Highfield Hollow Farm

ELIZABETH BEGGINS

Rotational grazing helps Amanda improve soil health and save time.

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Profiles in Soil Health: Amanda Lee-Milner

Amanda Lee-Milner grew up on Highfield Hollow Farm, an operation begun by her parents in 1972, where they raised sheep, goats, and honey. Amanda is now the primary operator of the farm, which is situated on 90 acres in Gardners, Pennsylvania, producing mostly the same products as her parents.

AMANDA LEE-MILNER

The farm is a family operation. Adults (front), left to right: Lincoln Milner, Richard Lee, Amanda Lee-Milner, Nathan Young; kids (back), left to right: Andrew Young (12), Isaac Milner (14), Eli Milner (12), Patrick Young (14)

"I have a bias towards sheep and goats," she says, "because they're small. But part of it is, you do what you know, and I know something about the sheep and the goats."

As much as she's following her parents' model, she is also doing things differently. Avid conservationists who employed techniques available to them at the time, Amanda's parents paved the way for her own dedication to farming regeneratively. But the journey has had its challenges.

Though she grew up immersed in agriculture and benefitted from strong female role models, taking over the family farm wasn't exactly on Amanda's bucket list. The untimely deaths of her mother, Pat, to ALS in 2011 and her sister, Jacqueline, to brain cancer in 2020 changed that.

Amanda's reflections on this heartbreaking turn of events convey both her humility and her resilience. "I think their losses are important," she says, "because I couldn't do what I'm doing if they hadn't been the ones to teach me. While I enjoy farming, I would say that, of the three of us, my mom and my sister were probably more qualified."

Apart from transferring their commitment to sustainability and exceptional animal husbandry skills, what Amanda really means is that her mother and sister showed her that success as a woman farmer is possible.

"When my family started the farm," Amanda says, "my mom ran the day-to-day stuff. My dad maintained the equipment and found all the continuing education opportunities, but he had an off-farm job. The situation was similar on my grandparents' farms. I thought female farmers were common," she chuckles. "It wasn't until after I got going that I realized how wrong I was."

She knew she wanted to make improvements to the operation, starting with the condition of her pastures, but she lacked the depth of knowledge needed to prioritize or accomplish her goals. As a fallback, she relied on her father and brother-in-law to make the decisions, a reality she found frustrating. She didn't give up.

"In theory, we were ready to scale up," she explains, "but I knew it wasn't going to work because I wasn't getting enough out of the fields. I had a six-acre pasture that the sheep wouldn't eat. I would put them in there with what looked like plenty of grass, but they just stared at me like it was already time to be moved."

When she learned about American Farmland Trust's Women for the Land program, she was eager to get involved. Supported by a Conservation Innovation Grant from the Pennsylvania Natural Resources Conservation Service and a Northeast

Farm at a Glance

COUNTY: Adams County, PA

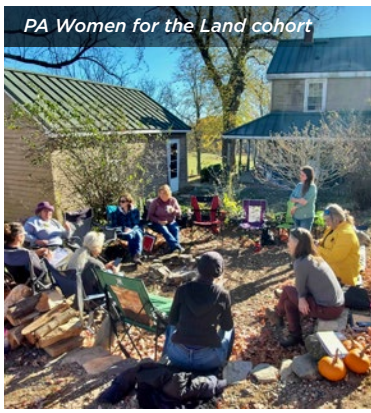
WATERSHED: Susquehanna

CROPS: Pastured sheep and goats, honey, hay

FARM SIZE: 90 acres

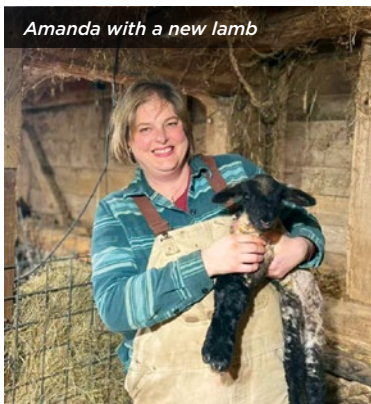
SOIL HEALTH PRACTICES: Rotational grazing, no-till, soil testing, nutrient management, pasture species management

