

MEET FELLOW TILTH PRODUCER DANIELLE GIBBS

Danielle Gibbs is owner and operator of Gibbs' Farm in Leavenworth, Washington, a diversified vegetable and fermentation operation that sells primarily to the local valley community. When not farming or teaching sustainable agriculture courses at Wenatchee Valley College, Danielle spends time helping start more school district gardens and being with her family.

Tilth Farm Programs Director Elizabeth Murphy chatted with Danielle Gibbs this summer.

TILTH PRODUCERS QUARTERLY (Q): When and how did you start farming?

DANIELLE GIBBS: I was in college getting a philosophy degree, and I had a really hard time sitting in class and being inside. Every year I went to college, I threatened to quit and become a farmer—and I had never grown a thing in my life!

There was a 300+ acre farm north of Boston in Ipswich, Massachusetts that grew apples and berries mostly—conventional ag type of stuff. It was the only farm I knew of near me, and the farmer only hired migrant workers. He agreed to hire me under a migrant worker contract after I begged enough (*laughs*). I didn't even think much about it back then. I didn't know anything about farming or the dynamics of hiring workers in ag. I worked with five Jamaicans and a Puerto Rican man. I learned how to drive a tractor, and basically just got my butt kicked. I wasn't taught anything specifically about farming, but I learned how to work hard.

...And I loved it. It made me feel alive, connected me with the deepest parts of myself I hadn't been aware of, made me feel whole. I grew up in suburbia with some nature around, but not that much. Working in the soil and eating right off the plants was new and wonderful. My passion was ignited, and luckily I only had one more year of college to make it through.

I knew I wanted to try living out west. I looked around for an internship, and I ended up at Gibbs' Organic Produce in 2001. I chose his farm because of the diversity of his operation and because it was organic. The internship with Grant Gibbs taught me a lot and also solidified my love for farming.

After growing my own market garden and then managing the farm at the sustainable retreat center Tierra Learning Center for four years, I wanted to farm at home. I checked back in with Grant who was kind of done with the market gardens, and he left me to it. There was an evolution as I took over the market garden, and he focused more on grains and the orchards. We found out that it's better if we run separate businesses, with our different ways of doing things.

Q: Gibbs' Organic Produce and Gibbs' Farm are connected by family relationships. How do you talk about transitioning the farm to the next generation?

DANIELLE: Even in families where the family really wants to pass it on, there's a lot to figure out. It's tricky to work with family anyway—the dynamics it can be really intense. Grant's sons, none of them farm. I was the only one farming and still am. We had a family dinner the other day and the subject came up, "Who is going to keep the farm going?" There are many conversations still to be had.



Danielle Gibbs at the Leavenworth Community Farmer's Market in Leavenworth, WA.

Photo credit Alison Detjens

Q: Who have been your inspirations?

DANIELLE: There were definitely some elder farmers who I looked up to as I learned how to farm. One of them being Jerry Pepitone from Rock Island Farm. He was always really supportive and there when I had questions. Jerrilyn Delaney who runs Grandma Garlicks Place in Leavenworth also taught me a lot. She and I started at the Tierra Learning Farm together. She really instilled in me the importance of respect for the land and the care that is an integral part of growing healthy crops.

Q: What have been your greatest challenges in farming, and how did you approach them?

DANIELLE: My two greatest challenges—no, wait, there are more than that (*laughs*). Well, one would be marketing in Eastern Washington because I've always operated a pretty small-size farm business.

A lot of other farmers my size go to Seattle to make more money, but I never wanted to do that. I didn't want to be away from my family that much. I knew I could sell in the valley—there are enough people here, but the challenge is in distribution and moving enough crop at a time to make enough money. This caused me to diversify, which is what you want to do anyway in marketing. It's challenging, and it changes every year.

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The second challenge is the multitasking. To run a small farm business, you have to do everything—from bookkeeping to hiring to teaching to planning to marketing to raising your family. I have three kids and the first two were born very close together, so there was lot of farming during kid nap times. I wore myself out back in those days.

Q: Farming can be a challenging profession. What has motivated you to continue farming?

DANIELLE: I really care about nutrition. It's always been an underlying passion of mine. I'm really interested in the connection between soil and the nutrition of the food that you eat. And my community has made me feel very appreciated for the product that I've offered them and that's kept me motivated.

