

# OUTSTANDING WOMEN OF WISCONSIN AGRICULTURE

PART 1 OF A 2-PART SERIES CONCLUDING NEXT ISSUE



## An impressive group is furthering potato and vegetable production in the state

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

The suggestion was made during a phone conversation one day that the *Badger Common'Tater* run a feature article on the spectacular women who fill important positions in the Wisconsin potato and vegetable growing industry.

Researching the article was as simple as contacting a handful of qualified

members of the industry and asking each a dozen questions or so.

Not surprising, considering the sources, the responses to the questions were so thorough and informative that the feature article needed to be broken into two parts.

Three of the sources contacted are

featured herein, and the other two will be showcased in the second part of a two-part series, which will run in the May 2020 issue. Look for it next month!

Their backgrounds, positions in the agriculture industry, responsibilities and accomplishments are remarkable and make for a fascinating read.

### BECKY EDDY

Superintendent/Program Manager, Rhinelander Agricultural Research Station

With a Bachelor of Science degree in biology and a Master's in weed science, Becky Eddy has held positions as a horticulture intern at the University of Wisconsin (UW) Extension-Waukesha County Office and as a field technician in the UW-Madison cucumber breeding program.

"Then came an opportunity that changed my life," she says. "Dr. Larry Binning offered me a graduate research assistantship in the UW-Madison Department of Horticulture."

"For the next few years, I worked at Hancock, Arlington and Coloma Farms conducting research on

Brassica species as short-season spring seeded cover crops to supplement weed management in potato," she notes.

Eddy also held a position as a research specialist in the Frito-Lay Agricultural Operations and Development Research Station, in Rhinelander, Wisconsin.

"My primary responsibility with Frito-Lay was to be part of the team that provided technical support for the agronomy and breeding research programs associated with the discovery and development of novel potato germ-plasm for the creation of proprietary chipping varieties," she explains.



Becky Eddy, superintendent and program manager of the Rhinelander Agricultural Research Station, won a Fitbit Blaze at the 2018 Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association and WPVGA Chip Committee Seed Reception during Potato Expo in Orlando, Florida.

In 2015, Eddy resigned from Frito-Lay and took a position at the Rhinelander Agricultural Research Station as associate researcher,

serving as the on-site coordinator for the Wisconsin Potato Varietal Breeding Program led by Jeffery Endelman.

In 2016, she moved into the house on the grounds, along with her husband, Sam, who is the one of the station's equipment operators, and their daughter, Lucy.

A certified agronomist and crop advisor, Eddy is currently the Rhinelander station superintendent and program manager for the UW Potato Breeding Program.

**FEMALE SUPERS**

"I have never really thought much about how gender relates to my current position, but I do believe I am the first female station superintendent at Rhinelander," she says. "Both the West Madison and Marshfield stations also have female superintendents."

"I'm proud to carry on the 80-year history of the potato breeding

program as a part of the UW College of Agricultural and Life Sciences," Eddy remarks, "a history that started with nationally accredited potato seed grower, Miss Lelah Starks."

In support of the state potato variety breeding program, Eddy says her mission is simple: to leave the Rhinelander Agricultural Research Station (RARS) better than when she started.

"And that's going to be an enormous challenge for me because the Rhinelander station had such a strong foundation to start with," she explains.

While continuing to develop one of the most respected potato breeding programs in the nation, Eddy has adopted the philosophy of sustainability, striving towards permanent stewardship advancement through the entire operation.

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Becky Eddy does data collection at Paramount Farms, in 2007, while serving as a research specialist for Frito-Lay.



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“It’s rewarding to work for an industry that really cares about producing a quality product while balancing the environmental, social and economic challenges that we’ll all continue to face as we move forward,” she says.

“I’m delighted that this team of individuals utilizes the strong backing of the University of Wisconsin, and

the nation’s strictest production standards to assure clean, disease-free product while upholding a proactive approach to grow in the best and most responsible manner possible,” Eddy stresses.

“It’s also a phenomenal group of people to collaborate and be affiliated with,” she states.

### BEST FROM EACH FIELD

The UW Potato Breeding Program starts with 50,000–60,000 new clones each year, of which only the best from each field year generation move forward because they have a combination of sought-after traits.

“I enjoy the challenge that every clone is unique and it’s my job to figure out how to successfully grow a crop in the greenhouses and the fields,” Eddy says.

“My job is also to produce disease-free seed stock of advanced lines to share with our cooperators throughout the United States and Canada, in the pursuit of finding the right variety for the right location,” she notes.

This collaborative effort generates interest in, and provides valuable feedback on, advanced breeding lines and newly released varieties that can lead to commercialization.

