

# the PRACTICAL FARMER

AUTUMN 2025



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Sharing Values, Exchanging Ideas

Mapping a Path to Conservation

Making a Meal of Memories







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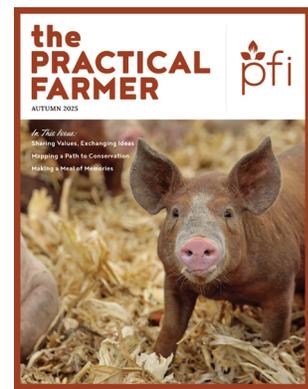
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**Due to funding shifts, we've temporarily removed a few sections from this print issue. But you can still find these items online:**

- For upcoming events, visit [practicalfarmers.org/events](https://practicalfarmers.org/events)
- To join or renew your membership, visit [practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew](https://practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew)

For the new members we would have shared this issue, look for those names in the Winter 2025 issue.



**ON THE COVER:**  
A pig peers out from a bed of corn stalks at Ron Mardesen's field day on July 22 near Elliot, Iowa. Want to see more images from our summer field days? Flip to page 14 for some highlights from the first half of the 2025 season.



## WHAT WE DO

Practical Farmers of Iowa was founded in 1985 as an organization for farmers. We use farmer-led investigation and information sharing to help farmers practice an agriculture that benefits both the land and people.

## OUR MISSION

Practical Farmers of Iowa's mission is equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities.

## OUR VISION

An Iowa with healthy soil, healthy food, clean air, clean water, resilient farms and vibrant communities.

## OUR VALUES

Welcoming everyone

Farmers leading the exchange of experience and knowledge

Curiosity, creativity, collaboration and community

Resilient farms now and for future generations

Stewardship of land and resources

## THE PRACTICAL FARMER

The Practical Farmer is a quarterly magazine published as a benefit of membership in Practical Farmers of Iowa. Through engaging stories and photos, our aim is to share the knowledge and experiences of PFI farmers, build a strong and connected community of members and supporters and celebrate our collective efforts to build resilient farms and communities.

Back issues are available upon request. Unless otherwise noted, articles may be reprinted or adapted if credit is given. Clippings and notice are appreciated.



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To see the complete list of PFI staff, including contact details, visit [practicalfarmers.org/staff](http://practicalfarmers.org/staff).

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# Preserving the Magic of Our Soils

**I've lived in Iowa most of my life.** Upon graduating from college way back in 2001, I experienced the typical urge many do at that time of life to broaden my horizons by living anywhere except Iowa.

When my husband and I lived outside of Iowa, we enjoyed experiencing the natural wonders of new places, from the lush New York Catskill Mountains to the vast expanse of federal land in Idaho. Yet, something felt amiss as I imagined living in these places long-term. I couldn't pinpoint what the missing ingredient was.

We moved back to Iowa. Upon return, the feeling that something was missing went away. Iowa doesn't have lush mountains or large swaths of federal land. So what was it about Iowa that filled my soul? Was it merely because it was familiar? In the 20 years since I've moved back, I slowly identified the missing ingredient – life-giving soil so rich it smells like home.

## Soils Feed Us

Soil is fundamental to life on Earth. It filters our water, grows our food and captures carbon dioxide. Iowa soils are so rich that, precolonization, our ecosystems were some of the most biodiverse in the world. As you well know, Iowa's soils have long provided us with abundance. From grains and pasture to vegetables and the rich, diverse prairie that once covered the land, Iowa's soils are truly magical.

Since our state is blessed with fertile soil, we have harnessed most of its power to raise crops. Today, over 85% of Iowa's land is devoted to agriculture. But the way we farm has become unbalanced. In the past, Iowa used to raise a wide diversity of crops. But as farming has become more efficient, the focus has narrowed to corn and soybeans – two annual crops that leave the land bare for about six months of the year. This contributes to nutrient loss and soil erosion.

As Iowa has shifted to fewer crops, the state has seen a dramatic drop in the number of farmers, from 206,000 in 1950 to 85,000 today. We've experienced rural community decline, loss of biodiversity, a decline in water quality and food insecurity. Iowans import more than 90% of our food, despite our fertile soils.

Our current monoculture farming system assumes that soil is an endless resource. However, as Iowa State University soil expert Lee Burras points out, if we keep farming the way we are, we have only about 60 years before our soils are essentially depleted.

## 40 Years of Sustaining Our Soils

Fortunately, PFI members have been attentive to the importance of sustaining our soils since 1985. Practical



*Due to Berry Patch Farm's good stewardship of their rich soils, Sally and her daughter Maya were able to pick a bounty of blueberries at the Nevada, Iowa, farm this past summer.*

Farmers turned 40 earlier this year – and I am proud of the leadership our members have shown over this time.

You remain passionately committed to not only preserving but regenerating your soils. You share generously with others how you care for soil, as well as how you are adapting your production systems for better long-term soil health, like switching to no-till as the Pelzer family did (see page 22 of this magazine). This includes when you take vulnerable land out of production, like Natasha Wilson and her family did when they converted row crop ground to perennial pasture that supports a diverse array of plants and wildlife (see page 9).

PFI members are unwavering in their commitment to preserving Iowa's soils, and they recognize the complexity of this task. They understand that soil regeneration goes beyond simply adding a new crop to their rotation. Rather, it demands a fundamental shift in the entire system. For a wider variety of crops to thrive, it takes dedicated research and development, viable markets, risk management, supply chain infrastructure and much more.

Forty years on, PFI members continue to lead by example and inspire hope. Thank you to Jeremy Gustafson and family for letting us celebrate this milestone at your field day in June, where you shared many details about how you are stewarding your soil.

The journey toward soil regeneration is challenging, but I can't think of a more hopeful group of farmers and partners to join with than the dedicated people at PFI. Together, we're building farming systems that support healthy soils, waters, communities, our health and the wildlife around us.

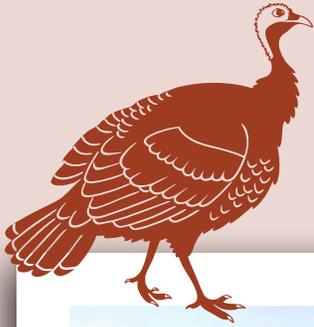
Thank you for your dedication to saving our magical soils. And here's to another 40 years of building resilient farms and communities.

*Sally Worley*

# Making a Meal of Memories

LaVon and Craig Griffieon share stories and lessons  
from their years of raising turkeys

By Amos Johnson



*The Griffieon family, with Craig and LaVon in the center.  
Photos courtesy of the Griffieons.*

**Three generations will gather around the Griffieon family's Thanksgiving table this year, headed by LaVon and Craig. The turkey that they'll enjoy is about as local as can be, coming from their pasture next to the house, raised on feed they grew and milled. They, along with their customers, have enjoyed this annual "turkeyful" bounty for nearly three decades.**

Stories abound from these years: of childhood businesses, tricks gained through tribulation and weathering life's literal storms. Gathered in gratitude around the table, the stories of raising food are ready to be recalled over heaping hills of mashed potatoes, spears of asparagus – and, of course, the turkey centerpiece.

