

## Women in Leadership Positions in Canadian Agriculture

### MARY AND SUSAN LESTER | LESTER FARMS [ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR]

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Lester Farms is a farm that is constantly reinventing itself. For more than 160 years, the Lester family has been working the land on Brookfield road, outside St. John, NFLD. When Mary and her husband, John came back to Newfoundland from PEI, they decided to focus on vegetables and split from the dairy operation run by their sister and brother. Since focusing on vegetables, they have expanded from a 20 acre farm that focuses primarily on

#### **Please tell us a bit about yourself and your career path.**

Susan: I'm a proud sixth generation farmer. I grew up on my family farm: there's my parents, my three older brothers and myself. I always like to tell people that I was the first soil machine on the farm as my first memories are of my playing with my toys in the soil as my parents were planting. Like many farm kids, I grew up playing and working on the farm alongside my family. I think growing up on a farm gives you a deeper appreciation for the lifestyle, you see not only the successes but the ups and downs to get there, plus the not so successful times as well. After high school I went to university and completed my Bachelor of Arts while working at the farm, and I just recently completed my Bachelor of Education. Completing both of these degrees have helped further my career as I have incorporated much of what I have learned into what I do on the farm. For my future, I want to continue in the footsteps of my family while creating a solid future for generations to come.

Mary: I always loved farming, I grew up on a farm. I went to secondary education for nursing originally. I got married and started our family while still working on the farm. I worked with the dairy industry, I also lived in PEI for a while where we had our own little dairy farm. We also had experience with beef cattle, and potatoes before we moved back home to Newfoundland. When we moved back we started in the vegetable industry and haven't looked back since. There's always something to learn. Since we started people's eating habits have changed, there's more varieties that we can grow, there's more ways of growing crops, more technology. I have been on many farm associations and have learned a lot from being involved with those groups. Part of my career path was to be a mentor for young farmers including my family.

#### **Tell us about your role and what your "typical day" looks like.**

Susan: This varies with the season. Right now, in our fall season we're in full swing with our harvest. Typically, my day will start with organizing the day: changing social media, updating phone messages, organizing what staff are working where for that day, organizing restaurant orders, updating the crop info and displays. From there it's checking over produce, packing produce, and continuing with organizing the day and the regular going ons. Sometimes there are school tours or group outings. Throughout the day there is a lot of direct and indirect customer interaction as you stock the shelves and package the crop. At the end of the day everything is concluded: cashes are closed off, produce is put back to the storing place, and a to do list for the next day is usually started. During the summer and spring season the days are quite different as our focus changes from flowers, to veggies over time. We also have a children's program which is a main focus of mine in

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the summer months. Although there is a lot that you can plan for there are still some times that you need to act on your toes as the days can change pretty quickly.

Mary: Early rise in the morning, schedule out the day in your mind. Get ready for other employees' chores of the day. Checking on machinery, making sure things are safe. Check on what has to be done for that day, figure out if there is time to do extra. It really depends on the season: flower season there's a lot of seeding, transplanting, watering and sales. Strawberry time there's harvesting, organizing u-picks, and sales. Vegetable time there's veg prep, veg packaging, fill orders, check on displays, and sales. At the end of the day there's a little bookwork.

#### **How do you define personal success? What steps do you take to get there?**

Susan: That too varies on the day. Personally, I like seeing when all of the organizing and planning works. I also really like seeing employees enjoy what they're doing, and seeing kids and families enjoying learning about what we do. If we can get through busy days and things go smoothly I consider that a great success. To get to these successes, I plan a lot. I try to think about every possible outcome or situation and then plan from there. I also get others to help, as I've learned you can't do it all by yourself. Most importantly, if something isn't a complete success, you can't let it get you down, rather you should figure out why it didn't work, make note of it and be willing to make the changes.

Mary: Attaining a goal and feeling good about it.

#### **What's the biggest professional/personal challenge you've had to face? And what did you learn from that experience?**

Susan: The biggest personal challenge that I've had to face was heading back to finish my education degree. After being on the farm full time for a few years it was a big decision to head back to get this degree finished. However, I felt that it was something that I could do to help improve what I do on the farm. It was a lot of work as I stayed on the farm full time while heading back to university full time, but I did learn a lot of valuable lessons from doing so. I improved my time management skills, interpersonal skills, my efficiency, plus I added to the programs which I run here on the farm. It was a busy sixteen months, but I am glad that I did decide to go back and finish it.

