



Seeding Our Dreams

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by Laurie Ball-Gisch

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When we were able to purchase our farm in 1999, our daughters were just 6 months, 22 months and 15 years old. I had quit full-time teaching to be home with the children. The Lavender Fleece began as a small seed planted when I said to my husband, “This little barn and fenced area should have a few fiber animals.”

Little did we realize how that seed would spread and flourish into a farm business that is now celebrating its 10th year. We’ve expanded our farm several times over (adding acreage, fencing and animals); my father-in-law moved from his farm in southern Minnesota and now lives across the road from us on a small farmstead that we bought for him a few years ago.

Along the way, Icelandic sheepdogs joined our family—initially to herd the Icelandic sheep, but they proved to be such wonderful family dogs that we can’t imagine life without them.

Our children are now old enough that they are beginning to help with shepherding duties. We’ve also added a couple of horses to their lives (including an Icelandic mare) so the girls can grow up with the rewards of caring for and riding horses. We’ve had chickens since the beginning and also added Icelandic chickens to the farm.

To diversify the farm products, in addition to the sheep and wool, I have specialized in lavender. Initially, I envisioned acres of lavender growing here, but the reality of the weather in mid-Michigan meant that I had to adjust the lavender dream. Now I tend a display garden with as many varieties of lavender as will do well here. I sell lavender plants in the spring; year-round, I make lavender soaps and myriad other lavender-based products. I conduct garden tours to educate people about the versatile and beautiful lavender plant.

Although I no longer teach full-time in the public school system, I am still educating people. I teach through my writing, through my website and through meeting people from all walks of life who are also drawn to farming. I mentor new shepherds in sheep management and fiber uses. I also teach about growing and using lavender.

In the past couple of years, we have begun to host Open Farm Days, inviting the public to the farm for a day of farming fellowship. These events are becoming increasingly popular, and I enjoy trying to add new twists to our farm days for those who come back each season. We are also actively trying to help promote our fellow farmers and invite them to come and grill samples of their pork, beef and chicken alongside the lamb that we prepare for our visitors; additionally, a local goat creamery brings their special goat cheeses.

What our farm does best is to allow us a lifestyle that we can appreciate and retreat to in this busy and confusing world. Our animals give us much joy and teach us more about what it is to be human. And the lifestyle—the health-style—of working outdoors is a reward in itself.

I cannot tell you that our farm fully supports our family in this economy, because it doesn’t. My husband, Daryl, is a chemist and, thankfully, has been fully employed (but in the current uncertainties of the dreary economy, this could change). This has allowed me to be a full-time mother, shepherdess, gardener and business owner.

But our farm dream is a reality that is sustaining itself, which we think is remarkable for our small acreage. (We are now farming about 25 acres.) Should Daryl get laid off from his job, we are currently gathering the seeds of ideas for how we can expand the farm business if he is to be here full-time. This would further contribute to the diversity of our farm.

In the 10 years we’ve been here, the farm business, in addition to paying all the expenses it incurs, has rebuilt the original farmstead barn, put up a new barn for the horses, renovated all the outbuildings and built a greenhouse, in



addition to adding acres of fencing for rotational grazing. Almost all of the money that our farm has generated has always gone back into the business. It costs money to run any business.

Every season, the first priority is securing enough hay to feed the flock through the next year once pastures are done for the season. To keep the retail side of the business going, those sales are dedicated to restocking shelves and advertising. As time has gone on, I've found that the profit margin for the retail side of our business is fairly small, and so I've cut back on stocking expensive spinning wheels and weaving looms.

Our goal as we approached "retirement" age was to be debt-free so that the farm business would support us. Keeping one of us employed off the farm helped us to realize that goal faster. We are relieved that as the current economy plunges into insecurity, that we are indeed now debt-free, and if we have to, we are prepared to gear up the farm production in some other exciting directions, sowing new seeds and nurturing a more diverse farm operation.

We don't pretend that a flock of 50 sheep is going to support a family with young children while paying off a mortgage and keeping up with inflation. But the farmstead dream for us was a dream that we nurtured daily, and as our dream matures and spreads its roots, we believe that it will, in turn, sustain and nurture us.

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