The Female Side of Farming

Green Heron Tools was created as a vehicle for supporting women farmers by providing better, more appropriate tools and equipment. 

by Mary Shepherd

Tools designed for women are becoming a reality, thanks to the vision of two women, Ann Adams and Liz Brensinger, of New Tripoli, Pa. In fact, they have stated their mission on the Internet for all to see:

To provide high quality agricultural and gardening tools and equipment designed to work with women’s bodies, thereby maximizing comfort, efficiency, productivity and safety.

These market-growers-turned-entrepreneurs were first avid gardeners. Ann started gardening for her young family when she and her late husband planted a huge vegetable garden at his parents’ farm. Liz dug up the corner of a rented backyard to plant her first tiny vegetable garden at age 22, when she was a newspaper reporter. Combining their efforts in the early 1990s at Green Heron Farms gave them the opportunity to organically grow enough heirloom vegetables for their own needs, Ann’s son’s farm-to-table restaurant — aptly named The Farmhouse — and eventually for selling at two farmers’ markets.

“These years of working on the land have been some of the most rewarding and replenishing of my life,” said Ann. “I’ll never stop growing food; it’s what keeps me sane, what brings me peace and balance.”

The women found it hard to expand the farm into a sustainable entity, however. They said part of the problem was the time and energy consumed by their day jobs, while another was lack of tools and equipment to help them improve their efficiency and increase production to a sustainable level. The equipment they did have took its toll. “We would wrestle with the rototiller and end up feeling like we’d lost the ‘match’, even though the field got tilled,” Liz said.

Talking with other women farmers through their membership in organizations like the PA Women’s Agricultural Network and Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, they found they were not alone in facing tool- and equipment-related challenges.

“Women are incredibly creative, hard-working and resourceful. They’ll get the work done, whether or not the tools fit them,” noted Ann. “What we’ve found is that in most cases, the tools and equipment don’t fit them — don’t fit us — very well. “And just because women have made do with existing equipment, doesn’t mean we wouldn’t do even better with tools and equipment that fit.”
Green Heron Tools, LLC is born

Ann and Liz conceived Green Heron Tools as a vehicle for supporting women farmers by providing better, more appropriate tools and equipment. They said they hoped to combine the tools business with their own market growing so they could give up their day jobs and focus all their efforts on agriculture.

With backgrounds in public health, both were tuned in to the health and safety aspects and the body mechanics of using tools. They knew that tools work best – and are safest and easiest to use – when they fit the user. So they began researching agricultural tools and equipment that were suitable for women's physical needs, and their real “aha” moment came when they found nothing designed specifically to fit the anatomy and physiology of women.

Adding insult to injury, a few so-called “women’s tools” were distinguished only by being pink or flowered, Liz said. “Can you believe it? Apparently they thought all that women needed was pretty tools.”

“It’s not that there are no tools out there that work for women,” she added, citing as an example equipment that adjusts to fit users of various statures. “It’s that no tools or equipment have been designed explicitly to work with women’s bodies. With the large increase in the number of women farmers in the U.S. — between 2002 and 2007, for example, there was a 29% increase in the number of farms run by women — that’s a problem.”

Ann and Liz posted an online survey in 2008 and later, thanks to a Small Business Innovation Research grant from USDA’s National Institute of Food & Agriculture, conducted focus groups and interviews with women farmers across the U.S. to learn more about women’s experiences with tools and equipment. Their own farming equipment experiences were echoed back to them: Tools and equipment women were using were too heavy, pull strings were too long, handles were too widely spaced and too high, grips were too big.

They also heard how women had adapted to ill-fitting equipment, often at the risk of safety. Among the stories they heard: propping a chainsaw between the trunk and branch of a tree so the woman could pull the long cord, and mowing with the safety switch off because the woman wasn’t heavy enough to keep the mower from stopping when going over bumps.

“Even for tall women, tools designed for men aren’t optimal,” added Ann, a nurse. The differences between women’s and men’s bodies extend beyond the obvious, to include differences in flexibility (women have more).
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From e-commerce to manufacturing
The original intended function of Green Heron Tools was to bring existing tools appropriate for women together in one, easy-to-find place. And that's still part of what the company's website – www.greenherontools.com – is about. With the help of farmers, gardeners and horticulturists who responded to the online survey or participated in focus groups, Ann and Liz have identified some of the best existing equipment available for women. Everything was tested by women prior to being offered on the site. Examples include an adjustable wheel hoe, a tractor rapid-hitch system that allows users to safely connect and disconnect implements without leaving the tractor seat, and Japanese cutting tools that were designed for people of smaller stature and therefore are a better fit for many women. Because survey respondents asked for it, they're also offering apparel such as gloves and work clothes. "One Iowa farmer told us she had to buy boys' Carhartts because local stores didn't carry women's sizes," recalled Ann.

But the results of their research convinced them that Green Heron Tools had to be "more than a one-stop e-shop," as Liz put it.

The "more" meant developing tools under the Green Heron label that fit women using a scientific process to base designs on anthropometric and other human factors data. Included in the data are body measurements, such as height, weight, reach and grip strength, and physiological characteristics such as upper-body and lower-body strength.

Through the USDA SBIR grant, which began June 1, 2009, Ann and Liz have been working with a team of engineers at Penn State University. The first Green Heron tool
Spring at Green Heron Farms shows raised beds, ground cover and plastic tunnels used in the production of many vegetable varieties, including heirloom lettuce, tomatoes and carrots.

A hybrid spade/shovel is being developed for easy digging and effective material movement. The introduction is expected in late 2010 or early 2011.

Beyond equipment sales
Ann and Liz want the Green Heron Tools website to be a clearinghouse of information for women farmers, market growers and gardeners. They envision the site as not only a place to buy appropriate products but also as a place where women can access useful information, resources, links and networking opportunities.

“We believe women have a vital role in both producing food and fostering sustainability,” said Liz. “While our focus is women farmers and market growers, we know that our products will be useful to home gardeners and other women who work the land, such as landscapers and viticulturists.”

“Eventually,” added Ann, “we would like to do something that will work for women in the developing world, where women produce 60-80 percent of the food in truly back-breaking conditions.”

Your comments about this article are welcome.
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