

2012 Iowa Master Farm Homemakers Guild Inductees

Who is a Master Farm Homemaker? She's someone who knows what needs to be done in the home, around the farm and in the community. Wallace Farmer once again recognizes four outstanding Iowa women as Iowa Master Farm Homemakers.

For more than 70 years, Wallace Farmer has helped sponsor the Master Farm Homemaker awards, which recognize women for their work and success in caring for family, the farm, and home, and devoting time to volunteer and support their community. These women represent the highest values in rural life.

Since the Master Farm Homemaker program began in 1928 as a national organization, the Iowa Chapter belongs to the national organization, which is made up from winners each year from many states.

Recipients for 2012 are Marylou Ahrens, Osage; Maryella Johnson, Keokuk; Tamera Secor, Fort Dodge; and Judy Tonderum, Maquoketa. All of these women embody the term "master homemaker." They have kept the "home fires burning," nurtured their children into successful adults, helped manage the farm with their husbands, and still found time to volunteer at school, church, 4-H, farm and civic organizations, and much more.

Maryella Johnson - IMFH Class of 2012

Lee County

In 1963, six years before FFA programs nationwide admitted women, Maryella Johnson of Lee County was pushing for acceptance in vocational agriculture classes at Central Lee High School. The school now has one of the biggest FFA programs in Iowa. "I was the first girl at Central Lee to take vo-ag," Maryella says.

Ever since, she's served as an agricultural leader in the area near Keokuk, in Iowa's southeast corner. Her accomplishments have earned Maryella the 2012 Master Farm Homemaker Award. She served on the Lee County Extension Council for 12 years, was a Farm Service Agency CRP specialist for 11 years, and spoke on ag-related issues. She hosted Farm Wife News magazine and editor "Nettie" Godlike on National Ag Day and was a member of CowBelles, which organized the Ag Day luncheon to unite rural and urban women in learning about agriculture. Today, she remains active in the United Methodist Church just down the road from the family farm.

Following family tradition in ag education, she earned a place in the 4-H Hall of Fame last year. "I followed my mother and older sister," she notes. "We're a strong 4-H family." This includes leading the local Jolly M's 4-H chapter, serving as project leader, judging livestock contests, and helping with the club float and bake sale, selling 660 dozen snickerdoodle cookies in 2010. "I've always been connected with 4-H."

Maryella's bond to ag education doesn't stop with 4-H. She's played a vital role teaching students about farming, especially in Keokuk where there is no FFA program. In 1984 she established School on the Farm to teach first graders where food and fiber come from. This changed in 1993 when she contacted first grader teacher Nancy Martin and began First Grader Outdoor Classroom. She told Martin, "You need to come out to see what farming is really like."

From 1984 to 1993, Maryella led most of the tours. "It was mom taking the students around, one class at a time for a week," says her daughter, Catherine. In 1993, Farm Bureau, Iowa State University Extension, and local FFA and 4-H chapters began helping, allowing nine stations and all first grade classes at once - sometimes a total of 200 students. The kids learn where their food comes from.

The program spread beyond Keokuk, and earned the Farm Bureau's Farm to City Award in 1995. "It's grown to cover every school in the county," Maryella says. "Such activities are happening all over the state. I want children to realize the grocery store puts food on the shelf and in the meat case, but that's not where it's produced," she says. "Kids know what a Big Mac is, but they need to learn who provides the beef."

Her family consists of husband Neil, daughter Catherine, sons Christopher and Brian, and seven grandsons. Maryella stays dedicated, sewing dresses for family weddings and assisting Neil on the 1,000 acres they farm. Neil and I both grew up on dairy farms," she notes. Both got started in 4-H showing Holsteins at the Lee County Fair. "That's how we met," Neil says, noting a picture of the two in the local paper. "We were showing against each other."

They raised dairy cattle until 1976 and beef until five years ago. Now it's only corn and soybeans, and Maryella helps make key marketing decisions. She stays informed by reading and even visited the Chicago Board of Trade. Neil says her advice has been profitable. "She's every bit as good at marketing as I am," he says. "She doesn't do any worse than the professionals." Maryella also enjoys running machinery.

Supporting her husband extends beyond the farm. Neil is a volunteer firefighter, and Maryella frequently helps the department with fundraisers. "We recently had a cookie fundraiser to raise money for new radios," she says. "I assist the fire department whenever I can."

While Neil was a member of the Iowa Cattlemen's Association, Maryella was a member of the local CowBelles and took care of the livestock. If Neil overlooked a sick cow or calf, she could spot it in the herd. "She has more cow-sense in her little pinky than some cattlemen do in their whole body," Neil says. Ever since they met while showing Holsteins in 4-H years ago, this couple has been helping one another on and off the farm. "We're like a wheel and an axle," Maryella says. "Both are important, but if you don't have them together you won't go down the road."

