

Amber Reed Maplemont Farm

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It's a sweltering hot day in the middle of July, yet the 70 sheep in the ample shade on the slope of Maplemont Farm are happily grazing and resting. Amber Reed walks through the pasture with a contented smile on her face, glad to be checking on her healthy animals and the land for which she cares so passionately. Maplemont sits on the hilly western

bank of the Connecticut River in the town of Barnet. Amber and her husband Chris bought Maplemont only four years ago in 2019, moving her flock there from the farm she previously managed in New Hampshire. Amber has extensive experience as a farmer specializing in ruminants. Prior to farming in Vermont and New Hampshire, she farmed in Colorado, New Mexico, Maine, and France, focusing on cows, goats, and sheep for meat and dairy as well as working with crops. Growing up in rural central Maine, she was inspired to farm at a young age through the connections she formed there growing food and living off the land.



Amber breeds and raises sheep at Maplemont Farm primarily for meat, but also for their fiber. The best fiber gets sold, and lower quality fleece becomes nutrient rich mulch for gardens. About half of the farm's 43 acres are pasture and the other half is forest that is too steeply sloped to sustainably graze. Amber has been using rotational grazing and other pasture management practices to regenerate land, some of which was depleted by years of growing field corn prior to her taking over the farm. While working to minimize heavy equipment usage to reduce costs and impacts on the soil, she re-seeded some of the pastures with a resilient mix of grasses, legumes, and flowering plants. Amber fosters a diverse mix of wild grasses and forbs in the pasture, including native species like milkweed and sumac. Through her regenerative farming techniques she has been able to double the number of sheep the farm's land can sustain, as well as double the number of days the sheep graze. She finds sheep interesting to work with and thinks they're particularly well suited for grazing Vermont's hills because of the lower impact they have on the soil compared to larger animals like cattle. She says they're also great animals for regenerating depleted pastures because they have lower nutrient demands than some other farm animals and, when well cared for, are very hardy animals.



While it is difficult to express how deeply Amber cares for her animals and this work, it's abundantly clear seeing her energy and attention as she walks the land. However, this work is not without risks



and challenges. One of the biggest threats is increasingly erratic weather which experts attribute to climate change. In recent years we have seen the weather in Vermont go from unusually wet periods for several months, and then into prolonged drought. While farming in the dry climate of Colorado, Amber learned to manage land thinking about how to soak up every single drop of rain. She works on developing pastures with relatively tall vegetation, returning substantial organic matter to the soil as successive

years of plants decompose and become incorporated. This enriches the soil so that it can absorb even the heaviest rainfall and maintain moisture through hot, dry weather. Thanks to a grant from NRCS she has also been expanding the number of trees in the fields to create silvopasture. The silvopasture offers more shade for animals to graze and rest in, as well as ecosystem services like carbon sequestration and diverse habitats for wild animals, birds, and pollinators.



Another major business risk that Amber faces is having stable market demand for her lamb at prices that are high enough to maintain profitability. The Covid pandemic almost instantly shut down



restaurants that were buying much of her meat and provided her with a consistent market. While that restaurant market is slowly returning, she works hard to maintain relationships with customers, many of whom return each season for Maplemont's high quality lamb. However, selling to a larger number of individual customers has its challenges, including many people not knowing how to cook and prepare larger and less common cuts of meat. Although she is very knowledgeable about processing and utilizing the many cuts and types of meat Amber gets from her sheep, she isn't able to

devote much time to educate customers about how to use all the different cuts of meat. Amber loves and appreciates her customers, but acknowledges that promoting, selling, and marketing products takes a lot of time away from the farm. She admits that she would rather spend her energies just moving fences, tending to sheep, planting trees, and holding story hour in her barn. It is also challenging to grow the animals to the size that her customers desire. Restaurants typically want very large lambs, while buyers who want to do their own slaughtering according to Halal customs want small lambs. Amber's lambs are often in between those sizes. To control their size, during lambing she will "twin" lambs, taking a lamb from a ewe that has triplets and matching it to another ewe that only had one lamb. Triplets tend to grow slower to a lower slaughter weight, while lambs that have no siblings grow faster to a higher slaughter weight.

Another big risk in production is that it's difficult to raise the animals profitably given how much buyers are willing to pay for their meat. Amber mitigates this risk by being very efficient with the work she does with sheep and pasture management and enhancing biosecurity practices to monitor and reduce

disease. By keeping her animals very healthy, she avoids veterinary visits. Just one veterinarian appointment for one animal might easily cost as much as the entire value of that sheep when sold for meat.



She is also careful and deliberate about which ewes and rams she uses for breeding to continuously develop the hardiest, most disease resistant animals with a focus on sturdy, healthy hooves. Amber keeps her animals safe from predators by using a guard donkey (affectionately named “Donkey”) to protect her sheep from coyotes. She carefully manages time and costs on her farm, and she generates enough profit to pay the land taxes of the farm.

Common to many small farms in Vermont, supplemental income from her and her husband’s full-time off farm jobs help to generate enough income to sustain the family and their farm. Amber is a full-time ruminant and pasture specialist working for UVM Extension. As a small supplement to income generated by meat and fiber sales, Maplemont sheep graze the Suncommon solar array on the property under a lease arrangement made by the previous owners. Having sheep grazing the solar array benefits the farm, while it is also environmentally friendly compared with mowing the area. Selling meat in nearby towns and on routes the family already travels helps reduce transportation and marketing costs.



For the upcoming year, Amber may get more lamb meat ground, because there is considerable demand for that, and it resolves the issue of customers needing to know how to cook less common cuts of meat. In the seasons ahead Amber looks forward to continuing to improve the farm and flock through her focus on the health of the whole system, including soils, pasture plants, trees, and of course, the sheep.



Photos by Josiah Taylor

August 2022