By Alicia Rodriguez and Luke Luna
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TAOS, NM—Melissa Bell loves to witness nature. To watch a praying mantis. To admire the variety of seed pods in their unique differences. To stand between the hedgerows when the flowers are blooming, and the air is buzzing with pollinators. It’s absolutely buzz therapy.

It started when her kids were little. Eating well had always been important to her and she wanted to start eating organically. But it was expensive. So, she started a garden for her family. She started little, and every year tried more and more things. As her passion grew, so did the size of her garden.

Bell’s transition from family gardener to full-time farmer was a gradual process that began with selling extra produce to a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). Over the years, by word of mouth, and with the help of her husband, builder, Ed Bell—Melissa Bell’s garden grew and evolved into the impressive full-time operation it is today.

Now Melissa Bell is a successful high-volume small-acreage farmer in the village of Taos, New Mexico. She cares deeply about soil health, the insect world and biodiversity. Bell implements holistic management no-till regenerative agriculture practices in her growing and she continually seeks to understand how soil biology interacts with plant roots and how nutrients are cycled. That quest has produced a wide variety of high quality, nutrient-dense, delicious vegetables as well as a colorful array of spectacularly beautiful flowers.

Diana Sakai, the owner of the Koko Coffee/Deli/Carryout, has been buying produce from Bell for about a decade now. “Her produce is exceptional,” Sakai says. In addition to the quality, Sakai likes the great variety Bell offers. Herbs, leeks, potatoes, various onions, cucumbers—“Oh my God, her tomatoes are awesome.” Anything Melissa grows, Sakai will find a delicious seasonal salad to put it in.

Sophia Vigil, chef at the Mabel Dodge Luhan House, a historic inn and conference center in Taos, also enjoys the great quality and variety of Melissa’s farm. Vigil tends to buy a lot of spinach and arugula —
la, onions, garlic, squash, zucchini, peaches, apples, shishito peppers, or really “just as much as possible from whatever is fresh that week.”

“I always try and reserve all of her poblano peppers for rellenos, it’s a nice treat, people really like those.” Vigil is also one of Bell’s flower customers.

Bell only recently started flower farming. One of her daughters was married a few years ago, and Bell took on the special opportunity to grow the flowers for the wedding. The results were amazing, and Bell fell in love with another aspect of growing. Now, her flowers are in high demand. “We buy lots and lots of assorted variety of flowers,” said Vigil. “Dahlias, zinnias, sunflowers, we like to keep those in our dining room for the guests throughout the season.”

Bell’s hard work, continuous learning, and passion are undoubtedly the greatest factors of her success. The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS) of New Mexico is proud to have helped Melissa Bell with one important milestone, a milestone Bell considers significant on her growing journey. In 2013, through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Melissa was awarded a contract that helped fund a high tunnel hoop house.

Vernon Mirabal, USDA NRCS NM Team 3 Soil Conservationist, helped Bell design a conservation plan and apply for the NRCS EQIP contract. In an interview, Mirabal explained why high tunnels can be so useful in places like Taos. Besides the wildlife—like bears and elk—and the constant scarcity of water, the biggest challenge in the Taos area is that growing seasons are so limited. “We are at a high elevation, above 7000 feet and it doesn’t get warm until later in the year and the growing season usually ends around September, so with that, you’re really limited with what you can grow traditionally.”

The high tunnels allowed Melissa to extend her growing seasons and, for some plants, even farm year-round. The installation of the high tunnels were
a gamechanger for Bell. “I felt like I made a step up,” she said. “I felt more authentic as a farmer.”

Bell’s regular clients have noticed the difference too. “I’ve watched her over the years expand her growing and her ongoing education,” Diana Sakai said. “I know she’s done some of her best stuff in the last few years with the hoop houses.”

Another aspect of Bell’s success is her continuous pursuit of learning. Bell is always educating herself, reading books, attending conferences, researching online and attending workshops. Diana Sakai has gotten to know Melissa as a kind, generous and “exceptional human being” over the years, but also describes Melissa as “very meticulous. She’s a perfectionist…. She has a very high standard.”