Marylou Ahrens - IMFH Class of 2012

Mitchell County

When Marylou and Don Ahrens moved to his family's farm near the northern Iowa town of Osage in 1980, they didn't know what was in store. Getting through the 80's involved Marylou's dietary consulting business, operating the East End Restaurant in St. Ansgar, selling Pioneer seed, and raising three children while farming. "We got through the 80's," Don says. "It was a zoo."

Without Marylou, Don says it would have been impossible to operate the seed business in spring. While he was planting, she handled billing and supplies. "I think both of us have loaded seed in Sunday suits," she says. Don notes this involved running a forklift. "Marylou could load seed with a forklift as well as I could."

Marylou is a 2012 Iowa Master Farm Homemaker award winner. This follows her and Don's 2006 Master Farmer award and the Dietetic Association's GEM award.

Marylou's 35 years as a dietician involved working with senior nutrition programs, hospital patients, diabetic education programs and community education. Retirement in 2005 allowed her to broaden her horizons in nutrition and ag education. National FFA asked her and Don to develop a national pilot project, Learners to Leaders, funded by Smithfield Foods, Murphy Brown and the National FFA Organization. For two years, they provided 25 disadvantaged FFA members leadership training.

While most of these students came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, they are vital to small towns. "These are students who probably will remain in their

communities,” Don says. “We’ll need them to step up and provide leadership.” The program was very successful, and all students attended two or four year colleges.

The couple educated college students during the Ag Weekend Experience. Starting in 2005 AWE toured local farms and businesses, giving ag students with urban backgrounds hands-on farm experience. One was a Ph.D. student in corn genetics. “She had never been on a farm,” Marylou says. “She’d been in a research lab a lot.”

Since 2005, Don and Marylou also host Farm Safety Day Camp annually. Two FFA chapters, ISU Extension, Farm Bureau members, the Osage Fire Department, and ambulance and police personnel help teach farm injury prevention to 120 to 150 elementary students. It covers everything from machinery to chemical safety, and involves a speaker injured in a farm accident. To get students’ attention, one introduces himself by removing his prosthetic leg; the result of an auger related injury.

Marylou serves as volunteer coordinator for the nonprofit Shop on State in Osage. The shop provides inexpensive used items to the community and has 45 volunteer workers. The organization distributed \$90,000 in grants to various nonprofits the past three years.

Marylou’s service reaches other countries, including Cuba and Russia, as part of the initial I-LEAD class sponsored by the Iowa Corn Growers. She participated in a trade mission to sell dried distillers grains to the Cuban government. She and Don also hosted a Russian farmer for a month on their farm, as he studied Iowa agriculture, before visiting his farm in Russia.

Between Don and Marylou; their children, Renee, Brad and Lisa; and their children’s spouses, there are 10 bachelor degrees, six master’s degrees, and three doctorates. Don and Marylou, who maintain their respective licenses as certified crop adviser and registered dietitian, were key influences. “We didn’t give our kids roots; we gave them wings,” Don says.

Although their children live in Washington, D.C.; Clive, Iowa; and Tacoma, Washington, everyone comes home for a week at harvest. Don and Marylou built a living space above their seed office. “It’s a great place for us,” Marylou says. “We give the group the entire house.”

Marylou makes her family a priority. Since retiring from consulting, Marylou has been able to spend several weeks with each family with the arrival of new grandchildren. “We’ve been blessed with six grandchildren born in the last five years,” she says. “You get to know the little ones and in-laws very well. They are great!”

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Tammi Secor - IMFH Class of 2012

Webster County

The sentimental value of the Iowa Master Farm Homemaker Award means a lot to the Secor Family. Tammi Secor is one of four winners of the award for 2012 and her roots run deep.

Tammi and husband Bill Jr. farm north of Fort Dodge. It's a unique family farming operation, founded by Bill's dad, the late Bill Decor Sr., a well known farmer and community leader. Bill Jr.'s mother, Carolyn, was named a Master Farm Homemaker by Wallaces Farmer in 1972. For many years, Bill Sr. accompanied his wife to the annual Iowa Master Farm Homemaker Awards Day in Des Moines, to honor Carolyn and her sister Harriet Smith, who received the award in 1968.

After Carolyn died in 1980 Bill Sr. continued to come to Des Moines for the annual awards day, accompanied by family members, honoring each new class of Master Farm Homemakers. After Bill Sr. passed away a few years ago, his daughter Janet has continued to attend, honoring the memory of her mother, father, and aunt.

The newest winner, Tammi, is another member of this family devoted to the betterment of agriculture and community. Tammi and Bill Jr. now farm with Robert, the oldest of their three grown children. When viewing the 7 acres of grapes amid the sea of corn and soybeans growing in Webster County, it shows the family proves its ability to innovate and diversify.

The farm features a modern grain handling and storage setup. The Secors farm about 3,000 acres of corn and soybeans. So where did those grapes come from?

