



Livestock Sitting 101

Considering livestock sitting? If you are an entrepreneurial spirit, learn what it takes to make livestock or farm sitting a viable business.

by Sue Weaver

One of the hardest things about hobby farming is finding someone to watch your stock when you're away.

Sure, you have friends, neighbors, relatives ... but are they reliable? Therein lies the rub.

Even reliable draftees may lack the expertise needed to keep your animals safe and comfy and thus assure your peace of mind. What you need is a pet sitter for livestock. But where to find one? They're few and far between.

Tales From the Trenches

"I'm a University of Minnesota student and I watch animals of all kinds. Usually I stay the whole weekend while their owners are gone. My first job was watching a flock of sheep. I was supposed to put medicine in one ewe's eye but the sheep all looked alike! Thank God they had ear tags and their mom wrote the sick one's number on her instructions. One of my professors suggested I buy plastic neck chains like they use on dairy cattle. I have them in 10 different colors. They're safe, they break pretty easily, and now I can identify each horse in the herd of bay and sorrel Quarter Horses that I watch."
—Sarah Mickelson, South St. Paul, Minnesota

"Make sure you know the animals before you accept a job. I had a job taking care of a herd of goats once and I was bent over cleaning a feed trough when a big old billy rammed me from behind. It sounds funny but it hurt and I sprained my wrist. It made feeding them really hard and he butted me three more times! That's the only time I worked for that lady."
—Jenny Miller, South Bend, Indiana

"I used to horse sit, so I know how it is. Now, to make things easier for my own sitter, I pre-make up feed ahead of time in plastic containers, each marked with the horse's name, with all supplements pre-mixed and ready to dump in buckets. I also typed up a sheet I keep hanging in the barn. It has a picture of each horse, along with its name and instructions beside it. Then the caretaker can correspond the proper 'things' with the proper horse. It makes the sitter's life easier and gives me peace of mind."
—Michelle Ives, Bethany, Connecticut

"Be sure to ask your clients what happens if you run out of food. Will they leave money or is there a charge account you can use? And it's a good idea to ask if anyone else will be coming to their homes while they're gone. When I hire a sitter for my own animals, I write everything down and leave two lists on the refrigerator so she can take one with her and the other is always available if she forgets hers. I list each animal, where it is, where it's supposed to be, if it's supposed to be moved or exercised, and what she should feed. I also offer info about the animal, especially if it will butt, bite or kick."
—Connie Wheeler, Molalla, Oregon

"Buy one of those coiled, stretchy key bracelets for your wrist. Keep all of your clients' keys on it and once your day begins, don't take it off! Before I got one, I locked myself out of houses, twice. Once a neighbor had a key. The other time I had to call a locksmith at my own expense. It was expensive and humiliating, both times!"
—Geri Donner, Tacoma, Washington

If you're seeking a fun and interesting way to make a country living, take note: horse, livestock and farm sitters are in great demand.

If you want to do the work, jobs are out there. Here's how to get involved.

WHY FARM SIT?

The beauty of farm sitting is that you own your own business and set your own hours.

Start-up costs are minimal and you'll be working outdoors, with animals, while providing a valuable service for folks who need your help, be they vacationers, owners incapacitated by temporary physical disabilities (it's hard to doctor horses or



milk the cow with your leg wrapped in plaster), or professionals on call.

You can design your business around your lifestyle.

Perhaps you'll specialize in basic livestock care, checking pastured animals or feeding them when their caretakers can't. If you're horse-savvy, you could operate a foaling service, standing watch over expectant mares when their owners are away or can't work the nightshifts. Or milk dairy cattle or goats on a per-visit basis. Or combine livestock care with standard house- and pet-sitting services. The choice is up to you!

The downside: you'll work holidays and traditional vacation times, that's a given. You'll need good insurance and you'll want to be bonded—it's expected of sitters these days. And you must follow clients' instructions to the letter; this is not a field where you can skimp or improvise.

GETTING STARTED

Decide what services you'll provide. It's important to care for species you like, aren't afraid of, and enjoy working with. Choose duties you can perform efficiently and well. This is especially sage advice for horse sitters and relief milkers, whose clients may be fussier than the norm. Sit for species you're familiar with, take a short course to further your education, visit breeders and veteran owners, and read all you can to earn the reputation of "expert sitter." Invest in species-specific veterinary guides; you'll need to recognize problems and know when it's time to call a vet.