“I love a profession that takes me outdoors from April to November as well as the physical nature of working with small plot research,” Eddy says. “I also enjoy working alongside the faculty lead of the potato breeding program, Jeff Endelman, who is driven both professionally and academically.”

“I do believe I’ve seen momentum to level the agricultural playing field with more females entering the profession,” she says. “I know many remarkable women who have dedicated their lives to potatoes both in the private and public sectors.”

Despite budget constraints and challenges, Eddy vows to continue to move the breeding program forward, make valuable improvements to the Rhinelander station and deploy ways to become more efficient.

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## SALLY SUPRISE

Past President and Current Board Member,  
WPVGA Associate Division  
Insurance Agent, Rural Mutual Insurance

One of only a few women to have served as president, in 2017, of the Associate Division of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA), Sally Surprise was reelected onto the Board of Directors for another term, in February 2020, and remains dedicated to the state's agriculture industry.

Obtaining her property and casualty insurance license in the early 1990's, Surprise has worked in the industry in several capacities over the years and furthered her education with multiple certifications and additional licensing.

In addition to property and casualty, she is also licensed in health and life insurance, and as a certified workers'

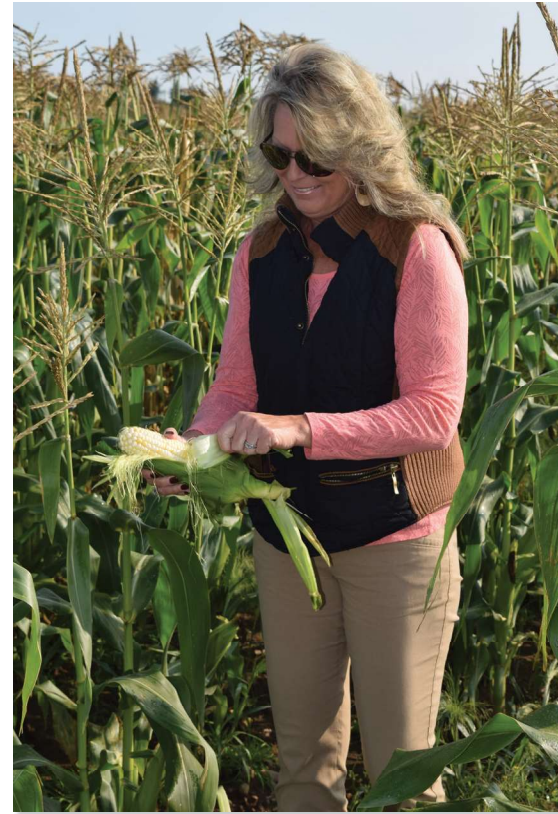
compensation advisor and agri-business farm insurance specialist.

An agent for Rural Mutual Insurance, since 2018, Surprise says her time spent serving on the WPVGA Associate Division Board has been most rewarding.

"Representing and being a part of our Wisconsin growers and this great industry is well worth the time invested," she says.

"I've had the opportunity to volunteer with the Spudmobile on various occasions to help children and adults learn what is involved in a 'Field to Fork' operation," Surprise relates, "and hopefully appreciate all

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Sally Surprise checks an ear of corn on Gagas Farms, Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

A large advertisement for Reinke irrigation. The background is a blue sky with a cornfield in the foreground. A large metal irrigation structure is visible in the middle ground. The Reinke logo is in the top left, and the text "THE ULTIMATE SMART IRRIGATION PACKAGE" is in large, bold letters. Below that is a paragraph of text. At the bottom right, it says "LEARN MORE AT REINKE.COM".

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the hard work that goes into putting food on their tables.”

### BUYS LOCAL

“Personally, when I shop, I am very selective in making sure I support our farmers and buy local,” she adds.

Suprise participated in a potato bar put on by the Oshkosh School District, talking to children about the effort that goes into planting and harvesting vegetables and potatoes.

She indicates taking pride in the money the Associate Division donates to research, as well as the scholarships given in support of youth who want to pursue careers in agriculture.

Suprise looks forward to serving potatoes at the WPVGA booth during future WPS Farm Shows, in Oshkosh,

and working alongside other Associate Division board members at the Hancock Agricultural Research Station Field Day.

“I have always had a passion to help others, and my role as an insurance advisor is to help protect what people have worked so hard to create,” she notes.

“I enjoy being able to talk with different people, listen to their needs and get to know what they value most. It’s rewarding when customers place their trust and confidence in you and they can rest easier knowing their insurance needs are met and they are protected,” Suprise adds.