## The Starter Course

Craig Griffieon is the fifth generation to grow up on this farm on the northern edge of Ankeny, Iowa. But he's the first to raise turkeys – though adding the birds wasn't actually Craig's idea. The enterprise started when Craig and LaVon's son, Nick, wanted a four-wheeler. "I said, you want a four-wheeler?" LaVon remembers. "You figure out a way to pay for it." Inspired by a session at the Practical Farmers of Iowa annual conference, Nick and a friend raised chickens to sell at the farmers market. But their business acumen lagged behind Nick's poultry-raising ability.

The friends encountered two problems familiar to many farmers: marketing and business planning. "Nobody stopped at the booth," LaVon says. "I go by to see how they're doing and they've got headphones on listening to their little Walkman. I told them, 'You've got to talk to people. Sell your chickens!'"

With the proper guidance on people skills, Nick eventually sold all 100 chickens for \$5 each – \$500 of pure profit! Or so the duo thought. "They forgot to factor in any expenses," LaVon laughs. "They were \$11 in the hole."

But they didn't make the same mistake twice. The next batch, they started making their own feed. They also added turkeys, despite not having built a pen to house them yet. "One morning I'm making the bed on the upper floor," LaVon says, "and these huge turkeys fly past the bedroom window." Between the turkeys and the chickens, the boys had soon saved plenty of money. But they were so busy raising the turkeys, LaVon says, they never got around to buying the four-wheeler.

## Side Dishes

The turkeys eventually became a long-standing farm enterprise for the whole family. Over the years the Griffieons adapted their turkey-raising methods to incorporate tricks they've learned along the way. For instance, LaVon waits to order poults until she sees how many are left at Tractor Supply, because she can get those for pennies on the dollar. They raise 70 Broad Breasted White turkeys per year. At around \$12 per full-priced chick, picking up these discount poults can mean significant savings.



*The turkeys reside in an updated version of Nick's original pen design on the Griffieon farm in Ankeny, Iowa.*

They've also learned that high humidity can harm chick development. "If they start to hatch when it's really humid out, in about six weeks they'll just start toppling over," Craig says. "It's the weirdest thing." The family learned from their veterinarian that the humidity impacts how the poults' lungs form. Given that the poults are hatched elsewhere, often other states, it can be hard to avoid this. They now try to anticipate when the worst of the summer humidity will be past at the hatchery, which usually means waiting longer to buy poults.

In general, the Griffieons have found that the domesticated turkey breeds they raise need more oversight. "When they're babies, if you look at them cross-eyed, they'll fall over," LaVonne says hyperbolically. While scientists point to the keen intelligence, memory, survival skills and complex social lives of wild turkeys, the process of breeding modern hybrids has led to the loss of some of those adaptive traits. "They're way more delicate and way more expensive than chickens," LaVon says.

*(Continued on page 8 →)*

To find turkeys and other local foods raised by PFI members, visit [practicalfarmers.org/local-foods-directory](http://practicalfarmers.org/local-foods-directory)

To learn more about the Griffieon family's farm, visit [griffieonfamilyfarm.com](http://griffieonfamilyfarm.com)

The Griffieons have had to learn to safety-proof their turkey pens. For example, they discovered poults laying dead near the waterer. The reason? The poults were drowning themselves as they tried to drink. "What they were doing was putting almost their whole head under the water," says Craig. Putting marbles in the waterer counteracts this by limiting how deep the turkeys can put their beaks.

What goes on in the mind of a turkey is often opaque to us, and leaves us guessing at their motivation. LaVon recounts one bad windstorm where the turkey pen lifted up and blew across the highway. But LaVon and Craig didn't have to go chasing birds all over the country. The turkeys – perhaps mindful of the hazardous weather conditions around them, perhaps petrified in place – stayed put, a grounded cloud of ruffled feathers arrayed in the perfect square outline of the now-missing pen.

### For Dessert: Mud Pie

The best stories to remember with family are the times when everyone worked together to overcome harrowing challenges. Whether it's the ubiquitous Iowa conversation about the derecho, chasing cattle that escaped or sudden flooding, these events seem to be perpetual fonts of stories.

LaVon and Craig still remember the night when 10 inches of rain fell in about two hours. Interstates and county roads were closed, and cars were rerouted everywhere. "I called our son, who lives down on the corner. 'Why aren't you up here helping?' He said, 'There are 150 cars in my yard, people are pounding on the door to use the bathroom. I can't get out!'"

Finally their daughter arrived at 1:30 in the morning, and their son a little after, as water poured across the roads and flooded their pastures where the turkey were trapped, sodden in their pen. "We got hair dryers and heat guns for everyone to dry off the birds. They'd look dead," LaVon says. "But if they were still breathing you could put them under a dryer and bring them back to life. Though it didn't smell too good in the shop that night."

"Just be careful not to cook them with a heat gun!" Craig chimes in.

Only a week away from processing, the losses could have been an unmitigated disaster. As it was, they lost about 20 birds, but managed to save the rest. It was a difficult year. But now, the story is told with chuckles at the memory of their hairdryer rescue brigade. Tragedy with the hindsight of time equals a good Thanksgiving story. ■

## LaVon's Turkey Brine

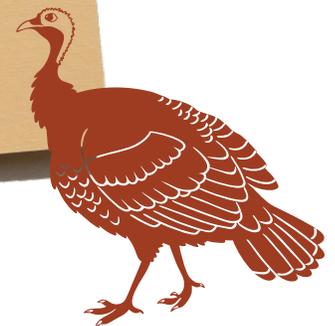
### Ingredients

Asparagus scraps  
Vegetable broth  
1 cup sea salt

1 Tbsp crushed  
dried rosemary  
1 Tbsp dried sage

1 Tbsp dried thyme  
1 Tbsp dried savory  
1 gallon ice water

1. Boil asparagus scraps until soft. Puree scraps and boiled water together. Add to vegetable broth to equal 1 gallon.
2. In a large stockpot, combine the broth, sea salt and herbs. Bring to a boil, stirring frequently to fully dissolve salt. Remove from heat and let cool to room temperature.
3. When the broth mixture is cool, pour into a 5-gallon bucket. Stir in ice water.
4. Make sure innards are removed from turkey. Place turkey, breast down, into the brine. Make sure cavity is filled with water. Place in a cold place, like a fridge, overnight.
5. After approximately 8 hours, remove turkey, drain and pat dry to cook.



# Changing Course

Since returning to the family farm, Natasha Wilson and her family have been taking careful steps to shift the farm's focus so multiple generations can farm together.

By Savannah Laur

**West Fork Farmstead is an easy ride from Iowa City, Iowa – about 40 minutes south and a little west along Iowa Route 1. A couple of other straightforward turns will take a visitor to the farm outside of West Chester where Natasha Wilson and her four siblings grew up.**



Natasha and her mother, Nancy, stand by the entrance to their farm, West Fork Farmstead, near West Chester, Iowa.

But Natasha's path back to the family farm was more like that of West Fork Crooked Creek, the aptly named stream (and partial farm namesake) that winds its way like a slanting "u" around and through the farm's fields. After leaving home, Natasha lived and worked in an array of places. She got her bachelor's degree in international studies from University of Iowa, followed by a law degree from Washington University in St. Louis. Her path also took her to Chile; Tanzania; Arkansas; Washington, D.C.; and Des Moines.

