

**Episode Title:** Women in Agriculture and Safety Issues

**Summary:** During this episode, we talk with Shelby and Susan Wright, two women on the frontlines of agriculture. They join us from Kentucky to discuss their role in agriculture and how personal safety and chemical safety relate to their jobs.

**Expert:** Shelby and Susan Wright

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**Episode Quote:**

*"I led trainings on how to be safe with farm chemicals... the topics included laundering clothes that had chemicals on them, how to stay safe around chemicals, and what to remind your significant other of when they are handling chemicals."*

– Susan Wright, Sales Specialist, Pro Solutions

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## Transcript

### 00:00 M. Bentley

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share firsthand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

The United States Census of Agriculture found that 36% of farmers in the U.S. are women. This is an increase compared to years past. We know that some of the concerns women face are livestock handling and treatments, which can include hormones, the design of equipment and personal protective equipment, which may not fit women's shapes and sizes, and as we will learn today, personal safety.

Today we are talking with two women who are on the frontlines of agriculture. Susan and Shelby Wright are joining us from Kentucky to talk about their role in agriculture and how personal safety and chemical safety relate to their jobs.

Thanks for joining us today. The first question we have is, tell us about your background, and how you got into agriculture.

### 00:54 Susan Wright

Thanks for asking us to be on your podcast we really appreciate the opportunity.

My name is Susan Wright, and I live in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. I got my start in agriculture at an early age. I was raised on a tobacco and cattle farm just outside Lexington, Kentucky, and my passion for agriculture developed at a very early age. Whether it was riding the tobacco setter, being in the stripping room or being out in the pastures, I knew that agriculture was something that I wanted to be involved in, and as a teenager I had the opportunity to join the Jessamine County FFA Chapter, where I was able to learn life building skills as well as leadership skills and served as an officer in the chapter. I was also Kentucky's first female State FFA President in 1989 and 90.

### 01:59 M. Bentley

Susan, can you talk a little bit about your experience in agriculture off the farm?

### Susan Wright

I'm a graduate of the University of Kentucky, where I majored in agriculture with an emphasis in animal science and after I graduated from University of Kentucky I went to work for an AG chemical company, and I was the basic manufacturer rep in the Midwest for several years, and I worked as a chemical rep, as a wholesale rep, as an independent retailer, and eventually I moved to Kentucky 6 years ago and worked for an AG retailer in Hopkinsville, and I focus on AG chemicals, fertilizer, and seed with my producers.

### 02:47 M. Bentley

Wow Susan, it sounds like you have been involved with many different aspects of agriculture. When we think of women in agriculture, we don't always think of sales rep positions. What about you Shelby?

### **Shelby Wright**

My name is Shelby Wright. My background and agriculture happened at a very young age. I was extremely passionate from the start, just watching my 2 influences, my mother and my father growing up on a small farm in Greenfield, Indiana. We had a small row crop farm with a livestock, and both of my parents were very involved in agricultural sales, so I can remember at an early age, going on farm calls with them, and having the animals in the backyard just really struck my passion for agriculture. So, growing up I was very involved in FFA and 4-H. I showed numerous livestock, such as pigs, horses, and specialized in breeding and raising goats. If there was a contest that I could participate in, no matter what it was, I was always going out of my comfort zone to do so. I was my 4-H fair Queen. It was an honor to be the representative of something that was so near and dear to my heart as a 10 year 4-H member especially. So, all of those experiences led me to attend Murray State University, and I was on the Murray State rodeo team there where I studied agricultural business and got my bachelor's degree. I then in college also had several internships.

### **04:16 M. Bentley**

Can we hear a little bit more about your internship experiences?

### **Shelby Wright**

I was with Helena Agri-Enterprises for one summer. I really wanted to try my luck, I guess essentially at becoming a salesperson, which was something you know, that I knew so well from what my parents did, and I guess it worked out because I was Helena's intern of the year that summer which was really special and it let me know that, okay, I actually can really do this especially, which is what this topic is about as a female. I was probably one of maybe 3 [women] out of 30 in that class, so that was pretty cool. And then the next summer after that I was an intern in Wisconsin for Dekalb Asgrow with Bayer Crop Science. That summer was amazing. It opened my eyes to the seed industry, where I also accepted a job after my senior year to be a trainee, and that led me back home to Indiana. So I spent a summer well, actually a year in Indiana, with Dekalb Asgrow training to become a salesperson.

### **05:15 M. Bentley**

I think you're a great example of how women are becoming more active in not only farming and producing, but also agribusiness. Where are you at now?

### **Shelby Wright**

I wanted to get back to Kentucky— I love the Bluegrass State and fortunately had the opportunity to do so last June. So currently my job is being a field Sales rep with Dekalb Asgrow in Owensboro, Kentucky. and in my free time I actually this year just started my master's degree in agricultural communications online through Texas Tech. So I'm very busy but still agricultural, enthused, and that's a little bit about what I have going on now and a little bit about my past.

### **05:50 M. Bentley**

As we see more women getting involved in farming and other agribusinesses, what are some of the unique precautions you have taken to address hazards that you have encountered in the field?

