

Women caring for the Land



Thelma's Story:



Thelma Heidel-Baker Random Lake, Wisconsin

Thelma grew up on the farm that she and her husband, Ricky, have now taken over from her parents. Thelma is an insect conservationist and is trying to ensure their 80-acre organic farm, Bossie Cow Farm, includes ample pollinator habitat.

“Since 2017, we’ve taken over full management of the farm and now rent all the land and buildings from my parents. The farm we are on has been in my family since the 1950s. My grandpa bought it because of the improved barn and facilities for the milking herd and for the 20-acre woods that is our sugar bush for making maple syrup.

All our agricultural land is in permanent pastures that have not been tilled up for 20+ years. We use managed rotational grazing to take care of the land and feed our livestock. We call ourselves a diversified dairy farm because a growing part of our farm business is selling organic pastured farm products (beef, eggs, chicken, and pork) direct to consumers in the southeast Wisconsin area.

Our land conservation goals are to continually maintain the conservation measures that were set in place in the past. These include being organic certified, maintaining permanent perennial pastures to ensure water filtration and quality, reduce soil erosion and runoff (we have some steep slopes on the farm), and continually

improving our knowledge to keep the pastures healthy and to support our diverse livestock as much as possible. We use the animals as a tool to help manage our land, and our unofficial motto is to make farming work with nature, rather than against it.

Our farm participates in the USDA NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Through this program, we are able to continually incorporate new on-farm conservation practices that address water quality, soil quality, and even wildlife conservation. Most recently, we are interested in practices that help our pollinators.

As an insect conservation specialist, I’m particularly interested in flexing my technical knowledge to implement new insect conservation practices on the farm. I worked with the Xerces Society for years (world’s largest insect conservation organization), and my expertise is working with beneficial insects in agricultural landscapes. On our farm, I want to try new things to further the knowledge and practices that can be done for supporting pollinators and other beneficial

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insects. We'd like to see increased plant diversity to our farm, both within our pastures and within other spaces that are useful to both the livestock and wildlife. We've

been planting many native shrubs around the farm to build up our natural hedgerows as windbreaks as well as habitat for other farm wildlife. Also, I'm always trying

to increase pasture diversity, and more recently, have been trying to incorporate native wildflowers into our existing pastures to support bees and butterflies.

Thelma's Conservation Conversation

with Tally Hamilton, Farm Bill Biologist

Southcentral Wisconsin Pheasants Forever, Inc. and Quail Forever

Thelma: Is there funding available to help us add wildflowers or trees and shrubs to further our conservation practices?

Tally: There are many potential options for cost share to diversify habitat. The USDA Farm Bill programs like NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentive Program and FSA Conservation Reserve Program all offer opportunities for working lands. The US Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program also works with landowners to improve and diversify habitat. There are even local conservation groups, like Pheasants Forever chapters, that may offer cost share to landowners.

A good place to start to determine which opportunities are available to you and would be best suited for your situation would be with your local Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist. Farm Bill Biologists are familiar with the array of conservation programs in their area and work with landowners to establish and improve habitat.

Resource Links:

www.pheasantsforever.org/Habitat/findBiologist.aspx

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/wi/home

www.fws.gov/midwest/partners

www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program

Thelma: Last year, a number of the trees we planted were nipped off by the cows. How can we adequately protect planted trees from livestock?

Tally: Some type of fencing or tree guard will be necessary to protect the trees from cattle and wildlife browse. You can purchase tree guards or create

your own by building a flexible iron mesh cage around the saplings. If you're doing a larger cluster of trees, you could consider fencing cattle out of that area. Purchasing more established trees, 4-5 feet tall, while more expensive than bareroot seedlings, can also aid in establishment. Many county land and water conservation districts have tree sale programs that are a good resource for landowners looking to purchase trees and shrubs. They may also have tree tubes for sale.

Thelma: As a certified organic farm, we don't use herbicides when preparing an area for new plantings (like a new wildflower pollinator planting). We've used solarization and tillage as methods of site preparation. Are there other non-chemical methods to prepare an area for a new planting?

Tally: Yes, additional methods of organic site preparation include smother cropping or sod removal. Smother cropping uses cover crops to reduce weeds through cultivation and smothering. This can be a good option for larger areas if you have access to the needed equipment.

Sod removal involves cutting and removing existing sod and leaving behind bare soil. This method would be a better suited method for small areas. There are a few more options as well. I highly recommend landowners interested in using organic methods download the Xerces Society document, Organic Site Preparation for Wildflower Establishment, for more details on each method to determine which one would work best for them and their property.

Resource Links:

xerces.org/publications/guidelines/organic-site-preparation-for-wildflower-establishment