Q: Do you set goals?

DANIELLE: I used to set monetary goals. But I would also set a goal to try a new thing every year. For instance, seedless table grapes or a new market. A new cover crop or a new rotation. With teaching I get the chance to experiment even more. I'm teaching a class where we talk about different cropping methods, so this year I've been trying a new type of cover crop in my table grape vineyard and trying to create a dryland insectary within the cover crop. As I drive through these areas of Eastern Washington that are turning into vineyards, I keep thinking, *What if flowering plants were between all the vineyards to provide more diversity and huge areas of pollinator habitat?*

Q: Talk more about how you teaching informs farming and vice versa.

DANIELLE: I teach an organic production class, an organic plant nutrient class, and a lab class. Teaching has forced me to read all those books I've been wanting to read for years. With teaching you also really retain the information. I'm reading more, learning more, and experimenting more. This summer, I took care of a friend's orchard as a learning practicum. I tried out different nutrient sprays so that I could speak to my class about them from experience. It's great that I'm teaching mostly about what I've actually done and that I can pass that knowledge forward.

Q: You're very busy with teaching, farming, and all the activities in your community. Do you have any tips for farm efficiency?

DANIELLE: The right tools and the right set up make a big difference. For instance, I didn't have my own tractor for most of my time farming—I was renting or sharing. It's so much more efficient when you have your own equipment. Farming is all about timing. I also found that hiring the right people makes a big difference.

Q: What do you do for soil maintenance?

DANIELLE: We have cows on the farm, so we make our own compost. I also plant a lot of cover crops in my rotation year-round. I tried a practice inspired by Eliot Coleman this year using a low-growing white Dutch clover under a main crop. It has worked out really well under broccoli and artichokes. The plants really benefitted and the cover kept the weed pressure down.

Q: Do you have any nagging pest pressures on your farm? How do you manage them?

DANIELLE: My worst pest is flea beetle, and I've tried everything from row covers to spot spraying with pyrethrin. What worked best over the years was cover crop rotation. I also I did do a trap crop, but I think it was more the cover crop rotation that broke their cycle. It took years, and the cooler summer may also have contributed, but I have no flea beetles right now. My arugula is uncovered, and without holes!

Q: What role has community played in your farming?

DANIELLE: It has been really important to create relationships with the community and to make them feel like you are *their* farmer. I've sold at farmer's markets for 16 years and have so enjoyed making those connections with people, talking about recipes and family and watching kids grow with my community through those seasons. When I stopped going to market to focus on farming for my sauerkraut business, so many people said, "What are we going to eat?" They had really come to rely on me for feeding them. Creating a customer base that relies on you is key to small farm marketing.

Q: Tell us three things on your "bucket list" (farming or otherwise).

DANIELLE: One thing that keeps coming back to me is that I love to travel. One thing that worried me when I started focusing on farming years ago was that I would become married to a place and have less opportunity for travel. I've always had a dream of being a traveling farmer. Does that exist? I'd love to travel the world and stay at different farms, working side-by-side with people, learning from them and listening to their stories.

Q: What three pieces of advice would you give a beginning farmer?

DANIELLE: Find a farmer that you really admire and want to spend time with—and work side-by-side with them as much as you can. You learn so much by doing that. So many students want to start their own farm. I say, "Go work with someone else for awhile first before you invest time and money on your own operation."

Q: What is your vision for agriculture 40 years from now?

DANIELLE: I would like to see the number of diversified small and medium sized farms increase. It's a tricky thing because there is this pressure to feed the world and get organic farms to grow bigger, but I do think there's that spot you hit where the quality and nutrition of crops goes down at a larger scale. I envision more farms interspersed in city and country.

Another thing I've been thinking about lately comes from reading about the Ogallala aquifer that's drying up [beneath the Great Plains]. I think it's important to remember to give back as much as we take from the soil. Especially with methods such as bio intensive farming, which I think is a wonderful way to cultivate great amounts of crops in a small area. It can work well, and be sustainable, as long as we remember to give back so much more.

Elizabeth Murphy is the new Tilth Farm Programs Director. She brings a love of growing food and a passion for soil health to support farms and farming communities. elizabethmurphy@seattletilth.org.