

A Connection to the Land

From breeding lettuce to academia

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Editor's Note: This is the latest installment in a series featuring UNH faculty telling their stories in their own words.

Becky Sideman, Extension sustainable horticulture specialist, professor of sustainable agriculture and food systems and researcher with the NH Agricultural Experiment Station

"I grew up on a farm that was in my family for six or seven generations. My mom still runs it with my sister. Both my parents farmed; I've been exposed to plants and animals since I was tiny. Several pictures of me as a little kid show me hugging mums.

In high school, in AP biology, we had to pick a project. I chose plant genetics. My teacher told me it would be too hard, that I wouldn't be able to find any information. That's how I discovered Darwin; Mendel. At the time, I thought maybe I'd be a landscape architect. It combined all my interests. Then when I went to college, I went to Dartmouth, and took physics, I said, 'Oh, this is what I want to do.' That was my major until just after my sophomore year. Then I took a molecular genetics course and wondered why I left biology.

So, I switched my major to biology. I was working in a lab at the medical school and at my mother's farm a couple of days a week. Senior year I decided I should look for a job. I said, I want to combine plants and genetics and I've been reading plant catalogues since I was a kid, so I'll be a plant breeder. I learned I'd have to get a Ph.D. so I said, well, I'll get one.

I went to Cornell and worked on peppers, studying what made them resist plant diseases. It was amazing. My first job was with the USDA in Salinas, California. I learned about a very different kind of agriculture there; it made me really reflect on what I knew of agriculture, and how farming in New England is really unique.

At that time, I was doing research to develop new varieties of lettuce. Because I worked for the public sector and not a private company, I could work with more exotic material, plants you would not recognize as lettuces, many that looked like weeds but that had traits that were interesting. That kind of work takes time, and you can do that in the public sector; private companies want to develop products faster. I also worked with a lot of farmers, doing research in their fields and presenting results to the lettuce growers. I loved that work and found it really rewarding.

When I wanted to come back East, I learned of the opening for my current job with UNH Extension. I thought it could be an interesting fit. I could do practical work in the region that would be helpful and study interesting things while connecting with farmers. Honestly, I didn't even know this kind of job existed. I didn't have a lot of teaching experience but had done a lot of presenting to farmers and realized that was a kind of teaching, so I told myself, 'You'll be fine, you should do this.'

It's everything I love — researching practical solutions to help keep agriculture vibrant. Teaching gives me the ability to do something academically challenging and not be at the behest of the weather. Farming is so risky and it's really high pressure. With my job, I have the freedom and the luxury to explore why something happens, and then use that information to help farmers make better decisions.

I come from a line of strong capable businesswomen like my mom, but I don't think running a farm business is right for me. My husband and I have a homestead farm in Strafford, where we raise our own food, fruits and vegetables. I love our farm life and connection to the land and the seasons. I have always been very connected to the land, very connected to agriculture. Before I came to UNH, I turned down the exact job I'd dreamed of as kid, as a plant breeder. I think I can do more good for more people by doing the kind of applied research and direct work with farmers and students that I get to do in my current job. I think I have found the right thing for me."

In addition to her work with Extension and teaching, Sideman is the program coordinator for sustainable agriculture and sustainable horticulture production.

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