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## Shepherdesses: Flocking To A Unique Career

Written by Kathy Blumenstock



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Shepherdesses What a perfect profession for a knitter: become a shepherdess, tending flocks of woolly sheep, friendly alpacas, curious llamas, while envisioning gorgeous creations from their fleece. Swap that Blackberry for a shepherd's crook, and leave behind office politics. History shows that even Marie Antoinette fancied herself a shepherdess, dressing in milkmaid's garb and adorning her imported sheep with satin ribbons.

Sorry, Marie, the job description for shepherds (of either gender!) is more physical labor than pastel daydream. The care and feeding of often-delicate animals runs 365 days a year. It can mean bottle-feeding a lamb or two in the house. And the intensive hours yield little or no time for knitting. "It's a whole lot more work than I expected but also more rewarding," says Susie Gibbs of Juniper Moon Farm near Charlottesville, Va. Gibbs left a fast-paced job in network news, eager for something "more authentic." Browsing in a bookstore, she was drawn to a volume on raising sheep---and a year later, bought her first four.

Gibbs, who raises Angora goats as well as Cormo and Cotswald sheep, calls getting to know the animals her favorite part of the job. "It's an honor to be present when these adorable things slide into the world. Within ten minutes they're on their feet, searching for their mama's udders. It's nothing short of a miracle, no matter how many times I see it."

Joanna Lawrence of Alpaca Crossings in Pickerington, Ohio, initially saw alpacas simply as a business opportunity. "My husband and I did not grow up on a farm, and first learned about them from a TV commercial about investing in alpacas." Instead of making an impersonal investment, the Lawrences fell in love with the sweet-faced critters. They outfitted a former cornfield with a farmhouse for themselves, barns for their new alpacas, and embraced both a business and lifestyle change.

More than five years later, the learning curve continues, as the Lawrences attend classes on processing fiber, spinning, knitting, crocheting and needle punch, as well as learning to choose the best breeding animals. Joanna still delights in the alpacas' habit of humming. "They hum as a form of communication, and to stand in the pasture on a sunny day, enjoying the alpacas humming to each other is such a relax-

ing environment."

At Dancing Leaf Farm in Barnesville, Md., Dalis Davidson has seen her business---the sale of handspun, hand-dyed wool and rovings---grow steadily over 25 years, after she casually began keeping sheep as pets.

Shepherdesses "They had to be sheared, so I had all this gorgeous wool," she says. "I then learned to dye and spin, then knit and weave." An "older, wiser shepherd" living nearby was Davidson's guide. She jokes that "raising sheep is easy, as long as you have good fencing."

Photo right: Namaste Farms (Cloudspun) Samba has won the most coveted show in the country.

Maggie Wright, of Kraussdale Alpacas in Pennsylvania, is a lifelong "animal person" who grew up around horses. "I had thought of [opening] a fiber studio with one of the domestic endangered breeds of sheep," says Wright, a software quality analyst. But on a 2001 trip to Peru, she was charmed by alpacas. "I love educating people about them," she says. "The amazement on someone's face when they pet a cria (baby alpaca) and feel the softness is magic." While her alpacas don't come into her house, they do travel in a minivan she's customized for them, with mats replacing passenger seats. "When I take one to a show or festival, they jump in and go for a ride," she says.

Like all of those who work with animals, shepherdesses cite the inevitable losses in life's sad cycle as their biggest challenges.



"Lambing season brings much beauty and heart-ache," says Natalie Redding of Namaste Farm in southern California, whose sheep include Wensleydale Longwools, Rackas and Gotlands. "They are my flock, I am their tender, and I always blame myself." Redding, who began adding sheep to her family's ranch as a child-safe animal alternative to cattle and horses, is hands-on in every aspect of raising, showing, shearing, washing, dyeing and spinning wool. "I have truly ugly hands," she jokes. "Being a shepherd is difficult and dangerous. I wish I could share with people what it takes to get their yarn from flock to the store." shepherdesses

Photo left: Namaste and Maddie winning the White Longwool Yearling Ewe class and then going on to win White Champion Ewe.

As for that obvious question about shepherds, let the shepherdesses confirm it: yes, the shepherd's crook is a vital tool, not just an image on Christmas cards. Redding says, "I have three and we use them to hook around the sheep's neck to catch them."



