

Essential Tools and Equipment for the Small Farm

Contributing editor Carol Ekarius shares her list of essential tools and equipment that every farm should have. Be sure you have the right stuff.

by Carol Ekarius

About the Author:

Carol Ekarius is a HF contributing editor, hobby rancher and author of many books, including *Small-Scale Livestock Farming* (Storey Books) and *Storey's Guide to Raising Sheep*. In 1981, Ken and I made our first move out of town. We rented a log house on 40 acres, with a sub-irrigated pasture. We quickly began acquiring livestock, and trying our hands at gardening. But when we moved to the country, we were both driving cars that were quite unsuitable for our ¾-mile-long, rutted, two-track driveway, and our entire tool collection consisted of some odds-and-ends hand tools that fit in a plastic fishing tackle box. We never looked back, and wouldn't dream of returning to town life, but over the years we have acquired a variety of tools and equipment that makes our life on the farm a whole lot easier!

My dad (a guy who could build anything, from any kind of material—wood, concrete, metal ...) taught us to treat tools as an important investment, so I'll offer up his advice: Take your time acquiring your tools (and equipment), but get the best quality you can afford and they will serve you for years. Don't make the mistake of buying every little thing you see; unless you are fabulously wealthy, you can quickly break the bank on stuff that doesn't get used and ultimately takes up valuable storage space, gets thrown away, or sold at a garage sale for pennies on the dollar. For a tool or implement that will only be used a few times, consider renting it—or bartering for its use with a neighbor.

If you have recently plunged into rural living, or are thinking of taking the dive, here's my list of items that will help you get started.

1. Pickup truck: Before we bought our indispensable pickup, we bought an old Chevy Blazer, but what we quickly realized is that an SUV is not, and never will be, a pickup. Pickups are probably the most versatile and useful long-term investment you can make for your farm. They are essential for hauling everything from building supplies to feed, and firewood to sod. Teamed with a trailer (see item 3), you can move livestock and much more. Although a pickup is a big investment, when well cared for (remember to change that oil every 3,500 miles) it is an investment that can last for decades, and good used pickups can often be bought at a reasonable price.

Add a basic topper to your pickup and you can haul items that need to be kept dry, use the truck for camping, or haul small animals. We've gotten some entertaining looks at gas stations and other stops over the years, when the topper held a menagerie. Some of my favorites were the time we were driving 30 rather-large turkeys to the poultry processing plant, or the time we had half a dozen ducks and geese, and several big rabbits, hanging out in the back. Goats, sheep, and small pigs are also easily moved under the topper.

2. Utility vehicle/Compact tractor: Even if you dream of working your land with animals, a tractor or farm utility vehicle (an ATV, or a cargo-ATV, often called a "ute") is a practical thing to have. Although we like to use our donkeys for packing firewood when time permits, winter often finds us (well, maybe I should say Ken) out with the ATV, equipped with its own trailer, bringing in wood.

Compact tractors (see "Taking on a Tractor," December/January 2004 issue) are versatile pieces of equipment that are perfect for small farms. Depending on the attachments you have, they can do just about anything: mowing acres of lawn, digging a foundation, baling hay, pushing snow, setting fence posts; it's all possible with a compact tractor.

For those in the under 60-acre category, a ute (see "Small-Farm Utility Vehicles" October/ November 2003 issue) will often do all the work you need done, for less investment than a tractor, and manufacturers now make attachments ranging from front-end loader buckets to manure spreaders, that are specially designed to work with these rigs. The fat tires, light weight, and low center of gravity make these units easy on the land. If money is not a big issue, and you have a larger piece of land (say 160 acres or more), having both a tractor and farm utility vehicle is the way to go. The tractor can do heavy work, like baling hay, but the utility vehicle can haul supplies, or get you across the farm quickly to move a paddock fence, or check on the stock and crops.

Two-wheel drive trucks, tractors, and utility vehicles are OK for flat ground that's not too muddy, but if you're in hilly terrain,

a snowy climate, or tend to have frequent muddy conditions, invest the extra money up front in 4-wheel drive.

3. Livestock trailer (see "Got Trailer?"): If you intend to have large livestock (horses, cows, llamas, yaks ...), plan on getting a stock trailer. We don't actually use our trailer that frequently for hauling livestock, but I still consider it one of the best investments we've made in 20-some years of buying. When we do need to haul our animals, we don't have to try to borrow or rent a trailer, and in between animal trips, we have used it to haul firewood, feed, hay and lumber. During the several household moves we've made since we purchased our trailer, it has done duty as a moving van, hauling furniture and household items. And, it often serves as a temporary storage shed. Although two-horse trailers are readily available, opt for a bigger trailer that can accommodate four animals or more.

