

John Millen: Soil Conservation Pioneer

Even a truly great idea can languish without a champion.

John Millen, a man who didn't begin farming until he was 31 years old, became one of the earliest champions here in Westmoreland County for a great idea called soil conservation.

When he came home from World War II in 1946, John had a head full of agricultural information ("Soils and Men," the US agricultural yearbook, was his constant companion in the service) and a pent-up passion for the soil. He bought a farm in Hempfield Township and, in his words, "started farming as soon as I hit the ground" – with dogged determination and the most unconventional methods.

To the stares and scorn of his neighbors, John steered his plow along the contours of the land... "light disked" rather than tilled steep fields (and reported that he "lost hardly any soil even during a near hurricane")...sowed cover crops...built a trench

silos (something he had read about in a history of the Roman Empire)... and created a drainage system that turned dangerous, muddy gullies into workable fields.

These conservation-farming practices were not generally accepted at the time, and many local farmers thought John was crazy.

"One even told me I was destroying the neighborhood," he said.

But gradually, John's passion – and his results – earned him second looks. He invited the curious to his farm and there, one-on-one, was where he 'made the sale' for conservation.



John, far right, gives fellow farmers a tour of his conservation farm in the early 1950s.



John was a patient and skilled teacher. His solid knowledge of agricultural science, coupled with the strength of his character and his delightful sense of humor, soon eased many skeptics' fears. Before they knew it, they were giving conservation farming a try.

For a time, John also advocated for conservation by volunteering his service on the board of the young Westmoreland Conservation District, and served as chairman in 1954.

He was one of the first farmers in Westmoreland County to cooperate with the Soil Conservation Service, and to have a conservation plan for his property.

Today, conservation is a widely accepted practice, thanks to John Millen and others like him who took a risk on a new idea and pursued it relentlessly.



The John Millen Soil Display is available for individuals, classroom teachers and students, and community groups to visit. It was made possible through the generosity of the following donors.

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Visit the John Millen Soil Display

at the



218 Donohoe Road, Greensburg PA 15601



*Get a
worm's eye view
of the world
underneath
your feet.*

Visit the John Millen Soil Display and you'll see something most people never do: The world underneath your feet.

Five large vertical slices have been taken right out of the ground from various locations here in Westmoreland County, and they're displayed at eye-level for you to examine.

The top of each slice is the surface of the ground; the part we walk on. Underneath is everything you'd find if you dropped straight down to a depth of about four feet.



The study of soil is called **pedology**.

There are 47 different kinds of soils in Westmoreland County – including ones that are slick and slippery...super thin...and chock-full of air spaces. This display features four of these local soils. You may have one (or more) of them in your backyard.

Soil tells a story you can read

At this display, you'll discover that you don't have to be a scientist to know things about the soil. You just have to read the "clues."

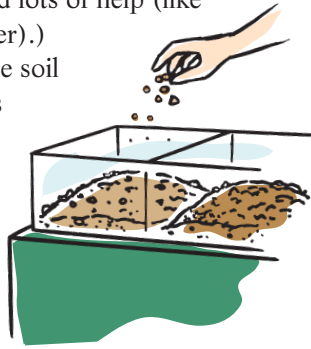
Here you'll discover how clues like color can tell if a soil is good for growing things. (Hint: dark brown or black soils usually have a lot of organic matter (nutrients and other remains from plants and animals)...and light gray soils usually need lots of help (like fertilizer and organic matter).)

You can also touch some soil to get clues about what it's made of.

(If the soil feels gritty, it probably has a lot of sand in it. If it's sticky and goeey, it probably has more clay.)

When you know what kind of soil you have, you can use it wisely.

Engineers, farmers, planners, builders, and botanists often consider the soil when they're making decisions about how to use the land in our community.

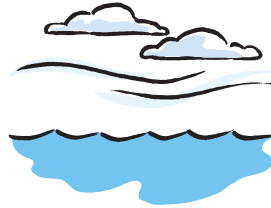


There are very good reasons why they don't build houses on a slick or slippery soil...or grow soybeans in places where the Earth's bedrock is close to the surface of the ground...or dig ponds in soil that has a lot of air spaces in it.

With a little knowledge about soil, you can make the same kind of good decisions about how to use the soil in your backyard.

Soil impacts our lives in many ways – including our health.

When soil is healthy and full of nutrients, it makes the food grown in it healthy and delicious for us. Some of the iron in your blood and the calcium in your teeth and bones came from vegetables and fruit and grains you ate. And that food got the iron and calcium from the soil.



Soil quality is as important as air quality and water quality.



Although your mother may think it's all the same (and that it all should stay outside), there are thousands of different kinds of soil on Earth. There are 47 different kinds in Westmoreland County alone.

This soil display features:

- **Gilpin**, the most prevalent soil in Westmoreland County
- **Dormont**, one of the most highly productive soils for crops in Westmoreland County
- **Clarksburg**, a soil that sometimes forms an interesting structure called a fragipan, and
- **Upshur**, the most landslide-prone soil in Pennsylvania.



Each soil in the display includes information on what its best uses are and facts about its depth to bedrock, particle size, parent material, and ability to hold water.

What's in your backyard? Be sure to check the maps that show where in Westmoreland County each soil is found.

