

# Meet Eliana Blaine

## Urban Soil Health Program Director, IASWCD



**H**i everyone, my name is Elli. I wanted to send out a note to introduce myself. At the beginning of January, I stepped into the new role of Urban Soil Health Program Director with the Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (IASWCD). I am excited to work with everyone to get this initiative up and running across the state.

Fun fact about me: I grew up on an island in the Pacific Northwest – sandwiched between Washington State and Canada. I used to joke that I was a “Pacific Islander.” There are still no stop lights and no chain stores on the island. And no, there isn’t a bridge to get to “the mainland.” It’s an hour-and-a-half ferry ride.

I’ve been an outdoorsy kid since my earliest memories.

My high school senior project was on “Gardening Education for Kindergarteners.” I spent half a year studying the literature on the benefits of introducing gardening education in early childhood, and the myriad subjects that could be taught with the garden as the foundation. Then, I spent the second half of the year with our elementary school’s kindergarteners in the garden. You can probably imagine how fun that was! I’m not kidding – I had a blast.



After college, I worked in a fast-paced environment in Boston, with a recycling, composting, and waste management company. I managed large contracts and projects for our customer base. I loved it, but there was something missing.

I’ve volunteered with urban farms and tried to maintain a connection with the land through frequent camping, hiking, and kayaking adventures. After a few years, through a personal connection, I decided to leave this life behind and venture to Indiana.



Soon after I settled in Indianapolis, I found my way to the Marion County Soil and Water Conservation District. The Marion and Hendricks SWCDs took a chance on me through a CWI grant, and I threw myself into Soil Health Outreach with small and urban farms. I put on my boots and got to work learning soil health. I am forever grateful for this opportunity.

So much about this work just “clicked” for me. The growers we worked with taught me vital lessons, as have the countless learning opportunities through partner organizations.

During this time, I met Tyler Gough, Farm Manager at Indy Urban Acres – a series of non-profit farm sites in Indianapolis that grow food and donate to food pantries and also via free weekly delivery to people who cannot otherwise access healthy vegetables. Each season for the past four years I've helped grow food from seed to harvest. This work gave me the opportunity to trial soil health practices in a small, organic, diverse small farm setting. This demonstrated the ability for human actions to reverse soil degradation in a fairly short time frame; and, at the same time, showed me the challenges of implementing these practices. The passion and dedication this small group of farmers give to their work is humbling. I have gained an intense renewed appreciation for people that grow healthy food for their community, friends, neighbors, and customers. I look forward to meeting many more farmers and growers throughout the state.



I look forward to talking with each district and partner organization about their specific challenges and current work with urban and small farms. Don't think you have "urban" growers in your area? Maybe think again. This program intends to reach a broad audience of "underserved" growers in the state.



A 5-acre diverse vegetable market farm outside of town, a community garden, a Master Gardener's demo garden at the Fairgrounds, a vacant lot being transformed to grow food in the city, a church garden growing food to donate, a university's demonstration farm – these are just a few of the core group of farmers we are trying to reach.

Our team is here to help you with work you are already doing, or want to do. We want to help pull together partners that may not currently work together. Program resources will be dedicated to creating new soil health programming, workshops, events, educational materials, site visits and technical assistance specifically for the growers mentioned above. Have a creative idea? I want to hear it!

In the next couple of months, I will be organizing listening sessions to hear more about what you are doing to reach unique urban growers, your challenges in doing so — even if you don't feel the need is there in your area. Please reach out to me at [eliana-blaine@iaswcd.org](mailto:eliana-blaine@iaswcd.org) to set up a time to talk. Or call me at (360) 317-6752.

**PS – Coming soon!** Keep a look-out for exciting news coming next month. We are hiring three additional staff (Urban Soil Health Specialists) to help lead these efforts regionally in the Northwest, Northeast, and Southeast. Holly McCutchan, Urban Conservationist with the Warrick County SWCD will continue in her role to cover the Southwest. You'll be the first to "meet" these new specialists virtually via an announcement coming your way in early March.