But the pull of the farm was strong. In 2019, after 17 years away, Natasha returned. "I realized I wanted to raise my children similarly to how I was raised, surrounded by family and running free on the farm," she says. Today, Natasha is part of a three-generation operation that includes her parents, Nancy and Brian Wilson; her sister, Claire Wilson – who returned to the farm in 2023; another sister, Jess Larghe, who came back in 2025; and her three young children.

Together, the Wilsons are working to slowly transform the conventional row crop and hog operation Nancy and Brian manage into a pasture-based business focused on grass-fed beef; pastured chicken, eggs and pigs; and raw honey. They've been taking their time to build customers and figure out how to ensure the farm is sustainable both financially and ecologically.

(Continued on page 10 →)





A window into the numerous enterprises of West Fork Farmstead (left to right): pigs, cattle, chickens and raw honey. Photos courtesy of Natasha Wilson.

## Purposeful Change

In hindsight, Natasha's decision to make a mid-life career change seems as straightforward as the road to town. Even the judge she worked for in Arkansas once told her he thought she'd end up moving back to the farm, Natasha shares. But at the time, she wasn't sure. "Part of what always seemed intimidating about farming was watching my parents work as hard as they did and never having time off," she says.

Years later, however, while putting in extra hours on a Saturday for her legal work, she had an aha moment: She realized she was working long hours for something that didn't really bring her joy. She recalls thinking, "If I'm doing that anyway, I might as well enjoy it."

That epiphany was in 2018. She promptly called her dad. Over the next several months, she and her parents had long discussions about what it would look like for her to return to the farm. When Natasha's first child, Corinne, was born in 2019, the time was right. "I envisioned a future where I could have her, and any other kids I have, with me," Natasha says. "I wanted to prioritize something I cared about and spending time with them."

It's now six years since Natasha and her family made the impactful decision to change course. As PFI's business development viability manager, I'm here with Natasha to learn more about her journey back to the farm – and how she and her family continue to take slow, intentional steps to transform the farm and prepare Natasha, Claire and Jess to take on increasing management roles.

The farmhouse we're sitting in is the home where Natasha and her siblings were raised. It's where her mother was raised – and where Nancy homeschooled all her children, while also farming full-time alongside Brian. The farm and farmhouse belonged to Natasha's grandparents, who in the early 1980s

transitioned it to Nancy and Brian. Now, it's their turn to make space for the next generation.

When Natasha expressed her desire to return, Nancy and Brian knew they'd need to make changes. They had already started converting row-crop land into pasture and raising some livestock for family consumption. Natasha says this led them to think, "If this is what we want to eat, other people might feel the same." But they first needed to figure out how all of the new pieces of the farm would fit with the old.

To help guide their thinking, Natasha applied for PFI's Savings Incentive Program. She was accepted as part of the SIP Class of 2022. The two-year program helps beginning farmers create a business plan, connects them to experienced farm mentors and helps them set goals and save money. It also offers matching funds to support the purchase of a farm asset.

Through SIP, Natasha was able to more closely examine each of the enterprises she and her family were planning to add. She also made valuable connections with other farmers and had space to define the farm's goals and vision. Natasha says this helps them stay focused when new opportunities arise, such as increasing herd size or exploring e-commerce. "We have all these choices to make," she says. "I come back to our values all the time."

Building on what she learned, Natasha decided to sign up for PFI's Farm Business Coaching program in 2023. Working with farm business expert Julia Shanks, who runs Julia Shanks Food Consulting, Natasha learned more about financial documents, like enterprise budgets. The program helped her figure out how much they needed to pay farm employees, and how to do so in a sustainable way. "That was a giant question mark that [the program] helped with," Natasha says. Inspired by the support she received through the PFI network, she joined PFI's board of directors in 2025.

**"I don't want to do this anywhere else. I am extremely fortunate to have a farm, parents**





Having a better grasp of how to make farm management decisions has been crucial as Natasha's sisters have returned to the farm. When Natasha first came back, she and her parents spent the first few years focusing on putting profits back into the farm and building infrastructure. Now, they're focusing on growing the farm and making sure they have revenue to support wages for those working on the farm.

"We're not just growing for the sake of growing," Natasha says. "A big part of what we try to figure out is what is our enough."

### Guided by Care

The Wilsons have also had to figure out the best ways to use everyone's skills. When Claire decided to return, she brought her own set of strengths. For instance, while Natasha handles much of the marketing – and enjoys being able to express her creativity in this way – Claire has more mechanical skills.

When Claire came back, the goal was for her to split her time between helping Nancy and Brian with their conventional operation and helping with West Fork Farmstead's enterprises. Slowly, they plan to transition Claire to working fully for the West Fork part of the farm. With Jess back on the farm, the family is now thinking about how best to use her skills and ensure she gets paid for her farm work.

Nancy says that being intentional about these decisions is essential to transition planning. The family worked with an expert in estate planning to structure assets in a way that would benefit all five children, while also ensuring that Natasha could continue to run her business.

For Natasha, being able to carry on the farm's legacy is especially meaningful. Recently, she received a call out of the blue from someone asking if she would consider selling her West Fork business in the next five years. Her response was

an immediate no. "I don't want to do this anywhere else," she says. "I am extremely fortunate to have a farm, and parents that are still successfully farming and were open to having someone come back."

Each generation has been able to add to the farm legacy, she adds. The pasture is one example. It was once used to grow corn and soybeans. Now it's a perennial pasture with a diverse array of plants, birds and wildlife. Nancy credits the high quality of their meat to raising the animals on pasture. Natasha agrees. "From day one when I walked in the door and ate that product [beef] to what it's like now – it's a dramatic change."

This was one of Natasha's goals when she came back to the farm: producing high-quality food to share with her community – and her family. As we talk, her daughter Corinne, 5, and son Lucian, 3, enjoy sandwiches made with fresh asparagus from their garden and shaved ham from their pastured pigs. The food is as local as it gets. Knowing their animals lead happy lives and are raised with care is also important to Natasha.

Before we say goodbye, I have a chance to see what this looks like. After a short ride in the Wilsons' gator to the renovated pasture, Natasha, Lucian and I hop out to see the chicken tractors and the diverse ecosystem the Wilsons have created. The hens cluck softly as they forage in fresh grass, and the pasture is lush and full of blooms. I can see the path where the chicken tractor had been – and over the fence, the cattle as they roam toward us.

For them – as well as Natasha and her family – that path is winding ever closer to a future more connected to the land, community and each other. ■

**that are still successfully farming and were open to having someone come back."**  
*- Natasha Wilson*



# Paving the Way



*Matt Johnson and Tiffiny Clifton build community around food and access for all in the greater Omaha area*

By Emma Liddle

**Long Walk Farm owners Matt Johnson and Tiffiny “Tiff” Clifton host the annual “Battle of the Chefs” event series**, which they launched in 2024 as a way to build community, celebrate local foods and showcase culinary talent in the Omaha, Nebraska, area.

