

FIELDS OF DREAMS | Give me land, beautiful land—and maybe a flock of sheep, an olive grove or an apiary. Meet five former desk workers who turned their passion for nature into a livelihood « By Jenny Rough



/ *The Sheep Farmer* /

REBECCA DENHOFF, Buchanan, Virginia
For Denhoff, who was born and raised near Virginia Beach, contact with farm animals was limited to stuffed toys and Little Bo Peep books—until she visited a great aunt who lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Awestruck by the beauty of the land, she vowed she'd live in a place like that one day. She was five years old at the time.

Three decades later, she moved to the area with her husband, a Boston lawyer. By day she worked as a registered nurse, eventually becoming a hospital administrator, and at night she read sheep-care books. Intent on buying a farm, she bolstered her savings with profitable real estate investments.

One day she adopted two orphaned lambs and bottle-fed them for eight weeks. They lived indoors, diapered,

"I do all my own veterinary work," says Rebecca Denhoff, who is also a nurse and a certified wool handler and grader.

until she moved them onto the couple's two-acre property. That was the start of her flock, which grew from year to year. "I was happy as a flea, but my husband was not," she says. Then some farmland she'd long been eyeing became available, and she bought it that day. When she broke the news to her husband after the fact, he gave her a choice: him or the farm. Denhoff didn't hesitate. "The farm," she said. "If I give this up, my spirit will slowly die."

After the divorce, Denhoff fixed up Solitude Farm, a 100-acre plot with no running water or electricity. She spent \$250,000 on a well, a septic tank, fencing and a barn. In 1996 she moved her

meat, wool and the retreat (solitudefarmretreat.com). But sheep are Denhoff's passion. During the lambing season, beginning every December, she always has a couple of orphaned lambs running around her house in diapers. "They're clean, and they smell good. They're easier than puppies," she says. "Sheep are peaceful and calming. They're the Zen of animals."



/ *The Beekeeper* /


MARINA MARCHESE, Weston, Connecticut
Marchese's metamorphosis from designer and creative director of a giftware company into professional apiarist began with RosieB, the queen

from a Georgia bee farmer. When the kit, with its precut wood and nails, was delivered, she was ready with a hammer. "As a kid, I built tree houses," she says.

With her design work still paying the bills, Marchese devoted her leisure time to learning all she could about apiculture: She read books, watched videos and even attended beekeeper-association meetings. She found out how to rescue a hive when the bees "swarm" (abandon their nest) and how to "requeen" the hive when her grande dame disappeared. And she fell in love with her bees, sitting in the sun to sketch them and marveling at the way they carry pollen balls and communicate through different "dances."

Two years later, Marchese had four hives ready for their first harvest. She'd planned to give away the wildflower honey, but after tasting it and thinking about how hard she and her bees had worked, she decided to turn her hobby into a business. Marchese created a label for her company, Red Bee (redbee.com), and began experimenting in her kitchen with products like lip balm (her recipe, passed down by generations of beekeepers' wives: Melt beeswax and olive oil in a double boiler; whisk in honey, and add two drops of peppermint essential oil). That summer she set up a table at a farmers' market, with jars of honey, skin-care lotions and candles. But on a good day, she'd make only \$40. Disheartened, she thought, Guess I can't quit my day job yet.

Then in 2006 a mysterious phenomenon called Colony Collapse Disorder destroyed many commercial hives. As the artisanal market began to swell, Red Bee started getting regular orders from upscale New York City restaurants and retailers. With the extra business, Marchese finally ditched her city work and wrote a memoir, *Honeybee: Lessons from an Accidental Beekeeper*, which was published last year. Today she grosses about \$60,000 annually. "I love that I can combine my artistic background with beekeeping and nature," she says. "I've created a business that sustains my finances—and my soul." »



Every winter Denhoff has a couple of orphaned lambs running around the house in **diapers**.

12 sheep onto the land, along with a trailer that became her new home. Still working as a nurse, Denhoff gave the animals shots and wasn't afraid to "sew things up," she says. Nearby veterinarians showed her how to deliver and revive lambs and push back prolapsed sheep uteruses.

To prevent coyotes and wolves from threatening her flock, she acquired a Maremma, a dog bred to guard sheep. But then some local men vandalized her property, destroying the solar chargers that powered her electric fence. "They wanted to run me out of here. They'd never seen a woman driving a tractor before," she says with a laugh. "But I had it out with them, and now we get along. When their animals need a vet, they call me first."