Determine where you want to work. Within a few miles of home? On the outskirts of your city? Within your county? Factor in gasoline costs and vehicle upkeep, as well as driving time. Most sitters charge per visit, so you don't want to range too far afield.

Set your rates. Don't undersell yourself but don't price yourself out of business, either. Find out what other local services are charging. If there aren't any, consult conventional pet sitters; you can generally charge what they do. Pet sitters' per-visit rates vary from \$10 to \$35 and more, depending on regional cost of living and local demand. Since livestock and farm sitters' duties are more diverse and frequently more time consuming, you'll probably want to set a basic per-visit rate and offer extras that clients can pay for if they choose (longeing horses or changing dressings, mucking stalls, medicating a cranky cow'seye). You'll hammer out details as needs arise, but know, going in, approximately what you'll need to charge to earn a decent wage.

Before committing yourself to livestock sitting, recruit emergency backup. Livestock sitters get sick too. If you can't round up dependable reinforcements, think twice before starting a business. Clients depend on the people they hire to care for their farms and livestock. It's your duty to make good on that trust.

Visit your insurance agent, a lawyer and an accountant—don't omit these steps. While pet sitters' policies exist, you'll be handling larger, often dangerous and sometimes very valuable animals, so you may need to have a policy written just for you. In today's litigious society, you must be covered for every eventuality. And since you will be self-employed, keeping accurate tax records is an absolute must.

In some locales you'll need a city or county business license. Depending on the state you reside in, possibly a sales tax number too. Your lawyer and accountant can advise you. If they're required, get them—don't try to wing it—and keep the paperwork handy to show clients who ask to inspect it (and they will).

How to Find a Reliable Sitter

Ask friends, veterinarians and farriers for recommendations. Peruse tack shop, feed store, and veterinarians' bulletin boards. Don't wait until you need a sitter to start looking for one. Let your fingers do the walking through the Yellow Pages: Check under "Horses," "Livestock" and "Pet Sitting Services." Or scope out the following national resources:

Locate a National Association of Professional Pet Sitters: NAAPS

Pet Sitters International It's wise to join a professional organization like Pet Sitters International or the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters. Affiliations look good on your credentials and memberships qualify you for cut-rate insurance and training materials. While little has been written about livestock tending per se, most pet sitting resources work for farm sitters too.

Name your sitting service something fairly simple—and let it indicate what you do (Reliable Farm Sitters, Horse Nannies,



Sue's Livestock Sitting Service). Use it on your business forms: custom contracts, invoice forms, brochures and business cards. All these items should smack of professionalism so invest in a quality product.

You'll need voicemail or a dependable answering machine. The nature of your work means you won't be lounging at home when calls come in. Record a professional-sounding message, identify your business and indicate when you'll return calls. When speaking with a customer, be polite, friendly and smile. They'll hear it in your voice.

Opt for a separate business line if you possibly can. If you don't, be certain that anyone who picks up the receiver has impeccable telephone manners—and knows how to take an intelligible message. Potential clients whose calls aren't returned are unlikely to try again.

YOU WILL ALSO NEED:

A record-keeping system.

Ask your accountant what she recommends and keep it up to snuff.

A cell phone.

You'll pack it on your rounds since many clients won't have barn phones. You'll be glad you have it if you need to call a vet or the owner.

Reliable transportation.

In some places, this means four-wheel drive. It needn't be fancy but it reflects on your professionalism, so keep it tidy. If you use it to advertise your service, choose magnetic signs instead of direct lettering. You can remove the signs when you make your rounds (advertise on your own time). If unscrupulous people see your truck pull up every day at a client's home, they'll know no one is home.

Good maps of the areas you'll be working.

If you live in an extremely rural area you'll need a plat book or topo maps charting township roads not drawn on county maps.

A schedule book or calendar and your business forms bound in a sturdy notebook. Take them with you every day.

A basic first-aid kit for yourself and a comprehensive one tailored for the sorts of livestock you'll be sitting. Be equipped to handle emergencies until a vet arrives. Be certain the livestock kit contains a powerful flashlight and batteries. Include extra halters and leads, or other handling equipment, and stash everything in a moisture-proof container with a lid. Keep it stocked and stowed in your vehicle at all times.