The series takes place at the farm and features eight chefs who compete, two per battle, in a bracket-style competition from mid-May through late September, with paying guests voting on the winning creations. Dan Hoppen, Omaha culinary writer and “Battle of the Chefs” emcee, keeps an online food journal of the event that speaks volumes. Dan uses the platform to record the chefs’ creative use of the featured weekly local-food ingredients. Many of the pictures feature plates heaping with vibrant greens, smoked meats, mushrooms, crispy fritters or a tasty turnip pie.

But what shines through each week’s competition is the community that gathers to enjoy this food. People eat together around long tables. Apron-clad chefs grin, holding pans against the pastoral backdrop. This palpable sense of community and collaboration is just what Tiff and Matt were hoping to create when they started their farm in 2020, unintentionally, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.



*Matt Johnson and Tiffiny Clifton*

Neither Tiff nor Matt grew up directly farming, but both had connections to agriculture and felt close to it. Matt always loved farming. His grandfather farmed on rented land, but Matt was steered towards work in information technology. Tiff grew up in farm country near Omaha, occasionally helping the neighboring row crop farmer with chores.

She and Matt met as adults while dropping off family members at a camp for children with disabilities – Tiff bringing her brother Caleb, and Matt bringing his son Kaleb. Matt and Tiff collaborated to organize a yearly stroller-pushing run from Omaha to Lincoln, Nebraska, in the Market to Market annual 70-mile race – the largest day-long relay in the nation. As they envisioned the long walk of their lives, they decided to take their teamwork back to the farm.

“We were in our early 40s,” Tiff says, “and it was time to explore the things we wanted for ourselves from when we were kids.”

## Jumping In

Matt and Tiff began browsing Zillow, an online platform for real estate listings, for farmland in late 2019. Then, one weekend morning in early 2020, Matt found a 16-acre property that checked every box. “The family had been on the land for over 100 years,” she says, adding that the drive is paved all the way from the city to their house. Matt and Tiff purchased the land in July 2020 and moved to the farm shortly after. Matt quickly bought goats, alpacas and pigs, fulfilling his childhood dream. He and Tiff planted greens and realized there was a major need for local produce. Tiff says, “We didn’t start growing our own food because of the food [distribution] channels, but it worked out well.”

Matt and Tiff poured their hearts, minds and bodies into their new farm. They dug fencing holes, built every bed and seeded and harvested by hand. Tiff recalls one day when she was so exhausted she fell asleep in the aisle between the plant beds. “It was a nice nap,” she says. The pair quickly took Long Walk Farm to the Omaha Metro community. They marketed at farmers markets in 2021, through restaurants in 2022 and through Farm Table Delivery, a Harlan, Iowa-based local-food procurement and delivery service, in 2023.

Today, Tiff and Matt – along with two full-time and three part-time employees – grow produce on 7 acres, with 16,000 square feet under high tunnels. They also graze their goats, ducks and pigs on 8 acres of pasture. Not everything works (Tiff recalls one annual harvest that yielded just six potatoes). “We just trust that the failing forward was going to get us to the next place,” she says.

Long Walk Farm sets itself apart by growing atypical varieties, colors and types of produce. “We want to grow things that are exciting to cook and eat,” Tiff says. This also appeals to the Omaha-based chefs they work with. Long Walk Farm delivers produce to Omaha chefs once a week and takes requests. And if Matt and Tiff don’t have something requested, they recommend other nearby farms that do.

Starting “Battle of the Chefs” was Matt’s idea to connect chefs with real, local food and the people who eat out. His thinking was: “What better way to know where your food is farmed?” In addition to bringing people together over food, the event helps raise funds for the nonprofit organization, Gotta Be Me, that Tiff founded in 2014. The organization honors her brother by providing all-abilities programming for people with disabilities and their families.

To accommodate the needs of chefs and the influx of people who’d be at the farm, Tiff and Matt converted a former metal collection area to an event space featuring a walk-in prep area, grills, a wood-fired pizza oven, a patio and long tables and chairs. In each battle, two chefs prepare two courses each for attendees featuring a secret ingredient. Guests are encouraged to graze on charcuterie and salad provided by Long Walk Farm. A local baker also prepares dessert.

Of the ingredients, 97% are local products, either from Long Walk Farm or elsewhere. Matt and Tiff say they “like to see people have fun with food.”

### Connecting Missions

Attendees enjoy interacting with the chefs and each other while eating local food. Reflecting the dual purpose of the series, guests are also signed up for Gotta Be Me emails. Tiff says this helps build community in multiple ways. She cites someone who attended a chef battle while pregnant, then brought her baby to a Gotta Be Me art event. “She said, ‘We



Turnip pie, a creation from Brie White of Breeze Bakery in Omaha, uses Long Walk Farm’s turnips. Photo courtesy of Dan Hoppen.

got to have great food then, and today we’re getting to do great art.”

Long Walk Farm continues to expand in ways that will increase food and farm access. Tiff and Matt recently received a Choose Iowa grant to construct an on-farm store, and the chef who works at the farm is now processing value-added products in Matt and Tiff’s new commercial kitchen.

The couple works to ensure that everyone can eat and live the way they want to. “When we talk about accessibility, disability always comes to mind,” Tiff says. “But the reality is that there’s so many people who don’t have access to fresh food [or] the farm.”

### Walk Alongside

Building an accessible farm (in the Loess Hills, at that) requires constant reexamination. For example, wheelchair users can’t roll under a typical wash sink setup. The pizza oven Matt and Tiff use for “Battle of the Chefs” requires a standing user – which led an Omaha chef to bring a tiltable pizza oven to a battle. But Matt and Tiff always aim to give the complete picture of what visitors are getting into and what help they’ll provide. They want visitors to have more control over decisions. “As an adult with a disability, you’ve been told ‘no’ a lot,” Tiff says. “I operate with, ‘If you get stuck, we will help you.’”

As their operation and audience grow, Matt and Tiff seek out new crops and new projects. “We want to be a long-term sustainable farm that can provide year-round employment and appropriate wages,” Matt says. Tiff continually centers the education and access aspects of farming, as well as love of the land.

“There’s really something to be said for sticking your hands in the dirt and working the land and community around us,” she says. Matt and Tiff commit every day to each other and their community. The road is long, but the people they have gathered happily join them in their long walk. ■

“There’s really something to be said for sticking your hands in the dirt and working the land and community around us.”

- Tiff Clifton

# 2025 FIELD DAY Season

Nothing says “Summer in Iowa” – especially this summer in Iowa – like the rain pounding on a barn’s steel roof. And nothing says “PFI field day” like trying to hear a farmer talk over that cacophonous din! Rain or shine, farmer-led field days continue to be a collection of gems for learning, new ideas and networking.

More than ever, we have access to data, media and information at our fingertips and in our earbuds. Some is incredibly useful and helps us make better decisions. But the volume can be overwhelming, and often is consumed in solitude. This summer we helped farmers host more field days than ever (66 field days!). At each one, we’re reminded of the unique value of being on a farm – listening, learning, asking questions and conversing in person. Thank you for being there with us, and please enjoy these photo highlights from the first half of the field day season.