Today, Solitude Farm is home to 60 Leicester Longwool sheep, 20 head of cattle and a dozen chickens. Denhoff hired a part-time worker and replaced the trailer with a house, which also brings in income as a retreat for women. She continues to work the night shift as a nurse ("for benefits") and pulls in \$30,000 annually from

bee character she created for a greeting card line. A neighbor saw her drawings of Rosie, and afterward the neighbor's husband offered to give Marchese a tour of the hives he kept in his backyard. Excited, she donned a beekeeper's hat with a veil and braced herself for fierce buzzing and sharp stings. But when the neighbor pulled out one of the honeycomb frames, all she heard was a gentle hum. "The bees seemed content and calm," Marchese says. Carefully, she reached into a cell to sample the raw honey. Divine, she thought. Maybe I could keep a hive.

Marchese had long desired a closer-to-nature lifestyle; that's what had led her to buy a home in a semirural Connecticut town. But the hour-and-a-half commute to her New York City job had prevented her from fully exploring the possibilities of her land. There just wasn't time. Keeping bees seemed doable, however: She could tend to them on weekends. "Bees are the kind of pet where you don't need to be there every day," she says. So she ordered a beekeeper starter kit from a catalog for \$125, plus a colony of 20,000 bees for \$72

Whitens Your
Teeth Faster
Than It Takes
To Read
This Magazine.



Total Treatment Time
One Hour.

Why take two weeks when you can safely and effectively whiten your teeth up to 6 shades in only 1 Hour without any tooth sensitivity?

Finally, the evolution of tooth whitening has arrived with dentist-created Luster 1 Hour White.

Also available in Luster Weekend White formula.



VISIT GETWHITWITHLUSTER.COM
FOR SPECIAL OFFERS

AVAILABLE AT:

Walmart, CVS, Target, Walgreens
and other fine stores

/ **second acts** /



/ *The Olive Farmer* /

JOYCE LUKON, Topanga, California

Six years ago, at 60, tax accountant Lukon hit a turning point. Unmarried and childless, she recognized that she didn't need a partner to help her pursue her dreams. "It took me a long time to realize that I should make my own plans," she said. So she bought a stunning, sun-drenched piece of property in Topanga Canyon, near Los Angeles. Her parcel was large enough (three and a half acres) that she figured she could generate income by "filling the hillsides with something that would grow."

That first year, she planted 200 grapevines, knowing they would take seven years to mature. Then she discovered the book *Olives: The Life and Lore of a Noble Fruit*. She says she quickly became "besotted" with the idea of raising olives and had her soil analyzed. The verdict: Her land was perfectly suited to olives, and she immediately ordered 1,000 Spanish Arbequina trees. "They grow fast and are well suited to high-density planting," she says. "But it never occurred

big planting party. A year and a half later, the trees were lush and heavy with fruit, so this time she threw a harvest party. Afterward, she loaded 845 pounds of olives into a friend's SUV and dropped them off with a local olive miller. The results were soon in: Her ranch had produced an impressive 214 bottles (375 ml each) of chartreuse-colored olive oil. Delighted, Lukon sold her entire inventory to friends at \$30 apiece, and she won a silver medal in the California Olive Oil Council tasting contest. "Olive oils are like wines and chocolate," she says, in that they taste different depending on the variety of the plant. "Mine tastes like buttah," Lukon says proudly.

Her 2009 harvest looked promising at first, with almost 2,400 pounds of olives. But Lukon didn't realize that cooler evenings had slowed down the olives' ripening schedule, and she picked them too early. "I should have had 600 bottles, but I ended up with only 400," she says. "That's just part of being an entrepreneur. I'm learning by trial and error."

Lukon's income tax job perfectly complements her farming season. "After April 15, it's time to gear up for



"The cows were nice, and we were nice. It never occurred to us to torture them."

to me to taste Arbequina oil before making the investment; that's how ignorant I was." Shortly afterward, she did taste a sample of the oil and to her relief found it was heavenly.

Lukon took out a \$300,000 loan to cover the start-up costs for the newly named Robinson Road Olive Ranch (robinsonroadoliveranch.com). While workers terraced her hillsides and installed an iron gate, deer fencing and irrigation, she spent weekends attending olive seminars and festivals. In May 2007, to help defray labor costs, she invited friends and clients to a

the grapes and then the olives," she says. It fascinates her to watch the olives go from budding white blossoms to mature fruits in hues that change from green to yellowish to a rosy blush. "You can almost hear the growth surge. I really am in love with my olives."



