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More women farmers sprout up

Female farmers are growing in numbers -- and growing everything from beans to sapodilla. They also have their own social networks and websites.

By Kathleen McGrory

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Six years ago, Gabrielle Berryer left her job as a psychologist in North Miami to start a fruit grove in the Redland.

"I'm a city girl," said Berryer, who earned her Ph.D. at New York City's Yeshiva University. "But when I came down to the Redland, I was enchanted. It was intuitive; I knew I had to be here."

Berryer, who specializes in exotic fruits and fresh ice cream, is one of a growing number of women running farms -- a business once dominated by men.

These women are forming nonprofits and educating customers about nutrition. And they're reaching out to fellow women farmers through social events, ag conferences and online networking sites.

"Women are changing agriculture as we know it," said Dr. Carolyn Sachs, professor of rural sociology at Penn State. "It's a tough row to hoe, but the women in this industry are really shaking things up."

Despite a decline in the number of farms nationwide, the number of women involved in running those farms is on the rise. Based on current trends, the Department of Agriculture predicts that as many as 75 percent of U.S. farmland will be owned or co-owned by women by 2014.

Janice Brooks was one of the pioneers. When Brooks moved to South Florida in 1972, she and husband Roger invested in a two-acre plot of land overrun with Brazilian pepper. Roger worked for a nursery to pay the bills.

"We cleared the land, rented the machines, trenched the ditches," recalled Brooks. "When my husband was at work, I put the irrigation system together. And I did it with a 2-year-old son running circles around me."

Thirty-five years later, Brooks is a partner with Roger in Four B's Nursery, an operation with eight acres in Parkland and 10 acres in Delray Beach. Although she no longer "does the physical stuff," she keeps the books and manages the business.

Like Berryer and Brooks, most women farmers own small plots of land, and likely farm vegetables or grow ornamental plants, experts say. Their male counterparts are more often involved in larger operations with commodity crops like wheat and cotton.

Still, about 240,000 women operate farms nationwide -- a 64 percent surge from 1992, according to the 2002 U.S. Agricultural Census, the most comprehensive study available. In Florida, women farmers run more than 8,000 farms and horticulture operations on their own or as partners. About 300 are in Miami-Dade, and 100 are in Broward, the 2002 census found.

It's a far cry from the days when nearly all U.S. farms were operated by men. Although women often farmed alongside their husbands, few were recognized as partners. Now, many are farming on their own, including Berryer, who is divorced and the mother of four grown children.

She grows everything from black sapote, a fruit that tastes like chocolate pudding, to sapodilla, a sweet fruit that resembles a pear. The tropical treats are the main flavoring ingredients in Berryer's ice creams.

INNOVATIVE

While the exact cause of the trend is unknown, some experts believe it's related to the overall rise of women entrepreneurs. And as fewer sons become interested in taking over the family farm, more daughters are stepping in. They've already garnered a reputation for being innovative.

"Women farmers don't have to live up to the same expectations as their fathers and brothers," says Sachs, the Penn State professor. "That's a good thing. Most don't want a typical farm."

Susan Hurley certainly didn't.

During her two-decade stint at the helm of the Bar-B Ranch in Davie, Hurley transformed the horse boarding facility into a full-fledged ranch offering trail rides, pony parties, and a day camp for kids.

And in the Redland, Denisse Schnebly turned her fruit packing business into the region's first -- and only -- tropical fruit winery. She and her husband recently launched tours and educational programming of the business, named Schnebly Redland's Winery.

Reaching that point is hard work.

"It's a huge challenge," said Brooks, recalling when a cold snap destroyed her nursery in 1989. "You answer to Mother Nature. Even when things get tough, you still have kids to feed and employees to pay. You do what you have to."

Brooks paid the bills that year by reselling plants grown at other nurseries.

'MOMMY DUTIES'

There's also balancing family life.

"In this line of work, it's hard to fulfill your mommy duties," said Angela DelliVeneri, who used to shuttle her daughter to dance class and her son to soccer practice while keeping an eye on her Homestead farm. "It gets overwhelming sometimes."

To cope, DelliVeneri never started work before 7:30 a.m. She devoted the early morning hours to eating breakfast with her kids.

But the women say they can rely on each other for support.

ONLINE HELP

In cyberspace, they can click on sites like womeninagriculture.org to participate in live chats and receive e-newsletters. They can also exchange recipes, give relationship advice and talk about their farms on message boards.

And there are plenty of social events and conventions. Late last month, women farmers from across the state converged on Tampa for the state Farm Bureau's annual women's leadership conference.

For Berryer, it's the perfect life.

"At first, my family thought I was absolutely crazy. I kind of did, too," said Berryer.

"But this is where I'm meant to be. I know it."