**Opposite page:** Attendees ride the hay wagon to see Ron Mardesen's research trial of finishing pigs on cover crops. (July 22, Elliot, IA) **(1)** Kody Karr takes questions from attendees while standing in his diverse stand of forages following his field day. (July 17, Monroe City, MO) **(2)** Grant and Aubrey Stuart stand in front of the planter. (June 18, Walnut, IA) **(3)** At his field day in mid-June, Laban Miller shares the values and reasoning behind the decisions he's made for his farm, including adding in relay cropping and getting livestock on the land. (June 17, Leon, IA)





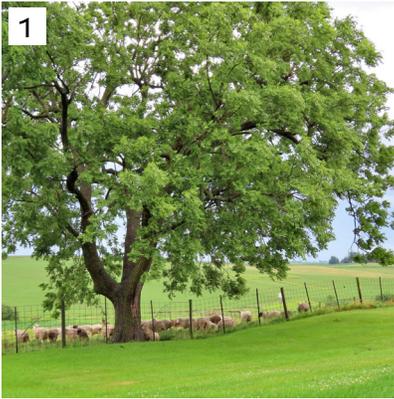
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(1) Cows stand in cover crops on Doug and Traci Steffen's farm in northeast Nebraska. (June 11, Crofton, NE) (2) Attendees file by the head lettuce field and into the high tunnel at Phelps Farm, with Amy Phelps in the lead. (June 11, Guttenburg, IA) (3) Wheat berries develop, nearly ready for harvest at Jason Russell's field day. (July 7, Monticello, IA) (4) Craig Fischer (right) discusses the impact of bison poop, pee and hooves on soil health during his family's field day at Sleepy Bison Acres. (June 20, Sleepy Eye, MN) (5) Tessa Parks shows field day attendees her first aid kit for cattle. (June 15, Northfield, MN) (6) John Wepking leads field day attendees to the edge of a vast field of Bickford wheat, a new wheat variety bred to be easily milled into flour. (July 10, Ridgeway, WI) (7) Longtime PFI members Fred Abels, Craig Fleishman and Ron Rosmann catch up at Jeremy Gustafson's field day and PFI's 40th anniversary celebration. (June 24, Boone, IA) (8) An elderberry cluster (a.k.a. cyme) is ripe for picking during Anna Geyer's field day at Land Alliance Farm, Folk School & Retreat Center. (July 25, Oxford, IA) (9) Even though Susan Young's field day focused on goats, some attention must be paid to the cat. (June 16, Iowa City, IA) (10) Levi Lyle and his son stand in front of their certified organic tart cherry orchard. (June 14, Keota, IA)

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(1) Regina Frahm's sheep get some grazing in between downpours. (June 20, Newton, IA) (2) Some attendees lead the way as others ride behind the tractor through the pasture at Eric Hein's field day. (June 25, Altura, MN) (3) Bailey Scott Hobbs explains the area of the farm where she and her partner, Mike, run trials ranging from cover crops to polycultures and more. (June 21, Dunnell, MN) (4) Eric Mahaney points out features of his rotary hoe mounted with an air seeder that allow him to reduce equipment passes in the field. (June 10, Arion, IA) (5) Eric Meyers inspects a soil pit in a corn field during his field day as onlookers ask questions. (July 24, Postville, IA) (6) Field day attendees walk to a trial in Michael Fosdick's field to look at strip-tilled, 30-inch soybeans. (June 19, Sperry, IA) (7) Jordan Lyon explains the irrigation system in his cantaloupe field. (July 10, Conesville, IA) (8) Attendees had a chance to see Andrew Van Nice's drone demonstrate cover crop seeding over a field of early-July corn at Wayne Braun's field day. (July 1, Durant, IA) (9) Neil Kruppen, Nick Sennert and Jessob Steffen stand in front of their Friesen bulk bins (which they referred to as "cone-bottom bins") as they describe the farming practices they've added and changed since starting their partnership a few years ago. (June 26, Linn Grove, IA) (10) Attendees overlook a 5-acre wetland on Fred and Vicki Abels' farm. (June 26, Holland, IA)

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(1) First-time field day hosts Denny and Emily Stucky pose in the giant rocking chair outside their farm, The Community Orchard. (July 29, Fort Dodge, IA) (2) Dan Miller introduces Dathan and Tony, the pilots who seed cover crops by airplane in partnership with Dan's cover crop business, Millermatic Seed. (July 31, Harlan, IA) (3) Chris Von Holten shares details about his twin-row planter. (July 29, Walnut, IL) (4) Benjamin De Boef (center) demonstrates a drone flight for field day attendees above Ryan Wolf's corn field. (July 11, Keosauqua, IA) (5) James Nisly shows how quickly his new processor can cube sweet potatoes. (July 27, Kalona, IA) (6) PFI staff members (from left) Chastity Schonhorst, Shawn Hanson, Katie Aupperle, Alexandria Atal and Jim Kain prepare to hand out local fruit and veggie samples to RAGBRAI riders who stopped at Plagge Farms along this year's route. (July 23, Latimer, IA) (7) Attendees listen as Jayson Ryner presents about the SeedSpike planting system at the Grundy County Fairgrounds. (July 23, Grundy Center, IA)

# New Policy Area for PFI

*PFI can now advocate for local and regional food system programs*

By Amos Johnson



**In April, PFI's board of directors approved a new policy area for Practical Farmers of Iowa focused on protecting and expanding local and regional food system programs.**

This was the first time the board has approved a new policy area for PFI since 2018, when the board voted to add a focus on increasing access to crop insurance to PFI's existing areas of focus at the time (beginning farmers, working lands conservation and sustainable agriculture research).

Given PFI's history of nonpartisanship, which has been key to encouraging a big tent, some people may be surprised that PFI does any formal policy-related work. For those wondering when PFI got involved in policy and how we make decisions about policy work, some background may be helpful.

## A History of Strategic Policy Work

The origins of formal policy work at PFI go back to 2009, when the board approved the formation of a policy committee. At that time, the board also approved three areas within the federal farm bill that PFI could advocate for: the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program.

"For the longest time, PFI was not going to get involved in policy because it would be perceived as partisan," says longtime member Margaret Smith, who joined PFI's board in February 2024 and serves on the policy committee. "But policy is not the same as partisan. Policy is for issues, not for parties."

In 2010, the board approved a policy area focused on the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program. And in 2018, it approved the narrow focus on increasing access to crop insurance. In a story published in the Autumn 2018 issue of this magazine, longtime board member Gayle Olson – who now serves as board secretary – said that strategic involvement in policy was important for PFI's mission.

"If an organization is focused on sustainability – by definition a long view – it is difficult to completely shut out the role that policy plays," Gayle said. "Also, policy will happen regardless. So I think it should be informed by the best research and the best thinkers." She added that when PFI does speak on policy, "it speaks with a single, vetted voice on a narrow range of issues that are directly related to PFI's mission and the difference it wants to make in the world."

Board approval for the new local and regional foods policy area followed a similar course of rigorous vetting. So what does that look like?

First, a proposed policy must be farmer-driven. It must also be nonpartisan and solutions-driven. The policy committee, which consists of nine to 12 members representing PFI's diverse membership, decides what policy proposals to elevate to the board of directors. The committee must vote unanimously to recommend a new policy area to the board, which then has the final vote on whether to add a new official policy area.

