

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WOMAN FARMER

The Schoonmaker Legacy

The United Nations declared 2026 the International Year of the Woman Farmer, casting the spotlight on the essential roles women play across the worldwide agriculture and food system, from production to trade. This project highlights women's influence on food security, nutrition, and economic resilience, and encourages closing the gender gap to improve women's livelihoods globally.



Saunderskill Farms, located in Ulster County, has a rich history of female leadership and influence. With its acreage dotted with high quality flowers, fruits and vegetables, history runs deep here, with generations of Schoonmaker men and women working

together to make this Accord, NY farm successful. Named for a tributary of the Rondout Creek, it is one of the few farms in the nation to have received the rare Tricentennial Award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Returning home full time this February, Renee Ciardi is 12th-generation and credits the contributions of family matriarchs for keeping this farming legacy alive and well. "Just looking at our collective experience, I think it takes powerful women to support great men," said Renee. "My grandfather credits my great great grandmother for keeping the farm going when her husband was thrown from a horse and killed suddenly at 45 years old. In the following generation, Helen Schoonmaker, my great grandmother, used her sharp business skills to balance her husband's social ambitions."

Renee channeled her grandmother in her 10 years of service with NY Farm Bureau serving as both coordinator of the Young Farmers and Ranchers Program and manager of seven counties in the Hudson Valley. A 1999 recipient of the NYS Ag Society's Distinguished Service Citation, Alice Schoonmaker was a tireless and vocal advocate for agriculture and a dedicated community servant. "Among many things, she taught me the lost art of being an active board member," said Renee, "which was drilled home to me by my Uncle David here in Ulster County. This was a classic involvement story. I missed a Farm Bureau meeting and soon found myself as a new board member!"

Now as a full-time grower, Renee feels her mother most closely. "With my hands in the dirt planting, I feel my mother," said Renee. "She was the dreamer in my parents' business partnership that launched the Saunderskill Farm Market in 1998.

Her positive attitude and creativity were strong influences on me. We still talk about operating in 'Cathy fashion.' I credit my sister Jennifer for stepping up to run the market during my mother's illness. Today she and my brother-in-law Ryan Shea work side-by-side."



While her father Daniel and uncle are still active, Renee has joined her cousin Ryan in managing the home farm which includes both the retail greenhouses, u-pick and wholesale enterprises. "Historically we operated a large wholesale business, shipping vegetables to New Jersey and multiple Price Chopper stores," said Renee. "But as my dad and uncle are quick to say, we had to deflate the balloon to properly manage the business. Now we're ready to inflate again."

What advice does Renee have for aspiring female agriculturalists?

1. "Believe in yourself and don't be afraid to make mistakes. You will learn from them." Renee credits both Farm Bureau and LEAD NY for helping to build her confidence. "They've exposed me to so many types of people and businesses. Their stories have been hugely influential in shaping my path.
2. "On the lighter side and a definite challenge for women in agriculture, remain sensitive to where restroom facilities are located!"