Mary: Probably when we moved from wholesale marketing to direct marketing. The direct marketing aspect had to be approached in different ways, there was a lot more to learn. We had to change how we did pricing, layout, communicating with consumers.

#### **Who is (or has been) your biggest influencer/mentor? What have you learned from them?**

Susan: My mom! I've watched her handle a thriving business while raising her family for the past 27 years. She's shown me what true passion looks like. Of course, my entire family has always been a

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huge influence to me. Both sides of my family are heavily involved with agriculture in one way or another. Being able to watch all of my family work at something they love so much is very inspiring.

Mary: Older farmers and other farms in the area. We also travelled to other farms in the country, seeing what they have done helped us move to where we are today. And a lot of my influence also came from being from a farming family. It's important to be proud of your products you produce. Vanda Gill was also a big influence on my decision to be actively involved in farming. And last but not least, my mother. She too grew up on a farm and was actively involved with it, she believed in farming.

#### **How has the role of women in agriculture changed throughout your career?**

Susan: Although I've always seen the women in my family involved with agriculture, I think that the roles have slightly changed. I also think that more women are playing an active role in it. I think that society is starting to see that farming has many different aspects and avenues and because of that we need more people, no matter male or female, to be involved in agriculture.

Mary: Lots! When I grew up, women took part in farming but weren't really recognized as "farmers". There were very few women in an ag rep position, it was mostly male dominated industry. Very few women were the decision makers on the farms, although they did quietly influence. Today, there's probably as many women in agriculture now as there are males. There were things that many farmers believed that girls/women shouldn't see. For example, a cow having a calf, a bull breeding a cow, now today we have women who are taking part on the farms by being large animal vets, and having a large part in decision making. When I was younger, the boys were allowed to take time off school for the agricultural fairs, but the girls never were. The girls were always allowed to weed with the boys though!

#### **Learning from our mistakes is an important, but sometimes tough, part of life. In the spirit of these profiles helping others, are you willing to share a mistake you made but taught you something important?**

Susan: The biggest mistake that I made was during my first year when I was on the farm full time. I had all of these plans to make changes, to evolve and grow, but I didn't take the time to realize that there was a lot that didn't need changing. I nearly drove myself crazy trying to reinvent the wheel. This taught me that not everything needs to be changed to move forward, sometimes a little perspective goes along way.

Mary: The biggest mistake that I made was thinking that I wasn't contributing to agriculture. I didn't think that I knew enough to support my ideas when I was younger, now however I fight for what I think is right, what I believe can be possible.

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**What's the most burning question for you right now in your career (that you think AWN members might be able to provide answers to or advice on)?**

Susan: The biggest question is how can we get the larger population to believe in/support what we do as much as we do?

Mary: The biggest question for me is where agriculture is going for this province and this country.

**How do you define agriculture?**

Susan: Agriculture is a lifestyle. It's a challenge that has obstacles you must overcome daily. It's also the greatest reward when you see the finished product of hard work.

Mary: A use of natural resources to produce a product that can be used or consumed by human or animals.

**What do you feel is a topic in agriculture and/or business that you feel isn't getting enough attention right now?**

Susan: Food security, and how we can get the real stories out.

Mary: Land issues, and food security in our province.

**What solutions, tools or processes do you think could be put in place to help advance Canadian women and specifically Canadian women in agriculture?**

Susan: I think there needs to be more options for secondary education in all provinces, and maybe even in grade schools. I think that this would help engage more youth into agriculture. Although we do already have Little Green Thumbs, 4-H and on farm programs we could and should be doing more.

Mary: I think it's the same for any young farmer: we need land, we need financial resources, we need support from government and consumers

**Do you have a piece of advice for young women starting their career in agriculture?**

Susan: Be ambitious but remain realistic. Agriculture is a busy lifestyle; you don't want to overwhelm yourself every day. Find a way to appreciate what you do. There will be days that you're overwhelmed, that everything that can go wrong does go wrong, but you need to be able to still love what you do. Lastly, always improve yourself and what you do so that you can help others achieve the same.

Mary: You need some kind of education to help you be more open-minded, it's always good to have something else on the side to help with finances. Plans are a necessity and stick to it, evaluate it

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every season, learn from your mistakes, believe in what you're doing. Always take part in the growth in what you're doing. Be very conscious of your financials.