## A Natural Expansion of Our Local Foods Work

Following the April policy vote, PFI may now advocate for protecting and expanding programs that support farmers' efforts to create robust local and regional food systems. This includes programs such as Choose Iowa, Local Food Promotion Program, Farmers Market Promotion Program, Local Food Purchase Assistance, Local Food for Schools and Regional Food Systems Partnerships.

Margaret says local foods fit PFI's work to build resilient farms and communities. "[Local food] has been an issue for so long now in my neighborhood. It keeps money moving through the local economy and it's a risk management strategy, for farmers and the supply chain."

Though a new policy area, local foods work is not new for PFI. We've been collaborating with other organizations to develop stronger local and regional food systems for many years. The topic has also been a frequent focus of field days and conference sessions. Margaret says that with this history, it makes sense to expand into policy work in this area. "It's easier to influence policymakers when you have a proven track record," she says.

Policy work can be viewed as an extension of the education work PFI is built on. We know our members' research, knowledge and experiences can help shape sensible policy and government programs. In 2018, Gayle said that "policy happens at many different levels." Margaret agrees. "We're working to educate in Washington as well as at the state level. Positive change can happen faster with policy than without it." ■



Learn about PFI's policy work at [practicalfarmers.org/policy](https://practicalfarmers.org/policy)

# Sharing Values,

# Exchanging Ideas



Two generations of the Pelzer family share values and ideas across the years as they steward their farm for the future

By Solveig Orngard

**When Mary and Jim Pelzer first started farming together near Tipton, Iowa, they farmed the way Jim had been taught by his father.**

The eldest of nine children, Jim worked hard on the farm from a young age. But as he got older, he realized there was no longer a place for him on his family farm. He and Mary found a patch of land a short distance away and started their own farrow-to-finish hog and row crop farm – one that included a fair amount of tillage, as was the norm in their area at the time.

Eager to be involved, but lacking a farming background, Mary learned various farm tasks. “I just remember when we were first farming, when we had CB [citizens band] radios instead of cell phones, it was so muddy and wet that I’d get the combine stuck,” Mary says. “One evening, I just kept calling, saying, ‘Jim, I’m stuck again.’ But I can’t think of the last time that was a big problem.” She turns to Jim, “Have you had to pull me out for years? Maybe decades?”

“Thank goodness, no!” Jim says, in a voice that echoes the stress of those moments so long ago.

Frustrated by those muddy field experiences, the Pelzers were drawn to learning about alternative farming methods. On a visit to central Iowa, they attended a field day hosted by PFI cofounders Dick and Sharon Thompson. They left feeling inspired to try something new. That spark eventually led to their incorporating no-till in the mid-1990s – a change that brought noticeable benefits.

*“On the hilly field, the water wasn’t flushing the ditches out or waterways. That really sold me on cover crops.” - Jim Pelzer, about his first time planting a cover crop.*

## Open To Change

Like so many farm families, the farm crisis of the 1980s had taken its toll on the Pelzers. With three young children to care for, the only way Jim and Mary could sustain their farm was to find full-time jobs. Mary began working for the local community college while Jim hauled seed corn and later worked as a rural postal carrier. Once they started no-till, they found it saved time and labor, and helped keep the soil in place.

Mary and Jim’s kids – Tracy, Kurt and Chris – grew up helping with many farm tasks. But they were also encouraged to explore other interests like theater and sports, something Jim didn’t get the chance to do. Jim and Mary showed the importance of having off-farm employment as they balanced farm duties with their other jobs.

The kids also roamed the land. They especially enjoyed the creek areas on some rented acres their parents maintained through conservation practices like filter strips and contour farming. Chris Pelzer recalls valuing conservation from a young age. “I always had an interest in soils and the environment,” he says, “I think largely cultivated from my parents.”

Chris would eventually pursue that interest at Iowa State University, where he studied environmental science. While there, he started working for an ISU agricultural research lab exploring cover crops and carbon sequestration. One year, while home on break, he brought home some hairy vetch seed and planted it in the garden just to see what happened.

Up to that point, the Pelzers had not yet tried cover cropping. But they wanted to keep reducing erosion on their hilly land. Seeing the hairy vetch grow in the garden piqued Jim's interest and he decided to plant a rye cover crop on the steep slopes of their rental ground that next fall. That was in the late 2000s.

"Towards the end of April we had 4-5 inches of rain. On one farm where it was just bean ground the year before and no cover crop, it washed away places I've never even seen washed," Jim says. "But on the hilly field, the water wasn't flushing the ditches out or waterways. That really sold me on cover crops."

After that dramatic event, Jim and Mary kept cover cropping – and they began to notice changes on their farm. Before cover crops, Mary recalls her frustration trying to till clay ground in their rental acres. "But that even got to the point where it was looking pretty good. And a big thing Jim noticed over the years was that all the earthworms came back!"

## Bridging Field and Lab

Chris continued in agricultural research, eventually getting a position as a laboratory manager and research support specialist in Cornell University's Sustainable Cropping Systems Lab, where he works today. In this position, he manages the field research and balances a range of responsibilities. "He's a jack-of-all-trades in the department," Mary says. "He puts in the crop and takes out the crop, does all the measurements, does reporting, helps write up stuff, does extension work and teaches classes."

In his years of research work, Chris has noticed that many researchers he's worked with don't have the practical farm experience he does. "One thing I bring to our lab group is just having lived and worked on a farm," Chris says. That perspective helps him stay grounded in the ultimate goal of his work. "In research," he says, "our work should have weight if we want to make it applicable to farmers and have value in the real world."

*(Continued on page 24 →)*



Jim Pelzer stands next to his rye crop to show its height at his farm near Tipton, Iowa, in May 2025.



*A terminated cover crop sits aside a filter strip on the Pelzer farm near Tipton, Iowa, in May 2025.*

Chris' work also promotes an exchange of ideas with his parents. Mary and Jim enjoy hearing about Chris' latest research, and they make a point of seeing his plots at Cornell when they visit. They all discuss new ideas of farming practices regularly on the phone. As Jim and Mary make decisions about trying new practices on their farm, Chris often chips in, noting when something sounds good but has drawbacks in reality.

"I try to be the moderating voice sometimes," Chris says. "But other times my parents are the ones who can see the barriers or the challenges."

### **Looking Forward, Going Back**

A year ago, the rental farm across from Mary and Jim's home that the Pelzers had farmed with no-till or strip-till for about 35 years was sold to a new owner. Soon after, the fields were all tilled. The trees and shrubs along the creeks where Chris and his siblings used to play and run were ripped out. Shorn of their vegetation, the creeks are now hardly visible across the field and the abundant wildlife is gone. The family mourns the loss of that land they stewarded for so long.

"I think it's been hard for my parents because they see it every day and they are really dedicated in terms of conservation practices," Chris says. "But as soon as the new landowners started farming it, they had a very different type of land ethic." Mary agrees you need to make a living from the farm, but explains the philosophy she and Jim have applied to their farm. "You have to have enough return on investment to keep on farming," she says, "but hopefully leave the land better than you found it."