/ *The Organic Niche Farmer* /

GABRIELE MAREWSKI, Homestead, Florida

In 1998, Marewski was a single mom raising her eight-year-old son while holding down a demanding county-

government job. "I loved my work, but conversations with my son were basically, 'Hurry, hurry, hurry! I'll drop you off at school.'" In December of that year, as she was figuring out child-care arrangements to cover the Christmas holidays, she decided to call it quits. "I need to spend this time with my son," she told her boss. Then, with money from a real estate sale, she bought five acres of gorgeous land next door and cast around for ways to make the property pay.

As a child, she'd spent summers playing in the forest near her home and tending a small vegetable patch. Now she wanted her son to have similar experiences. That spring she planted lettuce and sold it through a Community Supported Agriculture program. Then she noticed that local restaurant chefs were using microgreens—very young arugula, cilantro and similar leaves that are harvested when they're only a few inches tall. "They're way too expensive for the retail market, because you use a lot of seed and everything's done by hand," Marewski explains. After some research, she planted an assortment of 10 greens, then made cold calls at Miami-area restaurants, samples in hand. Four chefs bought her produce, and Paradise Farms (paradisefarms.net) shifted into high gear.

But the workload was dizzying. "At first I did everything myself: growing, delivering, bookkeeping," she says. Then she hired the first of what would become six full-time and four part-time employees. She eventually signed up 20 restaurants and added edible flowers and oyster mushrooms to her list. Now Marewski offers more than 100 types of plants throughout the year (microgreens typically sell for \$3 to \$4 an ounce), runs a volunteer program and hosts fund-raising dinners on the farm to benefit nature-based nonprofits. "We've given away over \$30,000 in the last four years," she says. "That's our way of giving back."

She puts all her profits into the farm for future projects and lives simply: no air conditioning or TV.

"I don't even get a newspaper subscription," she says. "If something is important enough, someone will let you know."



/ The Organic Meat and Vegetable Farmer /

SANDY LERNER, Upperville, Virginia

When Lerner was growing up on her aunt and uncle's California farm, she fed the cows every morning, locked them in the barn at night and loaded and unloaded hay. "Farming is an enormous amount of hard work," she says. But she enjoyed watching the cows graze under the pear trees. "I've always been a country mouse."

Yet Lerner left the farm to get her graduate degree in computer science, and in 1984 she cofounded Cisco Systems with then-husband Leonard Bosack. Forced to leave the company six years later, she sold off her holdings for tens of millions of dollars. And while her subsequent ventures succeeded, something was missing. "I looked at my life in the city one day and said, 'I've had enough.'"

In 1996, Lerner purchased Ayrshire Farm (ayrshirefarm.com), an 800-acre property in Virginia that was in total disrepair. "Luckily I found a great farm manager," she says. He helped her rebuild the infrastructure and guided her as she developed a certified organic and humane farm. Recalling her childhood experiences on the family farm, Lerner says, "The cows were nice, and we were nice. It never occurred to us to torture them."

Her biggest challenge today is contending with the "huge cartel factory farms" that dominate Virginia agriculture. So she focuses on heirloom fruits and vegetables, and rare animal breeds. Ayrshire now has annual sales of about \$2.8 million. "Once you get the bug about being on the land," Lerner says, "it's sort of a hokey word, but it's stewardship." 🌱

JENNY ROUGH, a former lawyer, writes about green living and holistic health.

MEPHISTO 
WORLD'S FINEST FOOTWEAR



**TIRED FEET?
NEVER AGAIN!**

**I WEAR MEPHISTO SANDALS WITH
SOFT-AIR TECHNOLOGY!**



BORA
(5 - 12)
whole sizes only



ADUA
(5 - 12)
whole sizes only

**FOR A COMFORTABLE AND
EFFORTLESS WALKING EXPERIENCE.**

The **SOFT-AIR TECHNOLOGY** of MEPHISTO makes tired feet a thing of the past. The flexible **SOFT-AIR** mid-sole minimizes the shock resulting from walking which offers protection to your feet, relief for your joints and proper care for your back.



Available at all **MEPHISTO STORES** and many specialty shoe retailers near you.

To request your free catalog please write to:

MEPHISTO USA,

**305 Seaboard Lane, Suite 328,
Franklin, TN 37067**

info@mephistousa.com

www.mephisto.com

FOR HEALTHY FEET