



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

# CONSERVATION Showcase

## Businesswoman Turned Farmer Earns 2020 Iowa Conservation Woman of the Year

*by Jason Johnson, State Public Affairs Specialist  
August 2020*

**A decade ago**, Maggie McQuown was figuring out what to do with the rest of her life. She had just taken early disability retirement from her business career in the Dallas Metro area after being diagnosed with Dys-tonia – a neuromuscular movement disorder causing the muscles to contract uncontrollably. And, her mom had passed away, leaving Maggie and her siblings the family farms in Iowa.

Fast forward to August 2020, with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) naming McQuown the Iowa Conservation Woman of the Year during the Conservation Districts of Iowa Virtual Annual Meeting. The Montgomery Soil and Water Conservation District nominated her for the award.

How McQuown earned the award is a combination of a passion for learning, business experience, cooperation among siblings, and support from multiple Iowa conservation organizations.

### Farm History

McQuown's Century Farm is just a couple miles west of Red Oak. She and her siblings are the fourth generation to grow up on the farm purchased by their great grandparents in 1899. After Maggie's father passed away in 1990, her mother co-managed the family farms with their farm operator until she died in 2008.

"My mother agonized over how to split three family farms among the four kids," said Maggie. "We con-



vinced her to allow all four of us to be co-executors of the estate. That allowed us to work together and decide how to split everything, including the farmland, in the best way for all of us."

Maggie and her native-Texan husband Steve Turman knew they wanted to retire to the Midwest and reduce their carbon footprint by building a low energy-use home. And since Maggie was the only sibling interested in living on the family farms, the couple began their new life in 2012 on the family farm which they renamed Resilient Farms. "The first thing we did was install solar panels to provide electricity for all the structures on the property," she said.

### A Learning Experience

Retired, with a farm and acreage to manage, McQuown recognized the new challenge ahead of her and her need to learn more about Iowa agriculture. "I've always been a person who goes all-in on whatever I'm doing at the time," she said.

After graduating from Iowa State University, Maggie moved to New York City to work in fashion marketing. She later lived in Chicago before moving to the Dallas area. "I have learned fashion, marketing, advertising, fundraising, branding and image consulting," she said. "Upon inheriting the farm, I read everything I could about farming. It was important for me to understand what was going on with the land. I learned about current production farming and conservation practices, weed challenges, native prairie, and how to protect soil from Iowa's extreme weather."



*Soybeans grow on McQuown's rolling Montgomery County hills in southwest Iowa. Maggie uses grassed waterways, terraces and now prairie strips to protect the soil from eroding.*

The couple attended conferences, including a cover crops conference, where they met Mark Peterson, a board member of Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI). Peterson, who farms in nearby Stanton in southwest Iowa, inspired the couple to join PFI and has served as a mentor to Steve and Maggie ever since.

### Cover Crops and Conservation Practices

Peterson encouraged Maggie to incorporate cover crops into her cropping system. In the fall of 2013 and 2015, Maggie tested 24 acres of cereal rye/rapeseed cover crop on the steepest slopes of her farm. In Fall 2016, the test expanded to oats/tillage radishes on 34 acres. With her farm operator noticing a reduction in erosion due to the cover crops, Maggie committed to planting cover crops on all row crop acres of her farm the following year. She planted cereal rye going into soybeans and oats/tillage radishes going into corn. Maggie and her farm operator are seeing an increase in organic matter, a reduction in erosion, and other benefits from the cover crops.

Not surprisingly, the farm already had a history of soil conservation management. Maggie's great grandfather built small terraces and planted an evergreen

buffer in the 1920s. The cropland has been no-tilled since the 1980s, steeper slopes are protected with terraces and grassed waterways, and the farm has been enrolled in the Conservation Security and Stewardship Programs (CSP) since the early 2000s. Additionally, her forester brother added walnut trees in the 1970s, adding a woodland component.

After adding cover crops, Maggie was interested in doing even more. She has focused largely on returning prairie to many parts of the farm while improving soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat. The couple added a riparian forest buffer along a creek running through their property, which includes native prairie grasses and forbs between the trees and shrubs.

She added pollinator plots around cropped areas. In fact, Maggie was the first private landowner to install prairie strips outside of Iowa State's research trial group. "I read an article about it, and being an Iowa State alum, I was fascinated with it," she said. McQuown currently has two prairie strips with three more to be installed this year. Maggie and Steve are actively involved in and supporters of the ISU Prairie Strips





Cooperator Program, Trees Forever, the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

## Produce Business and Other Projects

Maggie, who is now an assistant soil and water conservation district commissioner in Montgomery County, helps Steve with a small produce business where they sell vegetables at the Red Oak Farmers Market and through CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) Shares. “We embrace all-natural principles and pride ourselves in delivering nutrient-dense, healthy, fresh produce to our customers,” she said.

Steve and Maggie built their energy-efficient home next door to the family’s 120-year-old home. They have been working to update the farmhouse by installing an energy-efficient furnace, waterproofing the foundation, and insulating the basement and attic.

The couple is also preserving many of the farm’s historic buildings. They converted an old livestock scale pit to a passive solar chicken coop and a Quonset into a shop. “Maggie advocates strongly for farm preservation,” said Steve. “We are committed to conservation efforts as long as we are able, and Maggie is developing a plan for that to continue on the land after she and I are gone.”

“I am proud I can take care of my great grandparent’s farm and make it better,” says Maggie. “Steve and I have a lifelong project here. This could be a model learning farm or an agroforestry farm. We are trying to figure out how to best preserve our valuable soils, produce quality food and continue our farm’s tradition of being a small, family working farm far into the future.”

For more information about conservation planning, practices and programs, contact your local NRCS office.



**Top Photo:** Maggie McQuown stands in her soybean field. The farm has been in her family since 1899.

**Above:** Highbush cranberry serves as an outside layer of protection and wildlife habitat for McQuown’s 4-year-old riparian forest buffer.