

City Folks Become Owners of GardenHome Farm

Read the story of a successful micro goat dairy that began selling milk and find out what it might take to make it work.

by Barbara Berst Adams

© Kipp Davis "There's nothing like looking at your life through other people's eyes," says Joan Schleh, owner, with her husband and three children, of GardenHome Farm in northwest Washington state.

"A woman stopped by my farm soon after I had begun selling milk and thanked me so much for making this milk available for her--as if I were doing her a personal favor. Then she continued on about how this was her dream--to have some land in the country, a Victorian home and her own animals to raise."

GardenHome Farm is an earth-friendly, Grade A micro raw-milk goat dairy and free-range egg farm.

In Washington, raw dairy is legal when strict regulations are met. The entire Schleh family helps operate the farm.

Milk is sold on the honor system directly from the farm in glass jars, as well as at farmers' markets and at the local food co-op, where it's sold in plastic containers.

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Resources

www.GardenHomeFarm.com

www.realmilk.com Eggs are sold only on the farm. When coming to the farm to pick up milk or eggs, customers drive past the blue Victorian to get their jars, jugs or cartons out of the special cooler set aside for daily dairy and egg offerings. Along with paying, they write down their names, what they purchased and its price, and whether or not they returned a jar from a previous pickup.

"I love having people stopping by for milk and eggs," Joan says about this honor-system set-up. "I love that when they enter here they become a part of my farm; they are the reason for my being a farm. They have to be honest because if I didn't have honest people coming by, they wouldn't get far: They have to drive up my driveway past the house and the kitchen window. They then must face my fearsome, barking, but good-natured, German Shepherd. They must figure out my IQ test--a goat-proof (and often human-proof) latched gate. They must sign in. They must then drive out the way they came in. I am at home often and I know all my customers."

Personally, knowing one's farmer is part of the appeal for many who buy directly from local farms; as we can see, it also adds a measure of security for the farmer to know the customers.

Small Space, Big Dreams

GardenHome Farm demonstrates just how much can be accomplished in a very small space. When one enters the farm, a country paradise of beautiful flower gardens fills the front yard. The farm itself is operated in the back of the house.

© Kipp Davis While the home sits on two acres, the Schleh's use only about three-quarters of an acre for their entire farming operation.

"When we say micro, we mean micro," Joan says. "Everything is small, but it meets the same certification requirements as a large dairy. We were just imaginative enough to translate those requirements into micro language."

The Schleh's milk about a dozen dairy goats, tend their flock of free-range laying hens and the occasional turkey, and homestead other farm products for their own personal use.

Next to them lies an open 15-acre field owned by out-of-town non-farmers, which was previously leased to the highest bidder. But Joan spoke to the eco-sensitive land owners directly, telling them how their land could be reinvigorated by her farm's sustainable practices and bringing animals and their manure back into the picture.

She convinced them.

"This year, after patient waiting," Joan says, "we were able to lease the 15 acres."

This will allow for more homesteaded projects and better pasture rotation for the GardenHome Farm goats. While their goats currently don't eat down their lush green pastures, and even though free-ranging chickens help with parasite and manure distribution, it's still important to let pastures rest for regeneration and for better parasite control.

How It All Began

When asked how the family went from city folks to farmers in about two months, Joan lights up.

"Ah, I love this story--a total fairy tale," she says. "We lived in a small bungalow in Seattle and I began to get itchy. My daughter was reaching mall-rat age; my boys kept hitting the balls over the fence and I just could not fit anything else into my tiny garden."

The Social Order of GardenHome Farm Goats--and their Premium Diet

The goats on GardenHome Farm are bottle-raised Saanens, a large white Swiss breed, and an occasional reddish-brown Oberhasli.

All the goats have very distinct personalities, and living close to the animals allows one to experience how complex and intriguing the animal realm really is, including misconceptions about male dominance.

Take Maude and Fanny, for example. When we visited the farm, Maude was the first goat to assertively check us out, while Fanny was rather happy-go-lucky.

"Maude is what is known as the herd queen," Joan says. "She's not the oldest goat, as her sister, Fanny, is her twin, but Fanny has always conceded leadership to Maude except in one case: Maude was terribly injured when my dog attacked her a few years ago; she withdrew to a corner to heal for many months.

Fanny became just as dominant as her sister. When Maude had recovered fully, she took back her position of 'she-who-must-be-obeyed,' which Fanny easily allowed."

It is interesting to observe herd order, and to see how protective and dominant a female can be.

"Interestingly enough," Joan says, "Maude sustained the only injury in that attack because she was the one who stepped forward and challenged the dog, thus protecting the rest of the herd from any harm. She butts heads, literally, with her daughter, Mary, who would love to be herd queen now that she's big. Maude keeps her in her place, often chasing Mary around the field. Fanny, in the mean time, just steps in for some peaceful eating at the feeder."

All of the goats receive an intriguingly health-conscious diet.

"We, like many goat owners, recognize that goats have a high mineral requirement, being natural browsers and used to getting their minerals from deep-rooting plants and trees," she says. "Therefore, we supplement with a veritable cocktail. First we feed an organic grain mixture that I mix myself, then we supplement with commercial goat minerals mixed with sea kelp. The sea has all the earth's minerals mixed in a perfect ratio to one another and provides much-needed iodine as well. We also have a deer salt lick available to them and offer baking soda whenever their gut needs it. Finally, we add apple cider vinegar to their water."

Joan assures us that the goats don't erupt into a science project volcano with this combination of vinegar and baking soda!