Jim and Mary continue to farm their family's acres and wonder increasingly about how the farm will look for coming generations. As of now, their children live scattered across the country, settled into their own lives and homes. But their emotional attachment to the home farm lingers.

*"In research, our work should have weight if we want to make it applicable to farmers and have value in the real world." - **Chris Pelzer***



Chris and his kids help Jim with some farm work on the Pelzer farm near Tipton, Iowa. Photo courtesy of Chris Pelzer.

For now, Chris is content with his career in agricultural research and the life he leads in Ithaca, New York, with his wife and three young children. But as his own children grow, questions about the future of the family farm, and his role in it, loom in his mind. “Now having kids, I look fondly back on my childhood and what I experienced and learned growing up on a farm,” he says. “My oldest son, who is 4, has only been to my parents’ farm a couple times. But he’s always talking about going back. He loves it.”

It’s too soon to say what the farm will look like when Jim and Mary choose to retire. In the meantime, the soil in their former rental field that they built up over years of implementing conservation practices will continue to hold benefits for the new owners for a few more crop years.

The land ethic and values Mary and Jim have lived out through their many years on the farm, however, will last for generations. ■

*“You have to have enough return on investment to keep on farming, but hopefully leave the land better than you found it.”*

**- Mary Pelzer**



# Mapping a Path

## to Conservation

*Partnering with Pheasants Forever and her farm manager is helping Diane Horn shift the direction of her family farmland*

By Vanya North

**Diane Horn lives in Seattle, Washington, half a continent and a world away from Iowa City, Iowa, where she was born.** At age 4, her life became a steady unfolding of new chapters in new places: Cedar Falls, Iowa; Austin, Texas; college in California; graduate school in Indiana; and her eventual move to Seattle, where she worked as a cancer researcher.

Later, she moved again – not from a location, but to a new career as a radio talk show host focused on environmental, social and economic issues. But no matter how many places she has lived, Iowa has remained a touchstone in her life. In 2006, Diane inherited her mother’s farm, an enduring link connecting her back to the land and legacy of her home state.

The roughly 370-acre corn and soybean farm passed through four generations before her. But it also represents a legacy for its tenants: The same family has worked the land for 50 years. “The tenants have been a father-son duo,” Diane says. “The father rented it from my family, and now his son is the farm operator. It means a lot to have that long of a relationship in tenant farming.”

With Diane living so far away, she relies on a local farm manager to help oversee the farmland and assist the tenant farm operator to make critical production and land management decisions. Jake Thomsen of Growthland, who has an agronomy degree and a down-to-earth demeanor, has been serving in that role since 2022. “About a year ago, Diane reached out to me wondering what kind of conservation practices could be put into place on the farm,” Jake says. “I agreed that it was a great idea.”

“I’ve always wanted to do more for the land,” Diane says. “But I didn’t know where to start.”

### **A Spark and a Connection**

Diane’s journey toward conservation on the farm began not long after Jake took over managing the farm.

In the spring of 2024, Diane learned about Pheasants Forever and their work with precision conservation through PFI’s



Diane Horn

quarterly magazine and a follow-up conversation with Grace Yi, PFI’s habitat viability manager. Precision conservation is an analytical process that uses spatial technology and data analysis to pinpoint underperforming areas of a farm that may be better served by alternative management, such as perennial plantings.

The approach intrigued her, and she reached out to Jake to express her interest. Diane and Jake both agreed that a precision conservation analysis would be a good first step to make Diane’s farm more environmentally friendly. Through PFI, they were put in touch with Stephanie Nelson, a precision agriculture and conservation specialist with Pheasants Forever.

Stephanie helps landowners and farmers access and analyze maps and data about their farms to find opportunities for habitat that fit into the larger context of the farm operation. She worked with both Diane and Jake to explore the options for integrating precision conservation on Diane’s farm. Stephanie and Jake walked the land together to discuss possibilities, and Jake communicated with Diane’s tenant.

Stephanie started by creating the analysis map. “Mapping gives us views of the land from different lenses,” she says. “We can look at soils, slope and vegetation patterns over time. When yield data is not available, we can turn to NDVI [normalized



An aerial view of precision conservation in action on Diane's family farm in May 2025. Low yield acres were retired from production and restored to habitat. Drone photo courtesy of Jake Thomsen.

difference vegetation index], a satellite-based dataset that is correlated with yield, showing plant health and density.”

NDVI revealed puzzling gaps in the cropland of Diane's farm. On Stephanie's maps, they appeared simply as low-performing areas. But on the ground, they told a more detailed story. “During the site visit, we walked out to one of these gaps and realized it was grass around an area of exposed bedrock,” Stephanie says. “This helped me understand some of the NDVI patterns I observed and led me to make some suggestions about possible programs to expand those grassy areas.”

Instead of continuing to farm next to the bedrock areas, Stephanie suggested expanding the grassy areas around it. This would create buffers and help protect farm equipment. It would also shift the focus back to more productive areas of the farm.

The analysis maps also revealed another opportunity along the stream running in the southern part of the field. The NDVI showed crop impacts from the wet soils in that floodplain. Instead of losing money on crop inputs in that area, seeding it to perennial prairie would help filter surface runoff and provide a habitat corridor along the stream.

“Diane is really motivated to improve the habitat, but she's also very thoughtful about how it impacts the farm operation,” Stephanie says. “Since she and the tenant are in a 50-50 crop share, she's invested in the farm's success, not just ecologically but economically, too.”

### Restoring a Quiet Creek

To help finance these shifts on the farm, Diane enrolled in the Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program. She will also receive a precision conservation incentive through Pheasants Forever. The latter program, available in Iowa and

Minnesota, helps farmers identify and transition unprofitable farmland into wildlife habitat. Participants receive a one-time incentive payment, while the Conservation Reserve Program provides multiyear financial support.

But Diane is adamant that even without the funds provided through these programs, conservation would be going forward on the farm. She is concerned about the water quality flowing into the Mississippi River that drains to the Gulf Coast. “I've had a long-standing interest in environmental protection,” she says. “For a long time, I had wanted to do things on the farm that would make it more environmentally friendly.”

As the project gets started next year, Jake and Diane are both eager to see how the new grassland habitat, as well as the shift to farming the more productive areas, will benefit the farm. For Jake, being part of the project has given him the chance to manage a farm that's amid a conservation transition. It has also let him gain skills serving as a liaison between a landowner and tenant during that process. “What I learned here, I'll carry to every other farm I work with,” Jake says.

Diane is hopeful the changes will lead to better water quality and a more resilient farm. “I hope that putting in this buffer along the stream will increase the quality of the water coming from the land and increase productivity, because these are areas of the farm where it actually costs more to farm than not.”

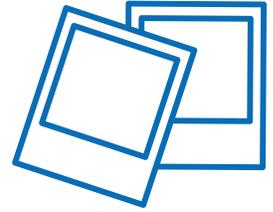
She also hopes to soon see more wildlife calling the land home – deer, pheasants, grassland birds and passing wildlife who will find a quiet Iowa creek bordered by native grasses to sustain them. And though Diane's home is far away, the choices she's making for her farmland are part of the legacy she's leaving here for Iowa – and beyond. ■

*“For a long time, I had wanted to do things on the farm that would make it more environmentally friendly.” – Diane Horn*

# PFI MEMBER

## Photo Album

This section features photos taken by PFI members. Whether you're a farmer, landowner or a non-farmer, we invite you to share your images of the everyday, the awe-inspiring or the curiously beautiful from your farm or community; we'll work to curate them into the album.



