

Debbie Carter: Fifty Years of Stewardship, Resilience, and Quiet Leadership

For Debbie Carter, farming wasn't something she planned — it was something she grew into through love, hard work, and a deep respect for the land.

Alongside her husband Tom, Debbie has spent nearly five decades farming in Morgan County, helping shape Carter Farm into a diversified operation rooted in conservation, adaptability, and care.

Debbie didn't grow up on a farm. She spent her early years in the city, but a brief childhood experience living on a farm left a lasting impression. "There were pigs on that farm," she recalls. "I fell in love with the country and always knew I wanted to live on a farm." That dream became reality when she married Tom at 19. Within their first year of marriage, they purchased the farm they are still working today — nearly 50 years later.

In the early years, farming didn't feel like work. Debbie worked nights at a hospital, then spent her days baling hay with Tom. "I didn't realize we were working," she says. "I thought we were playing." Farming quickly revealed itself as unpredictable, demanding, and constant — a lifestyle where plans change daily and the work is never truly finished.

Growing with the Land

Today, Carter Farm includes about 500 acres of owned and rented land producing row crops, hay, and livestock. Through the years, their commitment to conservation has remained steady.

The Carters were early adopters of no-till farming, practicing it for roughly 40 years — long before it was common in their area. The transition required patience. It took several years before the economic benefits became clear, but eventually yields improved and erosion decreased. "You don't see the gains right away," she says. "But over time, it really works."

Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and their local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), the Carters installed multiple waterways across their fields — an investment Debbie describes as transformative. "It made a huge difference in erosion," she says. "That financial and technical assistance really mattered. That's a lot of money to put out on your own."

Cover crops are a newer part of their operation and, like many farmers, the Carters are still learning. Timing, management, and weather all pose challenges. "It's all a learning process," Debbie says. "You're always adjusting."

A Woman's Role — Then and Now

When Debbie first entered farming, women were rarely seen working in the fields. Most handled paperwork or household responsibilities while men ran equipment. Debbie's role looked different out of necessity. She stacked hay, ran tractors, worked on equipment, and did whatever needed to be done.



"I definitely felt like I was stepping out of the norm," she says. "I remember going into town covered in grease and getting funny looks. But the work had to get done."

Over time, she's watched agriculture change. Today, Debbie sees women driving semis, operating combines, and leading agricultural organizations. She's especially encouraged by the growing number of women in

education, veterinary medicine, and conservation. "Women are realizing they can do so much more," she says. "There are women who love the outdoors and aren't afraid to claim that space anymore."



Knowing the Herd

One area where Debbie's strengths shine is livestock care. While she once felt intimidated by cattle, she now manages feeding, watering, and herd decisions with confidence. She knows each animal individually — its history, temperament, and health — often noticing issues before anyone else.

"I read an article once that said women make better herdsmen," she says. "I believe that's true. We tend to see animals as individuals, not just a group." That attentiveness has shaped herd management decisions and reinforced the value of observation and intuition — skills Debbie believes are essential but often overlooked.

Leadership Beyond the Farm

Beyond her work on the land, Debbie serves as a supervisor on the Morgan County Soil and Water Conservation District board, a role she has held since 2021. One of only two women on the board — and one of the few active farmers — she brings firsthand experience to conservation decisions affecting both agricultural and residential landscapes.

Debbie and Tom have been recognized for their stewardship with both the River Friendly Farmer Award and Morgan County Farmer of the Year honors. For Debbie, those recognitions reflect decades of steady, consistent care rather than any single achievement.

Looking Ahead

At this stage of life, Debbie says she finds comfort in stability rather than growth. Succession planning remains uncertain, as farming's demanding lifestyle isn't easily passed on. Still, she takes pride in knowing the land they've cared for is healthier than when they started — and better positioned for whoever comes next.

Her advice to women interested in farming or conservation is simple: "Go for it." She acknowledges financial barriers are real, especially for those without inherited land, but believes opportunities for women in agriculture are broader than ever.

"Being a good farmer looks different for everyone," Debbie says. "It's about being where you're needed, when you're needed, and doing whatever needs to be done."

After nearly 50 years, Debbie Carter's story is one of quiet leadership — shaped by resilience, stewardship, and a lifelong commitment to the land.