SALES OUTLETS: Direct-to-consumer, wholesale via livestock auction



CHERYL BURNS, CAPITAL RC&D

PA Women for the Land cohort



AMANDA LEE-MILNER

Amanda with a new lamb

USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture
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Sustainable Agriculture and Education grant, the program gave her access to advisors and to eight other women farmers in the Susquehanna watershed. Focusing on soil health as part of a whole-farm system, the cohort of women received both financial and technical assistance. Together, they spent a year participating in virtual and in-person learning circles, attending field days on each other's farms, drawing up soil health management plans, and sharing their experiences.

The program put her in touch with Pennsylvania's Capital Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Area Council. From there, she was introduced to Mackenzie Strawser, a small ruminant grazing advisor who offered guidance on soil testing, species selections for improved forages, and important modifications to her grazing rotation.

"They were really instrumental," Amanda recalls, "telling me, 'This is what rotational grazing really is.' I would just put the sheep out on a few acres and move them to the next block when they told me it was time. Then the grass wouldn't come back as quickly as I needed it to, and I'd resort to putting them in our woods sooner than anticipated. So, what AFT gave me, with the consulting funds, was a better way to do the rotational grazing and the understanding that moving the flock once a week wasn't giving me or the animals what was needed."

According to Capital RC&D Executive Director Ann Basehore, it's been rewarding to experience how Amanda has matured into the farm.

"When we first met," Ann explains, "Amanda didn't know which foot to put in front of the other. Now she has the confidence and ease of the person in charge."

As she worked to improve her operation, Amanda did the best she could, but she also took comfort in knowing she had support to try practices she still hadn't perfected.

In addition to the grazing mentorship, participation in the Women for the Land program enabled Amanda to renovate a

CHERYL BURNS, CAPITAL RC&D

With portable fencing, feeders, and water, the flock is moved every 2–3 days.

two-acre plot earmarked for lambs, which she describes as having the best soil on the property. A neighbor with a no-till drill helped her seed it with anti-parasitic species like chicory, birdsfoot trefoil, and lespedeza. She's excited to put it to use this spring.

Now, two seasons into the farm transformations, the changes are paying off. Her pastures are greener despite extended periods of low rain. Her hay yields have tripled. She's administering worming medications less often.

With the addition of more portable fencing, lighter feeders, and another mobile watering tank, Amanda's new grazing practices take less time than her former process, even though she's moving the flock twice as often. She estimates she's saving about two hours per week. That's fewer hours in the heat of August, more hours to focus on other tasks, and, importantly, more time to be with those she loves.

For all her hard work and vision, Amanda is quick to admit she could never manage everything without help. Her family remains key to the overall operation. She is the mother of two boys, Isaac, 14, and Eli, 12. Her sister's boys, Patrick and Andrew, are the same age. Her husband, Lincoln, brother-in-law, Nathan, and father, Richard, all have roles to play on the farm.

"Everyone enjoys different aspects of the work." Amanda points out, with a lift in her voice. "The two youngest boys exhibit the animal husbandry side of the farming gifts. The other two like to drive machinery and learn how it works. The older boys can move things from paddock to paddock. They like to mow the pastures, and I've never seen people so excited to fork manure or bale hay in my entire life!"

The kids' fathers handle farm repair and upgrade needs, while Amanda's dad, now in his 80s, loves monitoring the trees and what gets planted.

With a smile, Amanda says she's spending more time looking down. Aware that the health of the soil directly impacts the health of the flock, she's assessing what's going on beneath the wheels of her tractor, what the animals didn't eat, and the overall condition of the plants in her pastures. The relationships she has established and her personal drive to raise the highest quality animals are helping her take Highfield Hollow Farm to new levels of productivity. She envisions that everything she's doing now will benefit the young men in her life who are in line to become the next generation to steward these cherished acres.

For more information on this profile, to learn more about Women for the Land, or to discuss soil health practices, please contact Elizabeth Beggins, ebeggins@farmland.org or visit **farmland.org/project/women-for-the-land and farmland.org/soil-health-case-studies**

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