

Hobby Farmer's Bag of Tricks

Put these veteran farmers' tips to work on your hobby farm—no rabbit or top-hat required.

Courtesy Christopher Green

Dave Holderread keeps his flocks safe from predators by enclosing them in a predator-proof shelter each night. Every hobby farmer, from neophyte to old-timer, has a metaphorical bag of tricks: a diverse collection of clever strategies, techniques and tools that help us save time, frustration, money, or even life and limb while caring for our livestock, crops and farms.

When we start out as farmers, our bags tend to be on the skinny side (I know mine was), and the new tricks we learn often dazzle us into "Wow, I never thought to try that before!" moments. But soon, our bags fatten up with a passel of tricks gleaned from books, ag magazines, websites, classes, other farmers and a steady diet of first-hand, hard-earned, often trial-and-error experiences. Enough time goes by, and we may come to take our own oft-used methods for granted—their dazzle dims—and even think our bags are full. Like Mary Poppins's bottomless carpet bag, though, a farmer's bag of tricks always has room for more.

We asked 10 farmers across the United States to dip into their own bags and pull out a favorite trick to share. Feel free to help yourself to whatever tricky technique or tool might fit your farm. (I plan to do the same.) Who knows? The results could be pure magic

1. Stick to a Routine

"People always ask me how I can work full time and still take care of a farm, but because I grew up on one and realize how things work, I can be really efficient. Most important—I do the same routine every day. Horses love a routine, and when they can anticipate what comes next, it makes things easy and then usually nothing will happen to make me late for work. One time, though, the neighbor's pigs escaped and tried to run into the horse barn. I'm running around screaming at these big pigs, 'You're not going into my barn!' until finally the owner came and got them. I was late for work that day."

—Pam Gras works as an occupational therapist and lives in a converted barn home on 6-acre Clearwater Farm in Wakefield, N.H., with her golden retriever, three cats and four horses (who reside in their own barn).

2. Know Your Preferences and Your Pigs

"Get to know your pigs, and let them get to know you. Talk to your pigs and announce your presence when you are approaching their pens. They will learn to recognize your voice and will feel safe. Don't intentionally make loud noises or upset them, as they will shy away from you next time you come around. When you are done handling them, give them a bit of food as a reward.

"Pigs come in all shapes, sizes and colors. Choosing a pig [breed] that matches not only your husbandry methods but also your personal preference is important. Pigs chosen for preference will bring you a sense of pride, and you will take better care of them. While preference is important, try to be objective with your requirements. Many people have color preference or size preference. Choose the breed that matches your personality, but also choose the best animals in that breed."

—Bret Kortie is the co-rancher, along with Arie McFarlen, PhD (author of *Hobby Farms Pigs*), of Maveric Heritage Ranch Co. in South Dakota, a ranch dedicated to saving and promoting endangered livestock breeds.

Courtesy George Tanley

Cher Boisvert-Tanley suggests bribing your animals into cooperation.

3. Bribe Your Cattle with Bread

"When it's time to work our cattle and calves, we just call them into the corral from their 53-acre pasture. What persuades them to come in? Inexpensive bread and buns from the day-old bread store—an irresistible treat! We can safely separate

cattle by tossing bread to other areas, and it's invaluable for keeping mama cow busy while we're doctoring or tagging her baby. True safety in the field! During our farm tours, the children learn the 'cattle call' and are delighted to see the cows running in from the fields to eat bread from their hands."

—Cher Boisvert-Tanley, a retired chiropractor and rodeo doctor, runs Chestnut Hill Ranch Bed & Breakfast in Tennessee with her husband, George. Along with tending to their animals, the hard-working couple hosts weddings, farm tours and other events.

4. Herd Ducks with a Light-wand

"To protect ducks from nocturnal predators such as raccoons, foxes, bobcats, coyotes, skunks and owls, they should be locked in a predator-proof enclosure every night. In many locales, the safest strategy is to put them inside at least a half-hour before dark. If you're tardy putting them in their nighttime quarters, ducks can range a fair distance from home since they're enthusiastic foragers of earthworms and other delicacies that emerge at nightfall. [If this happens,] a good flashlight with a strong beam can be used as a light-wand to herd them back to their enclosure. By shining the light several feet behind the ducks, you can guide them to their quarters (but don't shine the light directly at them, as this can cause panic and scattering). With the right flashlight, good technique and a little practice, you can gather a scattered flock of foraging ducks from several acres in just a few minutes."

—Dave Holderread is the author of *Storey's Guide to Raising Ducks* (2000) and *The Book of Geese: A Complete Guide to Raising the Home Flock* (Hen House Publishing, 1981). He and his wife, Millie, raise more than 45 waterfowl breeds and varieties at Holderread Waterfowl Farm & Preservation Center in Corvallis, Ore.

5. Paint Your Cows

"To help me identify cattle out in the field, I just spray them with Quik Shot Livestock Marking Paint, which comes in bright fluorescent colors. If I have someone new do chores for me, this helps them, too, because to someone who doesn't know the herd, they all look alike. I might number the cows, or if the cow is named Evie, I might spray an E on her. It's also an easy way to identify an animal going off to calve, or to keep track of one coming into heat. I've even had neighbors stop and say, 'It looks like #3 is going to be calving soon.' One time, I had this fantastic advertising idea: I'd put a letter on each animal, and my cows would be walking billboards. But then my neighbors asked me, 'What's TEA FEBE?' They were supposed to spell out EAT BEEF! Cows don't know how to spell ... or do they?"

—Kathi Jurkowski has raised Belted Galloway cattle on Klover Korners Farm in Rockton, Ill., for more than 20 years. She urges hobby farmers to learn more about this hardy old Scottish breed and—sorry, cows—energy-efficient converter of grass to tasty, tender beef at www.beltie.org.