

Women in Leadership Positions in Canadian Agriculture

RACHAEL CHEVERIE | HORTICULTURE SPECIALIST & AGROLOGIST [ANTIGONISH, NOVA SCOTIA]

Rachael Cheverie grew up on a self-sustaining farm in eastern Prince Edward Island that produced cows, chickens, hay, and grain. Her parents grew and raised enough products to feed their 10-person family, and the farm also provided cream to a local dairy on a weekly basis.

Rachael developed an interest in the outdoors and horticulture early and joined the Eastern Kings 4-H program when she was quite young. At the time, there were few members in her area, but over time, the program's popularity grew, and one club quickly became three thriving clubs within a 30-minute radius. Rachael stayed in 4-H for many years, eventually becoming a club leader.

In the early 1990s, Rachael left home to pursue a degree in agriculture from MacDonald Campus at McGill University. During the summers, she held various agricultural jobs, which furthered her interest in the sector and led her to the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Rachael spent a year there researching Colorado potato beetle resistance management, then transferred to the University of Guelph, Ontario, to complete her research and earn a Master of Science in entomology.

In 2008, Rachael relocated to Nova Scotia and reconnected with 4-H, this time as 4-H coordinator for Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture in Antigonish and Pictou Counties. Following this one-year position, she began working with AgraPoint (now Perennia) as a horticulture specialist, a position she continues to hold today. In her role, she provides production advice to growers and commodity groups in Nova Scotia, including vegetable, cranberry, grape, greenhouse, and haskap producers. Through one-on-one assistance, she works with growers to address problems such as pest management and assist with nutrient management and site assessments for new farm land development.

When Rachael first began her agriculture career, there were very few women at many of the agriculture events she attended.

"I could count the number of women on one hand, and we tended to gravitate towards each other," she said. However, she has seen things change over the years. Today, most of the agriculture specialists at Perennia are female, and she sees many more female farm owners and operators at agricultural events.

"Over the past twenty years, I have seen more and more couples farming together, especially with smaller market farms; for example, people who grow produce specifically for sale at farmer's markets, organic farms, and smaller-scale farms," said Rachael. "In some areas, there are more women than men now."

After years of close involvement in Canada's agriculture sector, Rachael believes strongly that public education and support are the key to its continued success.

"I think we need to do a much better job with educating the public about where their food comes from. We need to support local producers to ensure we continue to have a safe local food source. It's important to keep agriculture land as agriculture land, so we need to be proactive about connecting with and supporting local producers and really knowing where your food comes from."