



#FridaysOnTheFarm: It's Conservation for All Seasons at Mill River Farm

Each Friday meet farmers, producers, and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This week we travel to New Marlborough, Massachusetts, where Jan Johnson has tackled a suite of conservation projects to strengthen her 32-acre organic farm.

Tackling the Hills

Steep land and a short growing season? Not a problem for Jan Johnson, owner of Mill River Farm, a 32-acre certified-organic produce and livestock farm in the heart of the Berkshire hills. She's tackling those challenges with a little help from the USDA [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#).

"Our farm is almost entirely on a hillside," said Jan. "I had heard that part of NRCS's mission is to help preserve topsoil, so I contacted NRCS as soon as I got to the farm in 2013. They came out and walked the property several times and brought GPS equipment to help us remake all of our growing beds to conform to the contours of the land."

"Having the crops be level in a planting row makes all the difference," said Jan. "It avoids having a heavy rainstorm create a sluice down a row and take out not only a lot of the topsoil but also a lot of the crop. We've avoided that with NRCS help."

High Tunnels

More recently, Jan heard through a local agricultural organization that NRCS had a program to fund [high tunnels](#), which are metal structures with a plastic covering that can be used to extend the season for growing crops and which provide conservation benefits, as well.

She contacted Dan Tighe – Soil Conservationist in the NRCS field office in Pittsfield, Massachusetts – for more information and to apply for financial assistance through the [Agricultural Management Assistance program](#).

"We've used the NRCS high tunnels to extend our season throughout the winter. It's been very successful for us," said Jan. "We expanded the business this past summer by adding two more high tunnels, one of which is movable. Being able to grow in a four-season way is a big boon to having a successful farm business."



A Conservationist's Approach

Dan said that before he got together with Jan to plan the location of the high tunnels, he reviewed the farm's file to see what other conservation practices had previously been done. "There were records of contour farming, nutrient management, and cover cropping. It was great just to hear that she already had so many practices implemented. I was very eager to work with her."

"Cover cropping is an important part of the organic program and we know how important it is as a way of preserving topsoil," explained Jan. "Cover crop is a great choice for us because it adds organic material to the soil when it's tilled in and, in the case of leguminous cover crops, it also adds nitrogen."

"We've come to believe that the rotation of animals and vegetables, with the composting and fertility amendments that they provide, makes for a well-managed farm. The fertility in turn leads to the high quality and nutritional density of the food that we grow," she added.

Jan is pleased with her experience working with NRCS. "There seems to be a can-do-it attitude that I've really appreciated," she said. "They've helped me through some big projects. I also appreciate the human aspect; I found them to be very easy to work with. We regard them as an important partner in the farm's success."

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers build resiliency and weather ups and downs in the market. Visit farmers.gov to learn more.

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