Sustainable Farmer Lets Nature Take the Lead

From the name of her operation to her sustainable agricultural practices, Antoinette Goodrich is a farmer who believes in going with the flow. Laughing Water Farm is an operation based on her love of the land and a desire to farm in concert with nature.

Antoinette’s land is nestled in Virginia’s Appalachian Mountains with the Middle Fork of the Holston River forming the northern boundary. In fact, the river actually drew her and her family to the property.

“Somehow, we found ourselves making the jump to buy the farm and that’s when we began to develop a viable farm philosophy based on a love of the land and the river, and wanting to protect them,” says Goodrich.

Bringing Harmony Through Diversity

Goodrich views the farm as nature and tries to bring in a lot of diversity to her operation. She raises chickens, ducks, turkeys, cows, pigs, lambs, goats, and sheep. However, it actually took a bit of convincing for her to bring cattle onto the farm.

“At first, we thought we absolutely would not have cattle,” she says. “Then, one of my neighbors said, ‘Antoinette you may not need cows, but your farm does.’”

After doing a little research, Antoinette says she realized that she could sequester more carbon on the grass by properly grazing than by planting it all in trees. Today, she refers to the
cows as tenders because they’re such important workers on the farm.

**Farming for Things Seen and Unseen**

“Their grazing activity and the re-depositing of the unused nutrients back on the ground stimulates the plants to grow more and keeps those nutrients right here,” says Goodrich.

“The grass holds the soil and is a perennial crop that doesn’t require tilling or disturbing the life under the soil. As we learn more about it, we try to farm with a view of the things seen and unseen.”

Antoinette says she also grows vegetables that her family likes to eat, plus enough to share with neighbors at the local farmers markets. By putting diverse animals together on the land, Goodrich says she is able to more thoroughly manage the plants.

“I’ve been gardening organically,” says Goodrich. “Some of the ramifications of the chemicals are beyond what we know and, as we receive more information, we realize the importance of not disturbing the ground.”

“As a farmer, you think ‘I’ve got to add in my amendments, put in organic matter and enrich the soil because I’m taking a crop off of it,’" says Goodrich.

“With combinations of cover crops, you’re able to let nature do it. Clover actually pulls nitrogen from the air and fixes it in the soil, so we’re getting a fertilizer without adding any chemicals.”

**Respecting the Soil**

Though freshly plowed ground may seem enticing, Goodrich cautions that the soil contains communities that deserve respect and protection. Tilling breaks them up, opening the living organisms to air and promoting faster oxidation.

The nutrients aren’t held as tightly and the soil is more open to erosion. She says breaking the ground is losing ground, and she doesn’t want to see it end up in the river.

Stockpile grazing is another important part of soil conservation for Goodrich. By keeping the cattle off the field till after a frost, the fescue turns sweeter and is more palatable.
"It’s [farming] always a challenge because you’re doing a dance with nature and nature is the leading partner.”

Antoinette Goodrich, landowner

This technique helps her reduce or eliminate the use of fossil fuels, and is more sustainable than hay because the four-legged cow tenders are doing the harvesting and fertilizing.

Taking Risks and Making Mistakes

Antoinette's latest challenge has been growing an organic, no-till vegetable crop. Though it was a success, she adds that a lot of things haven’t worked as well. She says she think those failures are just as beneficial if you are willing to learn from your mistakes.

“Just in the last year, someone told me that farmers are risk takers, and it made me pause for a minute and think,” says Goodrich. “I said, you know, you’re right. We are risk takers. We wouldn’t be farming at all if we weren’t willing to fail. Failure, I suppose, is a great educator.”

“Don’t be afraid to learn from people who think differently,” she adds. “I’ve found that there isn’t anyone I can’t learn something from, including the cows. They can teach quite a lot.”

Antoinette Goodrich is featured in Common Ground, a series of short films produced through a NRCS partnership with the Virginia Association for Biological Farming. Hear this story in her own words at VABF.org/CommonGround.

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Aside from the fresh eggs, Antoinette Goodrich’s chickens are beneficial to her operation because they help with managing nutrients and pests, collecting insects and minimizing fly development.

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