

2021 WEST VIRGINIA

WOMEN *in agriculture*

West Virginia women have played a critical part in the state's agriculture industry since the first garden was planted by Colonial settlers. Even though they worked side by side with their husbands, women didn't always get the credit they deserved. Fast forward to today and one in three West Virginia farms are owned or operated by a woman! Whether they're tending to a herd of 150 cattle or growing produce to sell at a farmers' market, women are at the forefront of the industry. This month, we celebrate West Virginia's female farmers and honor those who are making an impact in agriculture.

"Women have continued to assume increasing leadership roles in agriculture," says Commissioner of Agriculture Kent Leonhardt. "In West Virginia alone, 35 percent of our farmers are female. The future of agriculture is female, especially in the Mountain State."

Commissioner Leonhardt will host a reception at the State Fair of West Virginia honoring this year's Women in Agriculture recipients. The event will take place August 15 at 11:30 a.m. in the tent next to the fair ticket office. The public is invited to attend.



DEBBIE FRIEND
BRAXTON COUNTY

Extension agents are the heart of many counties. They sacrifice their own to make the best for others. They take on roles of veterinarian, entomologist, horticulturist and many more to help the people in their county. That is how people describe Debbie Friend, an extension agent in Braxton County. She has been dedicated to WVU extension for 30 years. In that time, she has coached winning judging teams, coordinated scholarship funds, been heavily involved in the State Fair of West Virginia livestock skill-a-thons and Premier Exhibitor Programs, agriculture outreach programs, along with numerous other activities. She has also received numerous awards for her dedication to the Mountain State. Friend says working with kids on the youth agriculture competitions has been the most rewarding aspect of her career. Friend gives this advice, "Set goals, and don't set limitations on yourself; when you're confident in what you want to do, DO IT."



HOPE ALLEN YANKEY
HARDY COUNTY

Nestled in the hills of Mathias is Wild 'n' Woolly Farm operated by Hope Yankey. It's a sheep farm that specializes in dyeing wool. Hope has known she wanted to farm since she was four years old, watching her uncles and grandparents farm hogs and tobacco in North Carolina. Her path to farming was not immediate. She worked as a color chemist in the late 1970s and early '80s. Now 40 years later, she is doing what she loves, dyeing wool and living a sustainable, natural, conservationist life. The farm consists of a small herd of Scottish Highland cattle, some horses, 60 sheep and two dogs. She practices "Darwinian farming," which is understanding how to efficiently use our resources sustainably, as those resources are depleted. For her sheep, she selects breeds such as Coopworth that are prized for their long wool. She has narrowed the commercial focus to producing brilliant, white and dyed wools for crafters. During her 25 years in agriculture, Yankey says that she has noticed a major movement in acceptance of women as equals in managerial positions on the farm.



KATIE FITZSIMMONS
MARSHALL COUNTY

Katie Fitzsimmons' agricultural roots run deep. Starting at an early age, she was given her first heifer. That love of agriculture developed into rearing other animals including chickens and pigs. Her early introductions in 4-H and FFA taught her organization, community service, work ethic and leadership skills. One of her biggest accomplishments was earning her American FFA Degree. She always wanted to follow in her dad's footsteps and become a teacher but intern opportunities through the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) gave her insight into a different avenue of agriculture. After college she was offered a permanent position with NRCS and has been with them for the last 18 years. She continues to give back to the tri-state community by teaching others how to grow in a high tunnel, educating kids about where food comes from, providing information to local producers, helping promote women in agriculture and many other events. She works on her family farm, Hazel Dell, raising commercial beef. She has worked endlessly to promote and brand their products.



DIANNE MCCONNEL
PENDLETON COUNTY

Poultry is the biggest agriculture commodity in WV accounting for more than 50 percent of agriculture sales. Dianne McConnel, her husband David and son Davy run a cattle farm and a chicken breeder operation for Perdue. In 2018, Triple D Farm was named Grower of the Year with Perdue. Diane has been involved in the farm equipment business, the poultry industry and farming since 1968. When asked about her roots in agriculture, Diane says she was born and raised on farms and both of her parents were as well. "The most rewarding aspect of operating the poultry breeder houses is getting to stay home and work, doing your thing and just enjoying the farm in general," says Dianne. She believes in the do-it-yourself attitude and keeps all the records/finances of the farm. She says she's always felt respected and treated as an equal in the farming world. Diane loves the ability to learn something new each day. When asked what advice she would give a young woman in agriculture, Dianne says, "Do the best you can. Do your own bookkeeping and show the world that you can do anything you want as a woman!"