The late-day sun casts a majestic glow on a llama. (Jenna Hammerich, Blueyah Blueberry Farm, Oxford, Iowa)



Two Dexter cows nurse their calves on a misty morning before heading out to graze cool-season pasture. (Rob Mackey, KWR Ranch, Cumming, Iowa)



A lone pink poppy surrounded by bachelor's buttons. (Linda Wattonville, Wattonville Family Farm, Alleman, Iowa)



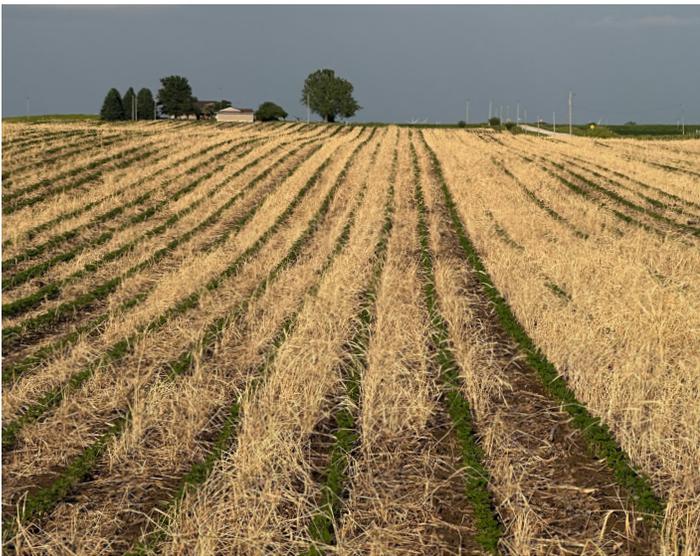
One of the chickens is double-checking that all the eggs have been collected. (MaryAnn Mathis, Cory Family Farm, Elkhart, Iowa)



Hybrid rye being raised for swine feed catches glints of sun. (Larry Nepl, Pratt Farm, Emmetsburg, Iowa)



A 10-inch rain causes the basin to overflow into prairie, designed by Natural Resources Conservation Service - but the prairie keeps water from flowing to the neighbor downhill. (Ray Meylor, Watershed Mitigation Farm / Cherry Glen Learning Farm, Polk City, Iowa)



Soybeans are custom strip-tilled into cereal rye and winter camelina, showcase the opportunity for using this planting method. (Jacob Bolson, Eldora, Iowa)



A prairie strip - about 15 acres in size - adjoins a cornfield where a wetland will be constructed this fall. (Carl Varley, Brave Bulldog LLC, Stuart, Iowa)



Family gather on the farm, which has been a century farm since 2009. Everyone shown here was raised on the farm. The rhubarb patch alone (at left) is over 80 years old! (MaryAnn Mathis, Cory Family Farm, Elkhart, Iowa)



Have a photo you'd like featured in the magazine?  
Email it to [rachel.deutmeyer@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:rachel.deutmeyer@practicalfarmers.org) or tag PFI on social media and let us know!

# Meet the Newest Members of PFI's Team

Learn more about the PFI staff at [practicalfarmers.org/staff](https://practicalfarmers.org/staff).



**Sean Dengler**  
Farm Systems Coordinator

When he is not involved in the community, Sean also writes for the North Tama Telegraph (the premier newspaper of northern Tama County) and on Substack. When he finds more free time, he also performs stand-up and improv comedy. While he misses running his own farm operation, Sean wants to help other farmers succeed.



**Will Doepke**  
Senior Member  
Engagement Assistant

Will and his wife enjoy the outdoors in about any way possible, as well as gardening and working around the yard to develop pollinator- and wildlife-friendly landscaping. He also enjoys woodworking and sampling the local breweries and restaurants.



**Emily Schroeder**  
Senior Member  
Engagement Assistant

In her free time, Emily enjoys spending time outside in her yard and flower garden, being active with her young family and reading a good book. She enjoys being part of a farmer-focused organization.

*Thank you*  
to our newest lifetime members!

**Dennis Jennings and Joe Jennings**     **Corey Strottman**  
Williamsburg, IA                                     Jewell, IA

*Lifetime membership is open to anyone, and confers the same benefits as regular membership – without any renewal notices! Learn more about this option at [practicalfarmers.org/lifetime-membership](https://practicalfarmers.org/lifetime-membership).*

**PRACTICAL FARMERS of Iowa**

# 2026 Annual Conference

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Join us for three days of learning, sharing knowledge and building connections to foster resilient farms and communities. Visit [practicalfarmers.org/annual-conference](https://practicalfarmers.org/annual-conference) for updates.

## Interseeding Cover Crops By Emma Link

In Iowa, when cover crops are seeded after corn and soybean harvest, there's not much time for them to grow before winter sets in. Even when planting covers after small-grain harvest, late-summer hot and dry periods often stifle germination and preclude a lush fall stand that farmers hope for.

Over the past decade, some PFI farmers have been experimenting with interseeding cover crops between rows of cash crops through PFI's Cooperators' Program. They have tested different interseeding rates, dates and mixes to determine if interseeding can provide summer weed protection and increased fall cover crop growth on their farms without affecting crop yield.

Neil Peterson, of Fonda, Iowa, has found that interseeding his oat crop with legumes or mixes in the spring usually gives him a nice cover crop to graze his cows on from the first week of September until corn and soybean stubble is available later in the fall after those crops are harvested. To hone his practices, Neil has been experimenting with different seeding rates and seed mixes through the Cooperators' Program for several years. "It's nice to do research trials on interseeding," he says, "because even though it's not a new practice, it is not a common practice. I am figuring out on my own what species work and how to do it better."

Neil encourages fellow farmers who are interested in interseeding or other novel practices to not be afraid to try something new. "You're not going to know by looking at the neighbors if the neighbors aren't doing it," he says. "Sometimes a new practice works, sometimes it doesn't. If you're interested, you should try it." Start small with test plots if you can. If you're interested in research, PFI's Cooperators' Program is always looking for farmers who are interested in scientifically investigating practices on their farms.



Neil Peterson's cattle happily munch on a legume mix that was interseeded into oats. Neil's cows grazed the field from Sept. 9–Oct. 10, 2024.



Paul and Timothy Peterson help their dad, Neil, collect cover crop samples in a clover interseeding rate trial in fall 2024.

### Dig Deeper



To learn even more about these projects and others going back to 1988, we encourage you to explore the research reports on our website at [practicalfarmers.org/research](https://practicalfarmers.org/research).

Contact Emma Link at [emma.link@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:emma.link@practicalfarmers.org) or (515) 232-5661 to learn about joining PFI's Cooperators' Program.

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## Making Space

Natasha Wilson and her son, Lucian, stand in front of the chicken tractor on their farm in West Chester, Iowa. Find out on page 9 how Natasha and her family are working together to make space for the next generation to shape the farm's path into the future.