

JENNY MATTHIESEN

The lady for our **new organic varieties**

Ecological farming will play an even more important role in international markets in ten years' time. Jenny Matthiesen is helping us deliver new varieties – across all crops.

A tree hugger in woolen socks and Birkenstock sandals? That's not Jenny Matthiesen. She hails from Northern Germany, grew up by the Baltic Sea and is homespun and nature-loving: Agriculture has shaped her life, she's a member of the German Rural Youth Association and still calls many farmers and hunters her friend to this day. "But you don't have to be a greenie to produce organic varieties."

And she has a clear goal at KWS. The countries in the European Union must do more to promote organic food and farming by 2030: The share of cultivation area used for organic agriculture has to be increased

to 20 percent in Germany and to 25% EU-wide. "Some farmers will have to change the way they farm," says Jenny Matthiesen. "They're already customers of ours and will hopefully still be in 2030. That's why we have to supply them with the varieties they'll need in 2030. And we need to start doing that now."

Overview of the many crops at KWS

Organic Variety Development – a function for which KWS advertised a job for the first time in 2019 and which Jenny Matthiesen has held at our main organic site in Wiebrectshausen since June 2020

– is tasked with pursuing that path. The now 32-year-old was working at the time in variety approval at the Federal Office of Plant Varieties and applied for the new post – albeit with slight doubts. Applications were invited from people with a master's degree or doctorate. "I only held a bachelor's in agricultural engineering."

However, her five years of experience at the Federal Office of Plant Varieties meant she had ideal qualifications. "I came into contact with Value for Cultivation and Use Testing in Organic Farming for the first time there." And she also dealt with all types of cereals at the Cereals department. As a result, she quickly learned to



change between crops and yet maintain an overview.

That now helps her in her work at KWS: She forges a bridge – straddling the various crops and countries – between conventional breeding and product management for organic farming. “I find the job really diverse, because I’m not concerned with just one crop, but with many ones in KWS’ portfolio. That motivates me every day.”

Conventional breeding as the foundation

One of her tasks is to select genotypes for organic farming. Traits such as speedy juvenile development and a high weed suppression potential are crucial in organic farming. A further factor that plays a role in cereals is plant length so that crops grow strong enough to leave diseases behind or generate more straw for organic farms that keep livestock. Another of her goals is better leaf health, since chemical pesticides are banned.

Conventional breeding is the foundation for developing varieties: “80% of the traits match. Our research has shown that it’s not necessary to establish a separate breeding program for organic activities, but to select younger generations systematically in terms of organic traits. As part of that, I talk and cooperate closely with colleagues working in the conventional breeding programs.” Following selection the

genotypes are tested under organic conditions on our own trial fields. In Germany these trials are currently underway at Wiebrechtshausen, Seligenstadt and Petkus. There are additional locations with trial fields in Austria and France. The goal is to expand these activities to other EU countries and the UK.

International experience in Canada

Jenny Matthiesen’s résumé also contains another aspect that makes her qualified to work as part of an international team: After training as an agricultural technical assistant from 2006 to 2008, she went to Canada in May 2009 and spent a year there. “I had a lot of freedom there to try out various things.” She improved her English and says that her experience living abroad means she can quickly put herself in the shoes of people from other cultures.

One of the places where Jenny – a keen horse rider – worked in Canada was Spruce Meadows near Calgary, the largest equestrian facility in the world. “But making my hobby a job wasn’t an option – riding was to remain a pastime.” Unlike her almost six-month spell with a breeder that further flamed her passion for this vocation. She worked there with Volker Marwede, with whose family she subsequently nurtured good contacts and who is now her colleague once more: He is a hybrid barley breeder at our location in Wetzze.

Breeding instead of sales

After returning from Canada, Jenny worked for a potato breeder for one-and-a-half years. But she wanted more – and quit to earn her high-school diploma and be able to study agriculture. In her final semester she came into contact with KWS for the first time, working as a trainee in corn sales. “That’s when I realized: Sales is sales, and what counts at the end of the day is to sell units and make money. That wasn’t my thing. I belong in breeding.”

What fascinates Jenny Matthiesen about it is working with plants outdoors. “When the combines are in the field in the harvest season, then I’m the first on site, rolling up my sleeves,” says Jenny, who is currently studying for her master’s in Business Administration alongside her job. “Genotypes are like little children. Of course you want to see them grow up and how they turn out.” She’s not wimpish. “Breeding’s done outside, come rain or shine, and not in front of the computer.”

Jenny Matthiesen – in her element. |



Jenny Matthiesen checking crop stands: She pays particular attention to traits such as plant length and leaf health as part of organic farming.