The Secret to HERgonomics

While the number of women farmers increased by a record 30 percent between 2002 and 2007, according to the last USDA Census of Agriculture, you wouldn't know it by the farm tools available at most retailers. Most items, particularly hand tools, are still designed with the male body in mind. Ann Adams and Liz Brensinger, female farmers turned entrepreneurs, cultivated this need into Green Heron Tools, a savvy start-up creating farm and garden tools that cater to the female physique.

Avid gardeners in their early 50s, Adams and Brensinger began their venture with a small, commercial farm operation, helping supply produce to Adams' son's restaurant in Pennsylvania. The duo quickly realized they lacked the proper tools to efficiently and safely farm at the scale needed for viability and sustainability. Instead of making do with the tools at hand, the women not only launched an entrepreneurial enterprise but also helped champion the growing movement of women farmers nationwide.

“Our first step involved researching what tools already existed for women farmers,” Adams explains. “Much to our surprise, we didn’t find anything. Nobody had ever considered that women would do better with tools designed specifically for our bodies. It’s not a question of women versus men; rather, women’s bodies work differently than a man’s, and we work better and safer with tools designed for our physiology.”

After listening to and surveying women growers to understand their unique needs, the duo designed their line of tools accordingly. Their research showed that women carry more strength in their lower bodies and are, on average, 5 inches shorter than the average male. Women have narrower shoulders, wider hips, proportionally shorter legs and arms, and greater flexibility. "Most tools are based on ergonomics, which means designed for maximum comfort, efficiency, safety and ease of use in the workplace," Brensinger explains. "We developed the concept of HERgonomic to describe tools and equipment designed to be safest, most comfortable and more effective for women.”

In 2008, they officially launched Green Heron Tools (www.greenherontools.com) with an online store that sold existing tools and gear recommended by their testers. By fall 2011, it had launched its first original product based on the requests of women's focus groups: the HERgonomic Shovel-spade hybrid (HERS) designed specifically for women. The HERS blade has an enlarged step to make the most of women's lower-body strength. It's durable (it comes with a 10-year warranty) and is made in the U.S. with sustainably harvested wood; plus, it's lightweight (less than 4 pounds). The trademarked HERS is sold in three different lengths to accommodate varying heights.

Beyond their enterprise, however, Adams and Brensinger share a passion for helping women better understand how to use their bodies. "A core learning for us is that too many women take physical risks or out of necessity. We simply want to get the job done as fast as possible and don't think that we should do something a different way, like using a lever as opposed to lifting something directly," Adams says. "Prevention is the key to best using and protecting our bodies. Remember to vary tasks and not keep your body in any one position for too long.”

Green Heron Tools has plans for more small hand-tool innovation, but doesn't foresee a large-scale equipment venture. "We found women love farming because of that connection to the earth and are not as interested in mechanized equipment," Adams says. "We're not interested in getting on a tractor and having the GPS tell us where to go. We want to touch and feel the soil.” —Lisa Kivirist