

A WOMAN FARMER PROFILE

A MASSACHUSETTS
FARMER PROFILE SERIES

SPRING 2025

Featuring

LUCINDA
WILLIAMS

she-her-hers



LUTHER BELDEN
FARM



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For Lucinda Williams of Luther Belden Farm in Hatfield, farming is more than a livelihood: It's a commitment to sustaining the land that's kept farmers harvesting for generations.

"I often say that farmers were the first environmentalists," Lucinda said. **"If we did not care about our environment, our land, our animals, our world, we would not still be here farming."**

Lucinda knows what it takes to support this longevity: Though she didn't become a farmer until adulthood, she took up the mantle nearly 40 years ago on a farm established in 1661. And while practices have evolved over the centuries, Lucinda credits this core conservation value — and the soil it supports — as the driving force behind the farm's endurance.

"I think we've always had, **for generations, a love and appreciation and a care for the land, the soil, its richness, what we can do to give back to it,** what we can do to have it produce more for us," Lucinda said. "So that give and take with the land has always been there."

At 364 years old, Luther Belden Farm has been in Hatfield for the town has been a town. It's now the last remaining dairy operation in town with 300 cows, a crossbred beef herd, and a small Kinder goat herd. Darryll and Lucinda Williams are the owners and operators, alongside their son Jackson, who represents the 13th generation farming the land.

The farm is situated on the flat, rich Connecticut River valley soils — "river bottom land" from a glacial lake that once spanned from Connecticut to New Hampshire. Surrounded by open fields edged by rock walls and tree lines that mark field boundaries and waterways, the Williams family and their workers farm 350 acres, growing, alfalfa silage corn and hay to feed their animals.

GROWTH MINDSET

Born in Virginia, Lucinda and her family moved to Hatfield when her father took a job as a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. There, he also became director of the UMass Extension, an educational initiative of the Center for Agriculture, Food, and Environment. Still, it wasn't until Lucinda met and eventually married Darryll Williams that she became a farmer herself.



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Like many historic farms in the area, the Williamses have long-standing land exchange agreements with neighboring farms to ensure healthy crop rotations. In any given year, you might see the Williams' hay and cornfields on a walk down the farm roads that pass the Luther Belden fields, as well as crops like raspberries, strawberries, butternuts, and pumpkins grown by other local farmers.

It's taken more than strong values to keep these crops, and livestock flourishing year after year: Behind each harvest or milking, the Williams family weaves innovation into their **tried-and-true methods, often working against rising expenses and waning resources for farmers.**

The Williamses have invested in equipment such as an anaerobic digester, which combines the manure produced on the farm with liquid food waste and other feedstocks to generate methane, a natural byproduct of decomposition. This methane can generate electricity when burned and is sold back to the grid in Hatfield, while the leftover digestate can be used for soil amendments, fertilizers, and animal bedding.

Luther Belden has also gone through many evolutions of their soil health practices. As a dairy operation, having productive fields is a high priority. However, heavy tillage for corn silage production led to high soil compaction and low soil organic matter.

The Williams family has always cover-cropped their soil between corn plantings, but through experimentation and a willingness to adapt their practices as soil science evolved, they gradually arrived at no-till farming. **A vital piece of equipment in this process, a no-till seed drill, allows the farm to reduce labor and fuel while boosting productivity and profitability.**

LUTHER BELDEN FARM

DWINDLING RESOURCES

These pieces of equipment come with high up-front costs, putting them out of reach for many farmers — typically, the Williamses would count themselves among that group. “We find that those (equipment) expenses just skyrocket, and our income is not skyrocketing in proportion,” Lucinda said.



But an agreement [with the renewable energy company AG-Grid](#) allowed the farm to purchase the anaerobic digester, which is now one of only eight digesters in Massachusetts and 25 in New England. Through adopting this technology, Lucinda and her family strengthen the future of their farm and business in the face of climate change. However, these decisions often add another layer of work to an already labor-intensive field.

Meanwhile, they bought the labor-relieving no-till drill with support from grant funding and often loaned it to neighboring farms. Demand for the piece of equipment has increased exponentially in the couple of years the farm has owned it, Lucinda says.

Availability of that farm equipment, meanwhile, has not. In fact, resource accessibility has in many ways, gone backwards compared to the days when Lucinda’s father oversaw the UMass Extension. “The extension service was robust and helpful, and there was money put into people doing research at the universities,” she said, alongside a “fairly strong base of agriculture support.”

That network is “**really disappearing as there are fewer and fewer farmers**,” Lucinda noted, with many surviving farms spanning just an acre or two of land. Equipment dealers are also vanishing, and those that remain are often owned by mega corporations — a sharp contrast to the independent knowledge sources that these dealers once represented. While the UMass Extension still exists, it’s “just not as robust as it had been,” Lucinda said.

LUTHER BELDEN FARM

BUILDING COMMUNITY, ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FOR WOMEN FARMERS

Another challenge Lucinda faces as a farmer dates back even further. "There aren't very many women farmers, and I don't know why," Lucinda said. "I think it's just tradition."

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2022 census, women account for 1.2 million, or around 36% of the country's 3.4 million producers, down .2% from 2017 data.

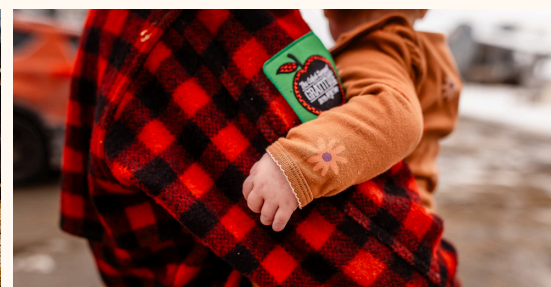
This imbalance can come with a lack of recognition for women farmers, in and outside of their agriculture work. In addition to farm labor, for instance, Lucinda works full-time hours in a job that provides the family with health insurance. "I'm in the barn for two hours before I (quickly) come inside and change and get to my job at 8 a.m. in the morning," Lucinda said. "I've already put in quite a bit of work before I show up to work."



Lucinda has experienced some reprieves in her overlooked experiences as a woman farmer, such as a Massachusetts Association of Dairy Farmers subgroup mostly composed of women. **"I think it's valuable that we have a chance to be open and honest with each other to cultivate these conversations,"** she said, **"and read and hear about other women and the things that work well for them and the places that they struggle."** But that's not the common experience.

"Among women in farming, I think that there are not very many places that we have to really speak with each other about our struggles," Lucinda said. Ultimately, she says, improving conditions for women in agriculture remains a work in progress — a common theme throughout farm work in general. But in the end, Lucinda's love for farming shines through.

"Not every day is great," Lucinda said. "I tell people regularly that people don't go into farming for the time off or the pay because those are not benefits. But there are some really beautiful things about farming ... Had I known how great it was, maybe I would've chosen it initially."



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