



## Start a Farm-sitting Business

**Is there a sitter on the farm? Give traveling pet owners peace of mind with your farm-based pet-sitting operation.**

By Cherie Langlois

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Kathy Hightshoe, of Foristell, Mo., wanted some ducks.

Specifically, she wanted a flock of ducks to use as surrogate sheep so she could practice herding with her two Border Collies.

She and her husband, Bob, both lifelong animal lovers, lived on a farm with 15 acres—ample room for creatures large and small; in fact, their menagerie already included Missouri Fox Trotter horses, mules and chickens. If you're hiring a sitter, download a copy of our Farm-sitting Checklist to help prepare you and your farm sitter. Kathy, keen to acquire more animals, thought ducks would be another great addition, but when she brought up the subject with Bob, he balked.

“He told me, ‘We already have so many animals, we can never go anywhere. We spend so much time caring for them, we couldn’t possibly find anyone to take over so we could go on vacation,’” recalls Kathy.

“Right then I had a lightbulb moment. I said, ‘You know, I bet other people in this area have the same problem—I bet I could start a business taking care of other peoples’ dogs and horses.’ My poor husband shook his head in defeat, saying something about me being in the ‘funny farm.’ I thought that was brilliant and I immediately decided to name my business Funny Farm Barn Care.”

### A Brief History of Farm Sitting

Kathy hasn’t been the only country woman to experience this particular flash-of-the-lightbulb moment.

After Christina Wright of Joelton, Tenn., found herself jobless in the aftermath of a divorce, she started brainstorming ways to earn a living. She had a degree in animal science from Middle Tennessee State University and experience working for a small animal veterinarian, plus she’d also done some casual farm sitting for friends and acquaintances; working with animals seemed a given.

“I’ve always loved and owned horses, so in the beginning I wanted to do boarding,” says Christina. “Unfortunately, there wasn’t much of a market for it, but I started getting calls about kenneling dogs.”

In 2001, she launched Town & Country Farm & Pet Sitter to provide pet and farm sitting for dogs, cats, horses, sheep and other animals.

Working together fulltime, she and her husband, James, also board dogs and horses on their 13-acre farm, which serves as home-sweet-home to their own animal family of five horses, two dogs, two cats, chickens and a couple of exotic birds.

As Patti J. Moran recounts in her book *Pet Sitting for Profit*, pet sitting has come a long way since she opened her own business in 1983.

Back then, pet sitters were a rarity and a novelty, eliciting amused reactions of “You’re a what?” When pet or livestock owners took a vacation or business trip sans critters, they had to rely on kennels, neighbors, relatives, friends or the kid next door to take over—with sometimes dire consequences if that kid forgot to feed the dogs or Aunt Rose got kicked by the horse. (As a farm sitter travelling to often-times unfamiliar rural areas alone, you need to be aware of a few farm-sitting safety tips)

This changed during the 1990s, however, as the pet-sitting market blossomed and more people discovered the benefits of having someone experienced with animal care come to their home to mind their furry or feathered friends.



Back then, few sitters specialized in livestock, but more farm sitters have popped up in recent years; the pet-sitting profession as a whole continues to grow despite travel-industry catastrophes such as 9/11 and recently soaring gas prices.

In December 2007, the educational pet sitter's organization Pet Sitters International boasted some 7,900 members.

#### A Woman's Work?

Interestingly, according to Moran's book, the pet-sitting field thus far has lured way more women than men.

Why the bias? Like Kathy and Christina, many women find working from home and being their own boss an extremely attractive alternative, especially when they have children—or a farm bursting with animals and crops to nurture.

A pet- or farm-sitting business offers amazing flexibility: You control how many clients you accept (depending on whether you can say "no"), your fees, how large a service area to cover, what types of animals you tend and, to an extent, what time you make your visits.

Would you prefer to sit part-time? Stay close to home? Specialize in cats because you're phobic about dogs? Schedule pet-sitting visits before your husband heads to work and after he comes home so you can spend the day with your kids? No problem.

Pet or farm sitting offers other perks, too, like the novelty—and challenge—of tending different creatures with distinct personalities in diverse settings. In other words, as a pet sitter, you can pretty much kiss monotony goodbye; no two days will be exactly the same.

There's also the intense satisfaction of caring for animals well and making them feel as happy and stress-free as possible in their owners' absence.

Face it: We're women and we like to nurture things.

"I love being able to take care of the pets just the way their owners would and I love helping a client with a behavior problem they might be having with their pet," says Kathy.

Christina recalls one female Weimaraner that arrived for a stay at their little kennel and promptly went on a hunger strike. She brought the dog into the kitchen and plied her with dog-food sandwiches, giving the pouting pooch a quarter at a time until her appetite revived.

On another pet-sitting occasion, making one lonely kitty happy involved literally sitting with the cat twice a day and watching TV together. Christina says her greatest joy is when a dog runs back to say goodbye to her after its owner arrives to pick it up following a long stay.

"I call it getting the doggy endorsement," she laughs.

See what a sample farm sitting chore list looks like.

Page 1 | 2

About the Author: Cherie Langlois is a Washington-based hobby farmer, freelance writer, and former zookeeper who enjoys doing a bit of farm and pet sitting on the side for friends and relatives.