



Sun Up to Sun Down

Hobby farmers get some time-management tips; learn the skills that enable us to effectively and efficiently manage farm life on a daily basis.

By Lisa Kivirist

Hobby farming requires a range of muscles, most of the physical variety.

Arm muscles feel tender after unloading a truckload of straw bales into the barn.

An active day planting the spring garden after we sat indoors most of the winter prompts us to nurture our bodies with a rekindling soak in a hot bath. The more we work these muscles, the stronger they grow and the better we can handle our farm duties. [Jump to Lisa's 5 Tips for Time Management >>](#)

Seasoned Time-management Tips

The best advice hails from those who are literally in the field.

Here's some advice from experienced women farmers around the country: Zoë Bradbury
Groundswell Farm, Oregon

I'm passionate about promoting a next generation of young farmers. Through my writing, I strive to share real-life experiences from my own farm to shed light on the challenges and rewards that face all of us who have made the decision to coax a living from the soil.

As a young farmer in my first season, the to-do lists are endless and time is always in short supply.

What I've learned is that the key to pulling it off lies in designing good systems on the farm—from irrigation to harvest to recordkeeping.

Even my choice to use a team of draft horses on my farm for tillage and cultivation boasts some amazing efficiencies; for instance, when they're not at work, the horses graze my farm roads, which keeps them fed and saves me the chore of mowing every few weeks."

~ Zoë Kristi Smith

Hawthorne Creek Farm, Wisconsin

My husband and I are weekend hobby farmers, living dual lives as we reside and work in the Chicago area during the week and drive two hours to our Wisconsin farm just about every weekend.

To make our transitions between the two places easier, we have written checklists for both leaving the city and leaving the farm.

We don't receive any mail at the farm address; all our farm bills are sent to our primary home.

I do my garden food preservation when I'm at the farm and have evolved to dehydrating most of our harvest, as it is both easy to do and the result is light and efficient for us to take back home to the city.

Our farm neighbors help us tremendously by keeping an eye on the place during the week.

Most importantly, I've learned to let go of my expectations that the garden and farm need to look perfect. When you're organic gardening from 120 miles away, you learn to be tolerant of weeds."

~ Kristi

Denise O'Brien

Rolling Acres Farm, Iowa

I always prioritize two things, even during the busiest time of the farming season: taking care of my body and being



actively involved in agriculture issues, especially as they relate to women.

I exercise five mornings of the week, getting to the gym at 6 a.m., before farm chores kick in.

I'm 58 now, and between yoga class and swimming, I hope to keep up my flexibility and endurance so I can keep working on the farm for years to come. I barter with a local massage therapist: her services for our chickens.

On the advocacy side, I founded the Women, Food & Agriculture Network to provide a voice and network for women farmers.

These organizational efforts, granted, take time, but have brought me into contact with other inspiring women and situations that continually reaffirm my passion for growing healthy, sustainable food.”

~ Denise Online Resources

Sustainable Agriculture Coalition Women, Food & Agriculture Network

TopBut there's another vital farming muscle that still produces force and motion and needs attention and exercise, although it isn't made up of tissue and cells: time management, the skills that enable us to effectively and efficiently manage farm life on a daily basis.

Now for those of you, like myself, who escaped cubicle jobs for the dream life in the country, the words “time management” sound a little too reminiscent of corporate careers and day planners gone by. Didn't we triumphantly trade working for someone else for independence on the farm? Can't we call our own shots, do what we want to do when we want to do it and bask in the sunshine of self-employment on the farm?

Yes and no. Most resoundingly, we hobby farmers should relish our autonomy.

Yet, like a well-trained muscle, time management is an ongoing skill that needs to be nurtured, trained and developed.

Why is this important? The to-do list never ends for those on hobby farms.

Between garden work, animal chores and outbuilding maintenance—added to a lengthy list of other family and life responsibilities, farm life can easily spiral out of control and feel more like a burden than a blessing.