“I am mostly honored and proud to be part of and represent the Wisconsin potato and vegetable growing industry. There are so many



WPVGA Associate Division board members Sally Suprise (left) and Kenton Mehlberg (right) serve corn during the 2017 Hancock Agricultural Research Station Field Day.

people and businesses that support the industry on different levels, and I have gained some wonderful long-term friendships,” she concludes.

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# AMANDA GEVENS

Associate Professor and the Integrated State Extension Specialist in Potato and Vegetable Pathology within the UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences  
Chair of the UW-Madison Department of Plant Pathology

From age 9 to 19, Amanda Gevens worked on a small, varied vegetable farm on the eastern end of Long Island.

“I thoroughly enjoyed the integrated nature of the experience, which included substantial time outdoors planting, harvesting and interacting with people in the marketplace,” she says.

Through her college years, Gevens spent summers working with the Cornell University Cooperative Extension as an integrated pest management (IPM) scout, and supported research and extension projects in potato late blight among other pest and disease conditions.

She earned a Master of Science degree in plant pathology from Purdue University, then a Ph.D. in the same field of study from Michigan State University, with strong grower, industry and Extension engagements.

“From those years in Extension, I learned that the best job in the world for me was one in which I could study vegetable diseases [indoors and out], engage with growers to help manage a crop to optimum productivity, and teach and advocate for a next generation of applied plant pathologists,” Gevens relates.



Amanda Gevens visited the Spudmobile with her current and former (graduated!) students, at the time in 2016, during the Hancock Agricultural Research Station Centennial Celebration. In the back row are, from left to right, Dr. Shunping Ding, Haley Higgins, Dr. Gevens, Dr. Katie Gold, Kiana Meinholz and John Hammel. In the front row, from left to right, are Dr. Michelle Marks and Sofia Macchiavelli Giron.

“I am grateful to have had valuable mentors, colleagues, friends and family along the way that enabled my growth to this point in my career,” she says.

Currently, Dr. Gevens serves as an associate professor and the Integrated State Extension Specialist

in potato and vegetable pathology within the UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

Since July of 2019, she has also been serving as the chair of the UW-Madison Department of Plant Pathology.

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### **COMMODITY ADVISORY BOARDS**

Dr. Gevens serves on several commodity advisory boards, including those for the Wisconsin Healthy Grown program, the WPVGA Grower Education Planning Committee, the Wisconsin Muck Farmers Association Research and Planning Committee, the Wisconsin Mint Industry Research Board Planning Committee, and the Wisconsin Fresh Market Vegetable Growers Association Meeting Planning Committee.

As for serving as the chair of the Department of Plant Pathology, Gevens says, “My integrated Extension specialist experience provides me with appropriate skills in supporting people and having access to financial and infrastructural resources.”

“While my career place is busier than ever,” she adds, “the work is tremendously rewarding, and I greatly enjoy seeing the successes of my department, from undergraduate achievement through professor career achievement recognitions.”

“Plant pathology has given me so much and it is an honor to be able to give back in this way,” Dr. Gevens says.

“To me,” she states, “potatoes are much more than tubers with nutritional value. The system of production, storage, marketing and processing of this vegetative, propagated crop engages some of the brightest and best people to sustain the innovation of agriculture.”

“In a time like none other in history,” Gevens notes, “consumers are most critical of, and yet arguably have the least connection to, food production.”

### **STRONG, ENGAGED GROUP**

“It is important for all of us who work with agriculture to be both informative and informed. The potato industry of Wisconsin, and across the nation, is a strong and engaged group,” she reminds.

“I enjoy my interactions,” Gevens says, “and am proud to represent our potato industry in various academic and professional venues.”

The potato and vegetable growing industry is highly invested in the UW research team, enabling relevant and impactful work to be envisioned, funded, conducted and realized.

Dr. Gevens says her overarching career goal is general: to be productive, effective and engaged, while achieving a sense of reward.

**Above:** Dr. Amanda Gevens shares updates on late blight in tomatoes and commercial potatoes, as well as fungicides that could limit or curb the spread of the disease, at the 2017 Rhinelander Field Day.

She also enjoys the variety her position provides.

“I can start the week in the field evaluating disease trials or engaging with growers and end the week in a formal administrative business meeting on campus,” she says.

“Particularly, my time in the field and with growers and students recharges my career battery.”

“My greatest pride comes not from an individual project accomplishment, but rather from the regard and inclusion that I have received from the potato growing industry,” Gevens remarks.

She concludes, “I greatly appreciate and find reward in being engaged and asked to contribute to matters that affect the current and future path of the industry.”

*Be sure to look for Part 2 of this Outstanding Women of Wisconsin Agriculture feature in the upcoming May 2020 issue of the Badger Common'Tater. BCT*