

## In South Florida, women farmers are taking charge of the land

BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ



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**KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY:** Joann Speers & her sister Angela Delliveneri with Father, Joseph, & Frances LaRocca.

Deep in South Miami-Dade, where lush greenery gives way to brown fields, sisters Angela Delliveneri and Joann Speers ready the land for this fall's crop of green beans -- an annual ritual they learned from their father more than 40 years ago.

"You just don't want to let it go," Speers says of farming. "It's a way of life."

Women have always participated in farm life, but historically in the background as wives and daughters. Now they're taking charge.

About 460 Miami-Dade farms, or nearly 20 percent, are run by women -- a share that is inching up even as agricultural acreage dwindles. In Broward, the figure is 157 farms, or nearly 30 percent.

Consider these numbers from the U.S. Census of Agriculture: In 2002, 11 percent of the nation's 2.1 million principal farm operators were women; five years later, the figure had risen to 14 percent. In 2007, 22 percent of Florida's farms were run by women, a 28 percent increase in five years.

"It's been a slow, steady evolution, much of it due to the nursery industry," says Debbie Brady, president of Florida Agri-Women, founded in 2003.

"Agriculture has become a pretty high-tech industry," says Terry McElroy, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. "It's not a question of brawn anymore." Some female farmers, like Delliveneri and Speers, grew up in the business. Others took over when their husbands died.

But many, like Alice Pena, saw farming as a way to live their passion. As night surrenders to dawn, the one-time banker scrubs her hens' feeders, adds water to their trough and scatters feed around the coop.

"They're like family," Pena says of the Isa Brown hens whose organic eggs she sells.

She runs the operation on the five-acre South Dade plot where her family began growing malangas, avocados and plantains in the late 1960s.

After her father's death in 1978, she sold her parents' Coral Gables home and built a house on the land for her mother. During the week she traveled internationally as a bank vice president. On weekends she helped with the farm.

Still, love of the land came slowly, Pena admits with a laugh.

"As a kid I hated it here. We would come on weekends and stay in the trailer, and I thought it was torture."

But when her mother died last year, Pena took over the business, turning it into an organic farm with chickens and tropical fruits. Now she has a steady clientele, some of whom travel miles to buy her eggs.

"My life has evolved totally," she says. "I don't wear a suit; only jeans. I go around in a ponytail without makeup, and I don't travel anymore, either. In certain ways, it's a lot more hectic, but there's a certain balance to it. I don't feel the tension or stress I felt in banking."

June Ward of Emerald Forest Interior Foliage is another relative newcomer. Her eight-acre nursery, which cultivates about 20 varieties of crotons, sells to landscapers, garden centers, florists and interior decorators.

Ward started out in the accounting department of another nursery, moved on to sales and, in 1998, bought a nursery on Southwest 189th Avenue that now employs five workers outdoors and three in the office. Though the Indiana native knew plenty about the business side of nurseries, she learned everything about growing -- soil, fertilizer, pests -- on the job.

"People are very willing to help you here," she says. "You learn from each other."

South Florida

## It's not a question of brawn anymore



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**WOMEN RULING THE ROOST:** Alice Pena with Gary the rooster on her farm. "My life has evolved totally. I don't wear a suit; only jeans, says the ex-bank vice president.

Acceptance doesn't always come easily. Colleen Boggs was one of a handful of women in agriculture when she started Pine Island Nursery in 1972. She remembers when buyers assumed she was hired help and invariably asked to speak to a man. Yet, she says, she also benefited from being a woman in a male-dominated field.

"Everybody was kinder to you, and you stood out in the crowd," says Boggs, now retired. Male or female, South Florida farmers and nursery owners face daunting challenges, from development pressure to unpredictable weather.

"A hurricane doesn't skip over you because you're a woman," Boggs says. Mary Lamberts, a Cooperative Extension Service agent who works with Miami-Dade growers, says fresh eyes and flexibility are among the assets women bring to agriculture.

"They're more willing to look into niche markets, to try different things," she says.

Farming has never been an easy way to make a living, and the housing bust and recession have hit ornamental nurseries particularly hard. Vickie Parrish says sales are down about 70 percent at her Parrish Nursery in Southwest Ranches.

She doubts that many in the next generation will make a living on the land. Her daughter earned a horticulture degree from the University of Florida, but has taken a job with a farm-credit agency in Orlando.

At South Miami-Dade's LaRocca Farms, DelliVeneri and Speers are not encouraging their children to carry on the family tradition, either. "The farming business is not going to be here forever," DelliVeneri says. "I'm pushing them to get into other fields."