Without time management, we grow stressed, overwhelmed and lose touch with the everyday joys of farm life.

Understanding yourself, your needs and your work style enable you to best manage every day to get the job done, work toward long-term goals and, most importantly, enjoy the ride.

The ironic side of time management is we often get too wrapped up in daily responsibilities to have any time to think about improving this skill.

Top

Take advantage of the current, slower winter months to read and contemplate these five tips for better time management, thinking of ways to incorporate them into your daily farm life:

1) Know Thyself

The first step in effective time management is understanding your work style: how you perform most effectively and in what situations. Take advantage of the autonomy farming allows and plan your daily schedule around when and how you work best.

Natural biorhythms play a leading role in understanding yourself. Are you a morning person or night owl? When does your energy level hit a high peak and what time of day do you perhaps crave a caffeine fix?

Plan your day as best you can around these natural tendencies and you can work more efficiently.

I'm a definite morning lark, and by 5 a.m. you'll find me typing on the computer.

Why am I pecking on a keyboard versus plucking weeds during my peak time? As do many of us, my family and I run a



diversified farm business, generating our income from a variety of sources, such as running a bed and breakfast and freelance writing on farm-related issues, like this article.

I focus my best creative time on writing, taking advantage of the quiet, early morning hours before my family wakes up. I don't need to be in full creative flow when I'm weeding the garden or watering greenhouse plants; I do those chores later in the day.

Another important aspect of knowing yourself is identifying where your interests lie.

This may sound obvious, but too often we get caught up in routines and spend time doing things that no longer bring enjoyment or fill vital needs.

For Example:

We raised a small flock of free-range chickens for years. While we loved the fresh eggs for B&B dishes, last year we realized the time and expense we put into the chickens no longer added up.

Because our family likes to travel in the winter, we were burdened with coordinating schedules for our friends to stop by to check on the chickens.

Plus, tensions with our neighbor started escalating because their roving dog would occasionally attack the flock.

Add to this situation the ease with which I could purchase eggs and support a local friend's fledging farm business and we decided to give our flock away, eliminating the time commitment, not to mention the stress.

Top

2) Partner With the Seasons

Mother Nature gifts hobby farmers with the ultimate time-management tool: four seasons.

Align with the natural ebb and flow of the seasonal calendar and take advantage of inherent busy peaks and restful valleys.

Summer may bring a chaotic climax of craziness—from garden harvesting to a range of outdoor social gatherings—but the summer balances with the slower, reflective winter season.

During the busy summer peak, focus on the essentials that need to get done and “back burner” other projects that are less urgent.

Are there ways you can simplify summer produce processing, putting off some things until winter?

For Example:

I'll quickly tray-freeze clean, whole tomatoes, placing them in freezer bags after they are frozen hard.

During the winter when it's nice to have something slowly cooking and warming the house, I defrost the tomatoes in the refrigerator, peel off the skins (skins peel off frozen tomatoes much easier), add seasonings and simmer in a crockpot or on the woodstove until it thickens into sauce.

A seasonal time-management approach proves to be the antidote for perpetual procrastinators.

I confess, before moving to our farm a dozen years ago, I tended to be the queen of last-minute deadlines. Now that I understand the farming workload, I know summer hours need to be dedicated to garden and outdoor work.

I won't have time to write an article in June or create that photo collage for my dad's July birthday, so I'm motivated to wisely use my wintertime and work ahead.

Winter gifts me with time to do my annual clean out and reorganization of the home office, attic and outbuildings.

Additionally, daily weather forecasts help plan weekly schedules. Go online and check the long-range weekly weather



prognosis. This will help you generate a wise work plan.

Rain predicted tomorrow? Hang the laundry out today. Rather than weed during uncomfortably hot and humid days, work in the kitchen or other indoor projects during sweltering heat. Get outside when the mercury lowers to a more comfortable zone and you can weave in a garden work schedule that's easier on your body.