The Must-Have Shopping List

- Pickup truck
- Tractor and/or utility vehicle
- Livestock trailer
- Handcart
- Manure spreader
- Composter
- Circular saw
- Battery operated drill/driver
- Tape measures
- Hammers
- Electrician's pliers
- Socket set
- Adjustable wrenches
- Screwdrivers
- Flat and pointed spades
- Digging fork
- Collinear hoe
- Fence-post driver
- Fence pliers
- Fence tester
- Pocketknife
- Leatherman all-in-one tool
- Heavy-duty flashlight
- Hoses
- Digging bar

4. Handcarts: This is the first tool I would invest in! Priced between \$100 and \$400 depending on capacity, they are a bargain that's hard to beat. They are lightweight, yet they carry big loads easily. Unlike their single-wheeled cousins, they are sturdy and steady over uneven ground, or through mud or snow, and they are just plain hard to tip. Best of all, they are balanced in such a way as to be easy on the back. Some carts come with an accessory that converts them to a trailer for pulling behind a ute or small tractor.

We have used our carts for everything around the farm. In the garden or yard, they're great for moving topsoil, plants, seed, fertilizer or tools. In the barn, they are handy for cleaning up small piles of manure, or dragging tack from point A to point B. They are perfectly sized for moving a bale of hay, or a few 50-pound bags of feed. We have also brought newborn calves easily from field to barn in bad weather, with mama tagging along right next to the cart.

5. Manure spreader: If you are going to have any livestock, sooner or later you need a manure spreader. Even if your animals will spend most of their time on pasture, piles of manure accumulate, and spreading this manure thinly over the land improves soil fertility, reduces contaminated runoff, and helps keep fly numbers down. Several manufacturers have come up with compact manure spreaders that are ideal for small farms (see "Tools of the Trade" on page 86). The tractor-driven units carry more manure in one trip, and are probably the best way to go if you have a significant number of animals that are kept in the barn regularly. The ATV units are good for operations with only a few animals stabled regularly, or with a larger herd that is out on pasture most of the time.

6. Composter: I love composting. It's one of the most environmentally friendly practices: reducing the waste going to landfills and incinerators, while at the same time feeding soil and plants. How can anybody not compost?

You can make a homemade compost box, but there are an assortment of commercial units available, starting at about \$25 for a perforated polyethylene sheet that creates a 32-inch diameter bin, and running as high as several hundred dollars for some of the largest capacity tumbling composters. The tumbling units are attractive for folks with small yards, and are easy to use; they generally yield useable compost the quickest, because they make mixing and aerating easy. They are also animal resistant, reducing worries about rodents and other unwanted visitors. For do-it-yourselfers, check local recycling offices for construction plans—many of which use recycled materials, like tires or pallets. (Pick up a container of worms in the spring at your local bait supplier, and add them to your compost pile or bin to speed things up even more.)

7. Electric tools: There are dozens of electric power tools available at hardware and home stores, but there are two must-haves for any type of around-the-farm construction project: 1.) A circular saw; and 2.) A drill/driver (preferably the rechargeable battery operated type). Need to build your own compost bin? Out comes the saw and drill. Hanging a new barn door? Get the saw and the drill.

You'll find these two versatile tools are useful for myriad projects, so invest in the best heavy-duty models you can afford. If you plan to do lots of construction and remodeling (thinking about that sunroom addition on the house, or that new barn?), consider adding a heavy-duty reciprocating saw to the electric-tool collection.

8. Hand tools: Every farm needs a variety of hand tools. Companies like Sears (with its line of Craftsman tools) and Snap-On (available at many auto parts stores) make hand tools that will last for generations, and that come with a lifetime warranty to prove it. First on my list of items to purchase: A 25-foot and a 100-foot tape measure; a good claw hammer with a comfortable grip; electrician's pliers; a socket and driver set; adjustable wrenches in several sizes; a screwdriver set with both regular and Phillips head drivers.

9. Garden tools: Every small farm needs a flat spade and a pointed spade for digging. A good digging fork is a multipurpose tool, used for breaking up and turning soil in the garden, harvesting, and for manure cleanup around the barn. My preference for hoes is the collinear hoe designed by gardening guru Eliot Coleman, and available from Johnny's Selected Seeds. This style of hoe takes the "back-breaking" out of weed control, by allowing you to stand straight up while you work.

10. Fencing tools: Farms and fences go hand-in-hand. Plan on purchasing a fence-post driver. A driver is a heavy iron tube that goes over the top of a T-post, and that has handles on the side. You use it to pound the post into the ground. A pair of fence pliers is a great, and fairly inexpensive, specialty tool to have. We are fans of electric fences—they are economical, efficient and safe—but when you have an electric fence, you need a fence tester.

11. Miscellaneous: We always carry pocketknives when out working, and a "Leatherman" type is a handy all-in-one tool. Heavy-duty flashlights are a must when the lights go out during a heavy storm, or when you need to tend to a livestock emergency in the pasture at 2 am. Garden hoses are a must, but when buying, purchase the longest and strongest available (fall is a great time to find really good buys on garden hoses). The good ones come with long-term guarantees (often 25 years or lifetime), and we save the guarantee card with the receipt stapled to it, because under farm-use conditions that "lifetime" turns out to be only a few years. The last miscellaneous tool on the list is a digging bar. We use ours for breaking ice in winter; for digging large rocks out of the garden, construction sites, or fence holes; and for prying apart incorrigible packages!

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