



Vegetables planted into weed barrier with grassed walkways

Wild Hill Farm

FIRST-GENERATION FARMER LEADING THE WAY

First Generation

Despite growing up in the Rochester, New York suburbs, Erin Bullock always felt deeply connected to plants. She attended Cornell University, first studying plant science, and ultimately graduating with a degree in landscape architecture.

After college, she moved to the West Coast and operated her own landscape company in the California Bay area. On weekends, she attended farmers' markets and saw young women like herself selling produce and talking about their experiences growing crops. She quickly realized that farming involved plants and that agriculture could be a viable career.

"I had a suburban view of a farmer. That you could only be a farmer if you inherited a farm," she said. "It didn't occur to me that agriculture was an open pathway."

She closed her landscape business and apprenticed on several farms before moving back to Rochester in 2008 to start a vegetable CSA operation on prime, rented land located on a floodplain. When a 100-year rain event forced the creek over its banks, she lost several acres of crops.

"I thought of this as a red flag of climate change and saw the writing on the wall. I swore I'd never farm on a floodplain again," she said.

All photos courtesy of Wild Hill Farm

New Ground

Shortly after the storm, the land owner terminated her lease. She sold the enterprise and created a non-profit program that taught veterans how to farm while searching for new ground for her CSA.



Erin Bullock

In 2015, she found 60 acres south of Rochester, NY available for lease and launched Wild Hill, a CSA model operation serving more than 350 families. The landowner is not a farmer but is an open-space preservationist who saw leasing the land as an opportunity to protect it from development pressures.

"I intentionally looked for well-drained land that was high and dry because I didn't want to lose crops to extreme weather," she said. "We're on top of the junction where three watersheds meet, and the land is able to absorb a large amount of rain."

"An old farmer once told me, 'A dry year will make you nervous, but a wet year will kill you,'" she said. "The sandy loam can be difficult to work during drought conditions. I am learning techniques to manage dry soil conditions. I'd rather deal with a dry year than invest in land that is going to wash away in a climate-related event."



Buckwheat cover crop

Farm at a Glance

COUNTY: Ontario County, NY

WATERSHED: Headwaters of Genesee River, Irondequoit Creek, Seneca River watersheds

CROPS: Organic vegetables, 350 CSA shares annually

FARM SIZE: 60 acres (rented), 15 acres in active production

SOILS: Sandy loam, well drained, on rolling hills

SOIL HEALTH PRACTICES: Cover crops, crop rotation, reduced tillage, organic methods



Wild Hill Farm

Seeing The Land In A New Light

Bullock knew from the start she wanted to avoid using pesticides on the land and food she was growing. She studied organic farming methods, and every year, she adopts a more resilient, regenerative approach to farming practices inspired by indigenous views of the land.

"Even though I'm not native to this land, I am learning it is a totally different paradigm," she said. "It is about thinking of the land as something I want to leave better off for future generations." Instead of believing pests are adversaries, she considers how she can balance working with the various organisms within the ecosystem to grow enough food to feed families and create a viable farm business.

Cover crops are the foundation for achieving those goals. She plants multi-species crops to support soil health, attract beneficial insects, and mitigate weed and pest pressures. At Wild Hill, extensive crop rotation among plant families is equally important to avoid building pest pressures from specific crops. "I learned from a farmer in Vermont that it is easier to take fields out of hay and put them into vegetables and then quickly rotate them out of vegetables," she said.

She also converted an old gasoline-fueled Allis Chalmers G tractor to electric-power to reduce her carbon footprint during cultivation.

Reconnecting People With The Land

On most traditional farms, one person relies on equipment to cultivate hundreds or thousands of acres. It reduces payroll and increases efficiency. But it has also dramatically reduced most people's connection to the land. Bullock strives to break down that disconnect. CSA members are encouraged to help with weeding, pulling garlic, harvesting potatoes, and other farm activities.

She also hosts on-farm events ranging from yoga to small concerts and offers other local producers to set up small tables on CSA pick-up nights.

"The interaction between all of these different people and the land is creating connections in the community," she said. "I feel like inviting people to have a relationship with the land, understand the challenges, and enjoy the abundance is a big part of our mission."

"If we feed the land, the land feeds us."

Creating community extends beyond customers to the employees. Wild Hill employs seven women, five of whom are making their living off the land, and Bullock herself has sustained her family as a farmer for 14 years.

"One of the things I'm most proud of for this farm is investing in workplace culture," she said. "I'm offering a livable wage, leadership opportunities, and a paid two-year apprenticeship program. I'm empowering people like me, especially women, who have no experience farming, by passing on the technical things and techniques I've learned to help other first-generation farmers break into the industry."

Farming For The Future

Although Bullock has been farming full time for 14 years, she still feels like a beginning farmer. Each year there are new challenges on the horizon.

More than anything, she wants the next generation of farmers to stick with it even with its challenges. She hopes there is greater openness and more knowledge sharing between farmers to help others launch their journey. "We shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel every time. There are existing models. If someone tries something, it should be documented and shared," she said.



The all-women crew experimenting with no-till (left-side)

Building Resilience

Investing in conservation takes time and money. Here are Erin's tips to build resilience:

On the Ground:

Multi-species cover crops provide the foundation of soil health

Beneficial insects support organic pest control and overall ecosystem health

Reducing gas and diesel-powered equipment use helps mitigate greenhouse gas emissions

Long-term crop rotations reduce pest pressure and disease

On the Farm:

Create a farm community that reconnects people to the land

Support a healthy work culture on the farm through a supportive team, growth opportunities, and fair wages

Learn from farmer peers and share lessons learned with others


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