Top

3) Prioritize

Accept the fact that there's only so much that you can get done in a given day and prioritize, focusing on those key essential items.

Need a motivational boost on a project that simply must get done? Break it down into small chunks.

The paint on our wooden farm sign kept peeling off and looked awful, but I kept getting caught up in other farm projects and couldn't block out a sunny afternoon to paint the sign.

Finally, one day all I did was take a close look at the sign and realized just the orange and white paint was peeling; the blue sections looked fine.

The next day I located and organized my supplies: paint, brushes and sandpaper.

The third day I quickly sanded and painted only the orange and white sections.

The whole process took less than an hour when I broke it down, leaving me with not only a tidy sign that presents a nice impression for B&B guests, but also the satisfying high that comes with completing a project.

Try multitasking when doing farm chores, using those chunks of time when you go through mindless routines to creatively think about new ideas.

My best ideas come to me when I have my fingers in the soil. When I'm going out to weed or harvest, I'll give myself a problem or project to ponder—such as thinking of new ways to use our bountiful spinach crop in B&B breakfasts or a topic idea for my weekly blog post.

I quickly learned to wear a fanny pack with a small notebook and a pen whenever I'm in my creative idea zone in the garden so I can capture and write down these new inspirations.

Top

4) Pick Low-hanging Fruit

Feel free to take the easy way out, looking for those low-hanging fruits that provide the same juicy flavor without your needing to dangle on a high ladder.

What this means is don't feel obligated to take the traditional, long road if there's an easier way that produces similar results in less time. This might mean breaking with your own expectations of how to do things.

For Example:

Throw a potluck party rather than feeling the need to personally feed everyone at an event on your farm.

The result is the same—a fun, social gathering—but you've reduced your workload considerably.

Embrace the idea that farm life is wrought with imperfection—let go of your inner Martha Stewart and focus on the easy tasks that make a big difference.

During the busy summer months, I never have the time to thoroughly weed the garden so I concentrate on quickly pulling out the biggest weeds, those that will soon go to seed and cause the most long-term frustration and additional work.

Top



5) Keep Connected

Despite the ever-present, ongoing list of farm chores, remember to take time to stay in touch with others.

Don't become a farm hermit; prioritize relationships and friendships and keep connected.

Sometimes the easiest way to connect with other farm friends is by teaming up and sharing tasks and workloads. Summon fellow gardening girlfriends in your area for a day of jam-making. Everyone brings their own canning jars and lids, produce bounty and other ingredients. You provide the kitchen facility.

Conversation blossoms while the canning efficiently gets done and, as an added perk, everyone can trade the fruits of their labors for a more diverse assortment of jam than canning solo.

Take time also to stay up-to-date with the rural community beyond your acreage or county lines.

As hobby farmers continue to grow in number and rural areas experience a renaissance of renewed vitality, we each need to stay informed on state and federal policies that affect our lives and livelihoods.

Don't shy away from complex federal issues like the Farm Bill, rationalizing that these issues don't matter to small hobby farmers.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (SAC) represents farming and rural-based organizations nationwide, making sure the voice of the small farmer is heard. The SAC website provides synthesized overviews of key issues.

"The most important thing individual hobby farmers can do is express their opinions directly to their congressional representatives either through a letter, e-mail, phone call or visit," explains Aimee Wittenen, grassroots coordinator for SAC. "If we each individually take the time to express ourselves and advocate for strong rural communities and healthy food systems, we can collectively preserve and enhance our countryside."

Just like biceps and triceps, time management requires on-going training and observation. Think of time management as a journey, a process and a tool that can help enhance your good life on the farm.

About the Author: Lisa Kivist is the co-author of *ECOprenuring and Rural Renaissance* and is a W.K. Kellogg Food and Society Policy Fellow. You can find her writing as the sun rises and weeding as the sun sets on her Wisconsin farm and B&B, Inn Serendipity.

Top

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