Mirabal quantified those sentiments with a recent example. “We [NRCS] have our standards and specs but Melissa always goes above and beyond what we’re doing.” In 2018, Bell applied for her second EQIP contract. To give herself a better chance of being awarded the contract in an increasingly competitive landscape, Melissa added new management practices to her application (all of which she was already doing). One of the practices she agreed to do was pollinator habitat, which she cares deeply about. By the NRCS standard, Bell would need to include 6-9 different plant species—that was the qualifying number. Well, Melissa also cares deeply about biodiversity, and so by the time she left Mirabal’s office the list of species that she wanted to incorporate into her planting was two-pages long.

In the summer, Bell’s gardens and high tunnels are filled with color and life. “When you’re out here during full production,” Mirabal said, “you can’t even see across all the way because there is so much vegetation…not only covering the ground, but vertically. It’s every single square foot, used to its maximum intent. And I think that has a lot to do with how healthy her soils are, the amount of organic matter in her soils…her last soil test was coming back with organic matter around 7-8%…the Taos average in this kind of setting is more around 3-4%.”

Chef Vigil also enjoys walking through Bell’s high tunnels and talking with Melissa about what she is growing. “Being able to see all the vibrant colors, her energy that she puts into the soil, the freshness of it, the loving hands that have worked it through the season. The guests, we really don’t have to mention anything, they say, ‘Wow, this is delicious, where did this come from.’ Oh, like half a mile up the road, it’s really nice to be able to say things like that.”

Bell’s successes have also garnered attention from NRCS. Her farm has become a popular place for NRCS NM personnel, where it has recently been the site of numerous High Tunnel trainings. As Mirabal explained, it’s one thing to read about no-till soil health in the classroom, but quite another to see a producer realizing that to its fullest potential.

Last August, NRCS Chief Matt Lohr visited New
Mexico. New Mexico State Conservationist, Xavier Montoya, as well as other NRCS personnel brought Chief Lohr to Melissa Bell’s farm to showcase some of the good work being done in the state. Bell provided a great example of the benefits of using no-till, holistic methods, and succession cropping, and how all that could be done in an urban agricultural high production seasonal high tunnel, and in a limited-water high-desert village like Taos, New Mexico. During Chief Lohr’s visit, NRCS presented Bell a certificate of appreciation for hosting high tunnel trainings at her farm.

All in all, it was a busy and productive summer for Bell. Ed Bell, Melissa’s husband, tried a little marketing, and just like that they sold out of many items. She had to start a waiting list for her most popular products, like her Tuscan herb salt and her garlic braids—the latter which Diana Sakai pre-orders every year and has even started taking orders for her Koko Deli customers. Bell is also excited about shiso, a Japanese warm-weather herb and a Bell family favorite, which has also been starting to catch on with buyers and growers.

Bell has accomplished so much so quickly, and still she has so much energy, excitement, and plans. She wants to convert a cool room she is using into a walk-in cooler. She’s expanding her flower operation—especially now that she’s just finished with an online workshop and is armed with new knowledge and techniques. And Melissa feels like she’s already outgrown her high tunnels and is ready for another.

I asked Melissa Bell if her farm has a name. It’s a fun game her family plays when they get together—brainstorm name ideas for the farm. There’s been good ones, like Ranchito Deluxe, or Farm 199, a reference to her number with the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA). “I think I resisted naming it,” Bell said, “I never wanted to name it.” The Bell’s finally settled on “Bell Lane Farm”, in remembrance of a friend who passed recently and had made them this sign ten years ago.

For Bell, it all comes back to the land, the soil, the natural world, and family. The plants, the soil, the insects, those are things with great intrinsic value. She remembers one year when a volunteer plant appeared in her garden. She didn’t recognize the plant at first. Maybe a bird had dropped the seed. She let it grow, watched it, and eventually it flowered and fruited. It turned out to be one of those strange and beautiful flowers, called a Devil’s Claw. That was exciting.

Nature is miraculous.

You can find more information about the USDA NRCS and the programs they offer at www.nrcs.usda.gov or by visiting your local NRCS field office.

To view the full online photo album from this interview as well as other events mentioned in this story, click here.

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