References.

If you have pet- or livestock-sitting references, so much the better. If you don't, ask a veterinarian, farrier, horse-training clients, or others familiar with your level of animal expertise to vouch for you.

GET IT IN WRITING

Never go to work without a detailed, mutually signed contract. Don't make exceptions, even for friends or established clients. The contract should be a pre-printed carbonized form (so both of you get a copy) and include: Your letterhead. Your business and personal names, street and e-mail addresses, phone numbers and any other pertinent information. A snazzy business logo is a nice touch.

Your client's name, address and home and business phone numbers.

When your services begin and end, precisely what they entail, the mutually agreed-upon cost, and when you will be paid.

Contact information, including phone numbers and an e-mail address. Always request the name and number of a friend, neighbor or relative you can call in an emergency.

The name and phone numbers of your client's veterinarian, with express permission to seek treatment and a description of exactly which veterinary services the client authorizes and agrees to pay for.

A detailed description of each animal including its medical history and idiosyncrasies. This may not apply if you're pasture checking a herd of cattle, but is especially vital when tending domestic pets or horses.

Permission to do anything out of the ordinary you might require, such as leaving halters on animals or neck banding them for identification purposes.

Legalese, as dictated by your lawyer, that protects you and the client in case a dispute arises.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

You've returned Jane Smith's call and she wants you to feed and water her horses while she's away on vacation. You



tentatively accept the job. What next? (Read "Tales from the Trenches")

You'll don clean, working attire and a cheerful face; pack up a contract, notebook, clipboard and pen, and arrange to meet Jane and her equine friends.

When you arrive (on time), Jane will show you around her farm. You'll meet the horses and discuss her needs and your services. Together, you'll strike an agreement, fill out the contract, and she'll hand over any keys you'll require. You'll ask her to show you where all applicable feed, bedding, and equipment is stored and to demonstrate or explain her feeding routine and any other tasks you're expected to perform. Find out where the barn's water pump, circuit breakers and fire extinguishers are located before leaving. Write everything down.

The night before you're to begin tending Jane's horses, you'll plan your next day's stops so you can keep clients' livestock on their customary schedules. Animals, like most humans, abhor change.

You'll arrive at the farm at your pre-arranged time, alone (no kids, dogs, friends or spouses in tow), and you'll perform your duties exactly as planned.

On your second trip of the day, you'll jot notes in the simple logbook you'll keep while Jane is away. Alternately, you'll phone or e-mail her at day's end with a daily report.

When your service contract expires, you won't just assume Jane's returned home. You'll phone her home or business to confirm. Emergencies occur, flights are cancelled, and horses can become mighty hungry. It's your duty to assure that doesn't happen. You'll make an appointment with Jane to return her keys, hand over your daily log, and present your invoice. Another assignment comes to its logical end.

THE RIGHT STUFF

Will your adventures in livestock sitting fly—or not? That depends on you.

You will need to: Advertise.

If people don't know you're there, you won't survive. Place brochures in veterinary practices, feed and tack stores, garden shops, at horse show offices and concessions, and any other place animal owners and hobby farmers tend to congregate. Give a stack to farriers to distribute, too. Pin fresh—not soiled or bent and wrinkled—business cards to every bulletin board you encounter; leave extra cards as potential customers tend to carry them away. Possibly spring for a display ad in the Yellow Pages; it's often the first place clients look for a sitter. Newspaper classifieds work, too; ads in the Pennysaver and horse-related regional publications are often best buys. Meet potential customers by volunteering time at humane shelters and rescue organizations, giving talks to Chambers of Commerce, saddle clubs, 4-H groups, and area kennel clubs; pass out brochures and business cards when you do. Wear your business with pride: on logo-decked shirts, jackets and hats. Advertising needn't be expensive to pack a punch.

Be impeccably discreet and dependable.

Word travels fast when you're not. Don't carry tales: They destroy credibility faster than anything else.

Grow thick skin.

Be scrupulously honest and always do your best, expecting to rectify problems as they arise. But no matter how good you are, you can't please everybody all of the time. Accept this premise going in.

About the Author: Sue Weaver is an HF contributing editor, freelance writer and full-time livestock sitter of her own menagerie.

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