The Secors raised hogs from 1980 to 2009. The hog buildings are now gone, as the vineyard was planted in 2007 to replace the hog enterprise. The family is building a winery on the end of their machine shed to squeeze more from the value added grape growing enterprise. When they planted the vineyard, Tammi was the working supervisor of the crew. Once the planting was completed, she spent many hours that first year watering and keeping a watchful eye on her new crop.

Music is a shared interest of this family, and they are accomplished musicians. Tammi plays violin and Bill plays cello and they've performed in the Fort Dodge Symphony Orchestra for many years. The family string quartet provides music for weddings in the Fort Dodge area.

When the family had hogs, Tammi helped but prefers the grape enterprise now, "Grape production does require more work than you realize," she says, "but it's something we all enjoy doing together." She drives the combine at harvest when needed and helps Bill with bookkeeping. Tammi is an adjunct professor of math at Iowa Central Community College. She was a full-time teacher from 1981 to 1991 in the Fort Dodge school system.

Tami encouraged her children to study abroad. Tammi and Bill have hosted elementary school classes at the farm to learn about agriculture. Tammi has also taught Ag in the Classroom for elementary students. She's active in church activities, sharing her musical talents. Tammi and Bill have traveled abroad and have also welcomed foreign visitors into their home.

Tammi's concern for people and her work on community and church projects in her trustworthy, responsible way were a great example to her children, "says her former pastor, Rev. Paul Opsahl. "Her love and skill as a homemaker, supportive spouse and loving mother is a blessing to her family and community."

The Secors' son Robert and his wife, Megan, both Iowa State University horticulture grads, live nearby. Daughter Anne, a Purdue graduate in food science, earned her master's at Washington State University in May and is interning at Gallo Winery in California. Daughter Amanda is a senior at St. Olaf College, studying music.

Farm life has always been important to Judy Tonderum, a 2012 Iowa Master Farm Homemaker Award winner from Maquoketa. Raised on a farm in Jackson County in eastern Iowa, she has fond memories as a 4-H member beginning when she was 10 years old. Later, as the mother of four, she devoted 14 years to supporting their 4-H activities and 16 years as a leader of their club.

Her children excelled in 4-H, and she eventually was hired as coordinator for 4-H and youth at the Jackson County Extension. For 17 years she enjoyed working with the 4-H'ers and their families. She started a number of programs and activities, helping many youth to achieve success in 4-H and in life. "I was fortunate to acquire on-the-job education from Iowa State University specialists," says Judy. She's judged both 4-H and open classes for years at county fairs and has judged at the Iowa State Fair.

After leaving Extension employment, she served on the County Extension Council. Elected to the Jackson County Fair Board in 1991, she's still a member and is very active in helping build that county fair into one of the state's best. Judy helps research and writes the fair book each year. She began a Memorial Bench program at the fairgrounds, a wonderful remembrance of past fair-goers and families who support the fair.

She developed a barn quilt competition showcasing the talents of many people throughout the county. The quilt patterns are unique, made by people in each community and displayed on buildings at the county fairgrounds. "This is a way to get each community throughout our county involved in the fair so they realize this is indeed their fair," she explains.

Judy helped start the Master Gardener program in Jackson County, was in the first class and served as president. She's devoted many hours to volunteer projects for community gardens and landscapes, and co-hosts a gardening program on a local radio station twice a month. Judy helped start a farmers market in Maquoketa this year, a new venue for people to buy locally grown vegetables, fruits and homemade products. She helps lead the women's group at Community Church of Christ in Maquoketa. For the past decade her home has been part of an annual Holiday House tour, a church fundraiser open to the public.

Judy's husband, Harlan, died in 2011 and was an Iowa Master Farmer. He too was a 4-H parent, leader and supporter. "I was very glad to write many scholarship recommendations for 4-H'ers in Jackson County," says Judy "I like to think I had at least a small influence on each and every member's thinking in regard to life's values and personal integrity. I'm so glad to have had 4-H be a part of my life as a youth as well as an adult."

Judy was involved in the day-to-day operation of the farm with Harlan. She raised her family to be very active and caring citizens. Her grandchildren are a big part of her life. Her flowers and vegetables reflect her love for gardening, and she shares her horticultural knowledge and bounty of vegetables and flowers with others.

Letters supporting Judy's nomination for the Master Farm Homemaker Award describe her as one of the most capable, best-organized, hardworking people who do things for the good of the community. "She's spent countless hours volunteering, is very dependable and trustworthy, and has served on various county and area civic boards," says Lanny Simpson, manager of the Jackson County Fair.

Retired from the U.S. Postal Service as a rural mail carrier, Judy works in her yard and garden, where she has flower beds and a bountiful garden from which she preserves fruits and vegetables. For the devotion she has given to Jackson County agriculture and her community, she was recently presented the 2012 Friends of Agriculture Public Service Award. She is a member of the Iowa 4-H Hall of Fame.