All animals have unique requirements and catering to each animals' needs appears to work very well for the GardenHome goats. With goats, like all animals, prevention is the key to good health. The GardenHome goats have had no serious illnesses—and no reason to reach for antibiotics or regular medicines. The Schleh's homeschool and at the time Steve worked for a large company about 30 minutes north of their home. Someone suggested they check out the beautiful

Skagit Valley as a place to relocate, even though it was even further north of Seattle.

It would require a similar commute, only south instead of north. Washington's Skagit Valley draws visitors from around the globe to its renowned tulip farm. While conventional farming still remains, this rural area is boasting more and more sustainable and organic farms that serve their local communities.

"We had always visited the Valley during the Tulip Festival (www.tulipfestival.org) and loved it," Joan says. "We visited an acquaintance there and she mentioned there was a home for sale at the end of the road. We drove by and I said, 'Why wouldn't I want to live there?' The next day when I called, the Realtor told me that the price had dropped \$40,000! There was no time to compare; we bought it. It had been the first and only place we looked in the Valley, and we've never found anything better."

But the home didn't come with resident farm animals. That was yet to come--and sooner than one might imagine. "Three weeks after moving in," Joan says, "we found ourselves goat sitting for the same friends we visited when we found the house. They had given us a crash course in milking, feeding chickens and general animal health."

The Schleh's friends also opened up these city folks' taste to something very delicious. "They showed us the wonderful world of goat milk by giving us our first taste of goat milk ice cream—yum! My children were crazy about it, so when they asked us if we wanted to buy their goats when their daughter left for college, we jumped at the chance."

The Schleh's had been city folk at the first of July, and by the first of September, they were milking a goat and raising two doelings. Joan says "We were a farm!"

But to earn the title "farmer," as in selling farmed products, the next endeavor was to become a Grade A dairy. This next goal seemed to be initiated by requests from others for quality, local raw goat milk. "We started having people interested in our milk and telling us about the wonderful thing we had in raw goat milk," Joan says. After doing much research, she was surprised to realize just what a wonderful opportunity she and her family had. "I had no idea how revolutionary this was," she says. "We looked into what it would take to become Grade A and made some initial contacts with our inspector. I remember the first time he came out to answer my questions about how to be a dairy. He looked very skeptically at my facilities." At the time, the Schleh's had two tall sheds leftover from when the place was an ostrich farm. By now they also had chickens; one of the sheds housed the chickens, and the other, the goats and milking stand. "We also had a dilapidated old milking parlor that had been partially remodeled for the ostriches and was black with mold," Joan says. "I tried to paint a picture of a Grade A set-up to the inspector, but he just smiled and said nothing. We went for it and slowly put the pieces together." The pieces included pouring a concrete floor on the hottest day in July and bringing in a large commercial sink through a side window during a January snowstorm. "Very slowly," Joan says, "and with every bit of extra time and money, we put it all together until we were ready for final inspection and Grade A certification. It was hard and not for the faint of heart, but we felt that we had now earned the title 'farmer'."

Getting the Word Out

A variety of methods have helped market the milk and eggs, and spread the word to people who eventually purchased directly from the farm. "People come to my farm after seeing my website (www.GardenHomeFarm.com)," Joan says, "or trying my milk that they bought at the co-op, or from the Realmilk.com listing, or just from word of mouth. Selling right off the farm is my favorite way of selling, especially since it is the only way customers can get the milk in glass containers, which I ask them to return."

As far as other marketing possibilities, Joan is aware of many, but has only a limited amount of time to try them out. Joan admits that marketing is difficult. "Oh, I get lots of ideas and suggestions, but implementing them takes time, which I don't have much of," she says. "My website has generated the largest number of customers and farmers' markets are great if you can get to them, especially the ones in the city. Also, having a local, farmer-friendly food co-op is wonderful. They really do practice what they preach; even though I take in only a small supply, they are still willing to stock my milk. There is definitely more competition now and I need to go looking for customers rather than them all finding me."

Educating customers and encouraging new food traditions can also be part of a marketing plan. "At peak season [mid summer]," Joan says, "many of my regular customers are on vacation or not thinking 'milk,' while I am sailing on a lake of milk. Then, in the fall, as the supply dwindles, everyone wants to be healthy and I have more customers than I can supply. I urge my customers to stock up on milk in the summer, just like canning the summer bounty, by freezing milk for the winter dry time when the goats are not producing anything." As more people are coming to understand, ideal milk is a seasonal product without the input of drugs or other manipulations to force animals to produce without the break in cycle nature intended. Our ancestors depended on making cheese and other fermented dairy products that extended the life of their milk when they had no refrigeration or freezing capabilities.

Spreading Knowledge of the Good Life

Joan is thankful that her children are being raised on a farm. "Our society is mainly an urban society now, with little understanding of farm life and our food sources," she says. "This leaves us vulnerable to manipulation and propaganda by large pharmaceutical companies and agribusinesses. I believe that we must do whatever we can to educate the next generation to be protectors of sustainable living." Joan seems to be in good company regarding this philosophy. Whether via their own children, school tours or the farm's customers, more and more local farms are collectively restoring our nation's support for the sustainable, small neighboring farm. Farmers, aspiring farmers, and non-farmers alike show a strong desire for their return and continued presence across the land.

A woman who once visited GardenHome Farm told Joan about her small-farm dream. Joan recollects: "We were looking east toward the mountains and the light was hitting just right so that everything looked golden. I realized how golden my life really was. Sometimes I get so caught up in the physical work of it all that I forget to see how blessed I am, but God sends me people regularly to remind me that I am."

About the Author

Barbara Berst Adams is the author of *Micro Eco-Farming: Prospering from Backyard to Small Acreage in Partnership with the Earth* (New World Publishing, 2004), www.MicroEcoFarming.com

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