do things just like men do to be respected or seen as a "real" farmer or rancher. From our perspective, this is a big problem

because we believe women's styles of farming are desperately needed to create a truly sustainable food system.

**FT: How would you like to see the options for women-specific farm tools and resources develop? What is next for Green Heron Tools?**

AA & LB: In general, we are a very small company and will never be able to design or adapt all the tools/equipment that are needed. So we'd like to see other companies take this on as well in a serious way, applying scientific principles of ergonomics to create better tools for women.

As for Green Heron Tools, we're hoping a patent will come through soon on a walk-behind tiller we've been working on for over six years. It uses innovative technology that is far gentler on the operator, the soil, the Earth. We think it represents the first major innovation in land-tilling in over sixty years. We developed the tiller with support from the USDA, and will be looking to license it to a larger company as soon as the patent comes through. Walk-behind rototillers are often brutal to operate—especially but not exclusively for women—and we're really excited about introducing something so much better.

And we expect next month to be starting our fourth USDA-supported design project, focused on the lifting/carrying issue that creates so many problems for women farmers. We're excited to be taking on this challenge.