

# Women caring for the Land



## Ellen's Story:



### Ellen Petrick Chicago, Illinois

Ellen and her husband, Nick Novosel, live in the western suburbs of Chicago but dream of living on a small-scale farm in southern Wisconsin.

Ellen has a background in science and has read a lot and attended workshops to get ready to farm sustainably. She's ready to trade her 3x8' raised bed for real acreage, but needs help evaluating land to find something suitable.

"We have been looking for at least 10 acres. I want to keep a small herd of dairy goats, chickens, perhaps some pigs, and probably other assorted mammals. So, we want enough space to create some terrific healthy pastures, as well as some browse for the goats.

I want to grow a lot of our own food and I have been reading about permaculture and restorative agriculture. I picture space for fruits trees, berry bushes, and mixed perennials, as well as annuals and ideally some wooded acreage.

Many things have motivated this plan to move to a farm. First, my husband and I both love animals, and we simply don't have enough space to have all the animals we would like in a two-bedroom flat in the city. We currently have dogs, cats, koi, turtles, axolotls (salamanders with feathered gills), a few dozen snakes, five breeding pairs of the world's largest skink, several species of geckos and some other assorted lizards, as well as all the various invertebrates and such required to feed them.

While my husband would like to expand his reptile empire, I have

always loved livestock. Keeping livestock would also allow us to grow more of our own food, which brings us to our second motivator. I have been a vegetarian on and off, not because I think it is wrong to eat animals, but because of the environmental and ethical implications of CAFOs and the like.

The more I read about restorative agriculture, the more I am fascinated and the more I want to do it myself. I am interested in our food supply not just for the health of the planet, but my own health as well. I have several autoimmune conditions, the cause of which are unknown. I always wonder how much of these issues may be attributable to chemical exposure. I am lucky that my upbringing included eating real food. My mom always took great pleasure in cooking actual meals that included fruits and vegetables for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and I continue to do the same.

I believe my trendy whole foods diet, in combination with my profession (I'm an exercise physiologist among other things) helped insulate me from the potential negative effects of my condition. It took over

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three years to get a diagnosis, in part because I was “too healthy.” But a lot of my clients are not so lucky.

One thing I dream about for the farm is to make it an educational

space where I can run workshops, not just on fitness topics, but on lifestyle choices in general, to show people some of these things firsthand. I am learning that the rural

community lacks health coaching and exercise physiology. My certifications in exercise for people with chronic disease, pain, and joint conditions could be very valuable.”

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## Ellen's Conservation Conversation

### with Gretchen Skudlarezyk, Farm Bill Biologist Southeast Wisconsin Pheasants Forever, Inc. and Quail Forever

**Ellen:** What are the key things to consider when evaluating land to purchase?

**Gretchen:** The first step is to think about your goals for the farm, including future growth. Think about the size requirements, site conditions, soils, and existing/potential infrastructure (building, fencing, and water lines or access).

Web Soil Survey ([websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov](http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov)) is a USDA website that provides soil maps and data on 95% of the nation's counties. Check out the land you're considering there before you even go out to visit the land. If you can, try to talk to the previous landowner to learn about the land's history, irrigation or drainage systems, and results from soil tests.

Notice what already exists on the land (trees, pastures, streams, etc.) and consider how they correspond with your goals for the land. NRCS (the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service) has several provisions to help beginning farmers. These include funding for loans and conservation programs that may help you set up your farm.

**Ellen:** Most of the land I've looked at is next to conventional crops and I'm concerned about pesticide drift.

**Gretchen:** I would be cautious to make your decision based on what you see growing now on a neighboring property. Renters change, conservation contracts expire, land gets sold—these events can change neighboring property use within a year.

If you are concerned about drift, look for land that has room to set up buffers of about 50 feet along the property boundary. You could also look for wetlands or easements on property lines—those

site conditions can offer more permanent separation from nearby crops.

**Ellen:** Since I'm hoping to find land that includes wooded acreage, what are some good resources to learn about woodland management?

**Gretchen:** A great resource with a lot of information is My Wisconsin Woods ([mywisconsinwoods.org](http://mywisconsinwoods.org)). There, you can request a free publication called “My Healthy Woods.” Look for it under the Services tab and click on “free information.”

The Wisconsin DNR (Department of Natural Resources) also has a lot of information about managing wooded acres. You can visit their website at [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov) and search “woodland” to see all the resources they offer.

Once you've purchased your land and woods, you can contact your local DNR Forester to request a site visit and initial forest management guidance.

**Ellen:** How do I evaluate the livestock pastures on land I'm considering?

**Gretchen:** Start by getting to know the plants that grow in pastures. The University of Wisconsin Extension has two great publications with color photographs: *Identifying Pasture Grasses* and *Identifying Pasture Legumes*. These are \$8.95 each through Extension. See [learningstore.extension.wisc.edu](http://learningstore.extension.wisc.edu).

The University also has a free publication to help you identify common weeds. You can view the guide online at [bit.ly/WIweedguide](http://bit.ly/WIweedguide).

Don't be put off by weedy pastures. With the right steps, those pastures can be regenerated. Your local NRCS office can help you establish healthy pastures.