### **Susan Wright**

I strive not to set myself apart based on gender as far as physical safety, I still load chemicals, and at times you know use a forklift at my warehouse or on the farm. It's important to me for my growers to see that I'm hard working in that, even though I'm a female I'm able to step up to any task that may typically be a male's task, and I don't ask my employees to do anything that I wouldn't be able to do myself that's really important to me. And when it comes to being a female in male dominated role, you need to gain a person's respect from the get-go, and although it may take more time to establish credibility with a customer versus a male counterpart, once you've established that credibility your relationship can be groomed, and it can blossom into a relationship that the customer very much appreciates. Shelby, what would you add to that?

**07:12 Shelby Wright**

I agree that being a female in a male dominated world, although you are unique in several different ways, especially when it comes to safety, we all have to follow similar precautions, especially like you said around chemistry and seed and in the warehouse. You know it's not whether you're man or woman but I would say, as a female in situations, especially with customers, You know, Mom, I think we do need to be a little bit more on guard, especially with dealing with newer customers and going to their farms and stuff, because, although we want to have those relationships with the customers and do our job and focus on our job as sales representatives. Sometimes we're just I feel like more vulnerable as female's individuals. So, it's just important for us to understand that we are different, and we are unique. So just being cautious about meeting with different people, especially on their operations.

**M. Bentley**

So, what are some of the precautions you take in regards to personal safety?

**08:11 Susan Wright**

One of the extra precautions that I may take when it comes to personal safety in a sales role that involves being out on the farm or all the miles that we drive each week is that my counterparts usually know where I am, where I'm going, the people I'm gonna be with, so if there's a circumstance where they may have a hard time getting in touch with me they know where I am and who I'm with. And in our jobs, we are on farmers properties and on landlords' properties from time to time, or really quite often and whether you're a female or male in these positions. It's important for people to know when you're going to be out looking at a field, because I know of instances where even men in our industry have been approached by landowners in confronted as to why they are on their property and some of them have been scary situations but it's all about the relationship that you have with your customer them notifying landlords. If you're gonna be out scouting fields, etc. that would be one of the precautions that I know we are more mindful of in these days and ages, because we never know who we may run into when we're out on the back roads scouting for weeds or looking at crops.

**09:38 M. Bentley**

Susan, you mentioned handling chemicals. Can you talk about the safety measures you use even though you aren't necessarily the one applying those in the field?

**Susan Wright**

It's very important probably in my role more so than Shelby's, because I am handling chemicals and fertilizer on a daily basis, and we have PPE kits with gloves and goggles, especially if we are around the sprayers where chemicals are being mixed, or on the farm making those deliveries or helping with spray issues. We keep PPE kits with us, and I use them diligently, because we know that we need to be very mindful of the precautions on the labels.

**10:21 Shelby Wright**

And from my perspective, dealing more with seed, I make sure to discuss with a farmer what chemistry he has sprayed before I go look at a field, because, you know, sometimes walking through those fields you might get mixed up with something that you don't want to, and get that exposure so to communicate is key in general, and to have those conversations about the chemistry perspective.

**M. Bentley**

Do you promote the safety culture to your clients as well?

**10:48 Susan Wright**

We remind ourselves of this safety precautions they need to take with different chemicals based on their toxicity classifications, and especially in crops where we know that they are going to be entered fairly soon after applications or during applications, and the crop I'm speaking of in particular would be tobacco. We are very cautious, and mindful in letting our customers know the toxicity levels of certain chemicals when they've got workers that will be entering those fields shortly after applications.

**M. Bentley**

Have you ever talked to the families of your clients about chemical risks and safety?

### 11:33 Susan Wright

Several years ago, I would host grower wife meetings. At the time, grower meetings were very popular, where the growers, which more than likely were men, came to dinner meetings, and we would discuss chemicals. But I did something different, and had grower wife meetings, which was just for the wives, and I led trainings on how to be safe with farm chemicals if you are not directly applying them. And the topics were helped to launder clothes that had chemicals on them, how to stay safe around chemicals, what to remind your significant other of when they are handling chemicals, so that those in the home were not exposed to the same toxicities that the growers were exposed to in the field.

### M. Bentley

Those are a few great ways to protect families and prevent take home exposure. Susan and Shelby, we really appreciate you stopping by and talking with us today. Do you have anything else you'd like to share?

### 12:41 Susan Wright

The future of agriculture remains so strong. There's no better industry to be affiliated with in the world, because we have got to feed the world and just so excited about what the girls have done with agriculture.

### Shelby Wright

I just wanna share what a blessing it has been to be a female in agriculture, and to have grown up with a female in agriculture. My mom has been such an inspiration to me and my sister and has taught us the value of being a part of a minority, you know, being a woman, and in a man's field and today we still are considered a minority, although agriculture has changed over the past 20 years. And I'm just super blessed to be a woman and to be a part of the agricultural industry, and to essentially just help feed the world.

### 13:26 M. Bentley

Check out the links provided in the episode resources section of our website which include safety information on today's topics.

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe. Also let us know if there's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website at [gpcah.org](http://gpcah.org) or email us at [gpcah-greatplainscenter@uiowa.edu](mailto:gpcah-greatplainscenter@uiowa.edu).

Original music for the FarmSafe podcast was written and performed by Ben Schmidt. This work was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health.

## Episode Resources

- [Agrisafe: Women's Health](#)
- [University of Illinois Extension: Challenges for Women in Farm Life](#)
- [Ag Safety and Health: Women in Agriculture](#)

## Photo

