

Alpacas Offer Way to Keep Family Farm, Restore House Farm Diversification in the Mid-Atlantic Region

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Aquasco, MD. – It took a while for Angel Forbes Simmons to get back to the family farm in Southern Maryland, but now she's there to stay.

Forbes Simmons moved to the family farm from the West Coast in 1996 after her uncle Bobby Forbes, was renting the farm, had a heart attack. Before moving, she researched several different farming options that she could enter with the goal of restoring the farm and its buildings, including a Victorian house more than 140 years old.



“I had to come up with something that didn’t need tons of capital,” Forbes Simmons said. “This place was falling down. I didn’t have the resources to wait.”

She was working in Seattle as a manager in a hospital and knew she probably could get a similar job in the Washington, D.C. area, but wanted to avoid the long commute. “That would also not give me the time to make this place work”, she added.

The farm, Villa de Alpacas, is the oldest and largest alpaca farm in Southern Maryland and last year was certified as a Maryland Bicentennial Farm, one of only four in the state.

She looked into raising buffalo, emu, growing shitake mushrooms, ginseng, organic vegetables, flowers, and tea, but settled in alpacas because they require a smaller investment to get started, there is a strong market for their fleece, and as a woman, would be able to handle them alone.

Forbes Simmons now has more than 90 animals on the 46-acre farm. Most are alpacas, but she also has some suri llamas and started raising a few peacocks.

Forbes Simmons shears the fleece from the alpacas once a year and sends it off to be spun into yarn and woven into clothing, which she sells at local bazaars and markets. While selling the clothing brings in money, she said most of her income comes from selling the animals to other breeders. She has sold alpacas to other Maryland farms, but also to breeders in Michigan, South Dakota, and California.

As for marketing, she said that using a Web site (hers is www.MarylandAlpacaFarm.com) has been “integral to my business”. She said that it saves her time and money because before she had it, she would compile and mail packets of information to prospective clients.



“Now, I just refer them to the Web site and it’s all there,” she said.

When Forbes Simmons came to the farm, things were in rough shape. “The house didn’t have anyone who loved it living there for over 40 years,” she said. There was no electric, no running water, and large holes in the roof.

“I actually set up a tent in one of the rooms and lived in that tent for about three months,” she said. “It wasn’t easy.”

Working with the alpacas had its challenges as well, she added, calling the first few years “trial by fire”. She said she has since helped many other people get started with alpacas by sharing what she has learned.

“I want my clients to be successful. That means that I am successful,” she said. “I want women especially to understand, you can do this.”



Now, Forbes Simmons said that the farm is achieving her goal of being self-sustainable. She raises the alpacas and llamas on about 12 acres of the farm and has put the balance into a timber management plan.

And she has been able to put money into restoring the house and the horse stables and carriage house.

Even on bad days, when the weather is terrible or things aren’t working right, Forbes Simmons said she “could never live anywhere else.”

There is so much to life about living on the farm.