

Sheepberry Farms: A Hobby Out Of Control

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HALIFAX (Dauphin Co.) —

Sheepberry Farms is the result of a hobby out of control.

That's what John and Lynn Zerpheys tell people who question their saneness for moving to the remote, mountainous region of Dauphin County from the artsy community of Mount Gretna.

The Zerpheys' lifestyle took a surprising turn in 1985 when Lynn begged her husband to purchase a Border Leicester sheep after watching a wool spinning demonstration.

Intrigued with the textures and colors of using natural wools and with the unique personalities of sheep, the Zerpheys soon became adept both as fiber artists and as sheep and llama herders.

Soon their six-acre plot in Mt. Gretna was not sufficient to raise the sheep that they continued to add to their herd. Because the Zerpheys wanted to continue working at their Y-Z Printing business in Elizabethtown, they looked in Lancaster and Lebanon counties for a farm. The high prices discouraged them. Two years ago, they saw an 84-acre Dauphin County farm advertised in *Lancaster Farming*.

They took a drive through the winding, mountainous roads until they came to a breathtaking view of a valley surrounded by mountains. The dilapidated house, barn, and outside buildings did not hinder their ability to see what the place could become.

Sheepberry Farms established

The first year was one of back-breaking cleanup as the Zerpheys removed 15 truckloads of trash accumulated in the buildings,

replaced broken windows, and pronounced war on the rats. They painted the weatherbeaten buildings white and trimmed them in blue. They enclosed the whole 84-acres with a high tensile fence and partitioned inside areas with wooden fences.

Before the purchase of the Dauphin County farm, neither of the Zerpheys had a farming background nor did they know the work required to maintain a farm. What they did have is an appreciation for nurturing the land, a passion for reading about every aspect of farming, and a willingness to ask the right people questions.

"We did our homework," Lynn said. "We wrote to Penn State for information on sheep, contacted a vet, and read every library book that we could find on the subject."

Lynn's eyes still shine with wonder as she talks of her "beautiful sheep" and the amazement of getting so much free information from Penn State Extension. The Zerpheys joined the Sheep and Wool Association where they found people willing to share information on the care of sheep and wool.

Llamas added to sheep herd

The Zerpheys own about 80 head of sheep including Border Leicester, Lincoln, Rambouillet, and Suffolk breeds. Intermingling with the sheep are several stately llamas that are used both for breeding and for their soft, luxurious wool.

As far as they know, Sheepberry Farms is the only farm in the state to raise llamas and sheep together.

About three years ago, Lynn visited a lady who owned llamas. "I was just taken with them right off the bat," Lynn said. "But, when



The Zerpheys raise several llamas, which they use for breeding purposes and for the wool in their projects as fiber artists.

my husband found out how much they cost, he was not so intrigued."

Nevertheless, the couple researched llamas and discovered that llamas and sheep could feed on the same grain and hay. Both species are copper sensitive and can be housed together.

In February 1989, the Zerpheys purchased their first two gelding males. They chose Bolivian llamas with short wool since long hair causes more stress on llamas during hot weather.

"When my husband visited a llama farm, he got 'baby' fever and purchased three bred females," Lynn said.

Llamas have a gestation period of 11½ months and they almost always birth during daytime hours.

For the past several years, the Zerpheys have bred llamas but have never seen a birth since both husband and wife continue to work full time at their printing business.

"We come home — and here's a baby," Lynn said of the llama's ability for easy birthing.

The Zerpheys sell the babies with the stipulation of visiting rights. Lynn personally delivers the llamas with a bag of feed, hay, and registered papers. She offers service after the sale believing that healthy animals are productive animals.

In 1990, the Zerpheys participated in a Penn State tour of a 3,000-head sheep ranch. They



The Zerpheys work together to process wool from their flock. Known as fiber artists, John weaves and Lynn handspins, knits, and crochets.

were surprised to find that llamas were used to guard the sheep from predators.

Although they have a Border Collie that does well with the sheep, he becomes intimidated by the llamas, which assume responsibility for the sheep.

Animal care

In the daily care of the animals Lynn, who is a registered nurse said that her nursing ability comes in handy to insert a prolapse uterus back into a sheep, sew it up, and assist with birthing. Ironically, she cannot bring herself to inoculate her own sheep although she is adept at diagnosing health problems.

One of the most beneficial methods for diagnosing health problems is to sweep the aisle where the animals are housed two times daily.

"Looking through the manure pile is not glamorous but it's the thing to do," Lynn said. It's there that parasites, diarrhea, and eating problems can be quickly diagnosed.

A typical day for the Zerpheys starts at 5:30 a.m. They spend one hour feeding the animals before they leave the home at 7 a.m. for their printing business. They have a neighbor who looks in on the animals during the day and does odds and ends around the place, but the feeding and care of the animals remains the Zerpheys'. It's 8 p.m. before they return home.

Rotational grazing

The Zerpheys are strong advocates of herding llamas and sheep in the same area. They find that rotational grazing allows them to

(Turn to Page B3)



Llamas are great kissers according to John.



"This is therapy," said Lynn of the time required to care for the sheep and llamas.

Homestead Notes