A Day in the Life: Matt Ruark

Caroline Schneider

By the time Matt Ruark turned 12 years old, he had lived in Iowa, Texas, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. As a young scientist, he also saw a variety of soils and crops while completing undergraduate and M.S. degrees in soil science at the University of Minnesota, a Ph.D. in agronomy at Purdue, and post-doctoral work at the University of California–Davis.

Ruark now uses his diverse experience to identify and find solutions to agricultural issues at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. There he is an assistant professor in the Department of Soil Science, and he also works as an extension specialist in the University of Wisconsin Extension program. Here’s how Ruark came to put down roots in the soils of Wisconsin and what he finds exciting about his career as a soil scientist there.

**Soil Horizons**: How did you become interested in soil science?

**Ruark**: I was always interested in becoming a scientist and chose to go to the University of Minnesota because it had an environmental science degree program. Within that degree, I specialized in soil science, mostly on the advice of my undergraduate adviser, Paul Bloom. Once I took that first soils class, I was hooked. I also worked for the soil fertility field crew with George Rehm, Mike Schmidt, John Lamb, and Carl Rosen, and I really enjoyed being involved with field-based research. In my mind, it became clear that agricultural systems were the “environment” I wanted to study, and I chose to focus on issues affecting agricultural production and environmental quality.

**Soil Horizons**: Where have you worked and how did you end up where you are today?

**Ruark**: My first job out of college was working for a grain company at the Minneapolis Grain Exchange. I worked on the trading floor, entering trades and taking phone calls from the grain elevators. The company I worked for was one of the smaller companies, and consequently, our booth on the trading floor was the farthest booth from the trading pit. When the grain elevators wanted to buy or sell futures, I’d stand on my chair and yell to our trader in the pit, and he’d yell back a price. If trading was busy, though, our trader wouldn’t be able to hear me over the noise, so I’d have to run into the pit and physically grab the trader to get him to buy or sell based on what the grain elevator needed.

That was a fun job. The trading floor was a combination of energetic twenty-somethings and grizzled, hard-drinking old-timers. In any case, I knew this wasn’t the career for me because I never seemed to have the sense for how much the wheat price was going to increase because Kansas didn’t get rain over the weekend.

After six months of watching wheat prices hover around $2.00 per bushel, I started my M.S. with John Lamb. Two years later, I started my Ph.D. at Purdue with Sylvie Brouder. While at Purdue, I met my wife, Jenny, who was also a soils grad student. Then it was off to California for a few years before landing a faculty position at the University of Wisconsin.

One of the benefits of moving around was the experiences I gained working in different agricultural systems, including sugarbeet, corn, soybean, grasslands, rice, and switchgrass. For me, the key was to focus on the basics of carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus cycling and then apply this knowledge in some way to address an issue (agronomic or environmental) facing a cropping system in a particular region. Another advantage to having experiences at multiple institutions is getting to know other graduate students, postdocs, and research scientists. I’ve made a lot of great friends along the way, many of whom are colleagues at other institutions.

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