

The Glengarry News

Sheep farmers flocking to Dunvegan

August 1 2018 BY TARA MACDONALD News Staff

Farming: It's in the blood / A Farmer's Daughter

While Laurie Maus was not born and raised on a farm, her desire to become a farmer started at an early age. "I've wanted to live on a farm since I was a teenager," said Ms. Maus who's father's family were all beef farmers. "My brother had a dairy farm for a few years which is when I started farming on his farm," she said. "When I was showing dairy cattle as a teenager, I actually used to compete at the Maxville Fair."

With a Master's degree in animal biochemistry from York University, Ms. Maus went on to perform a number of roles related to health, the environment, and policy development. However, her dream of one day owning and living on her own farm never went away.

After marrying her husband Bob Garner, Laurie Maus' dreams finally became a reality. "We bought Hawk Hill Farm in 1997 just after we got married," said Ms. Maus. "Both of us wanted to live on a farm and I have wanted to farm since I was a teenager. At that point we both worked off-farm: Bob in Montreal and me in Ottawa. Stick a pin in the middle and you end up in Dunvegan."

Heritage Breeds at Risk

Heritage breeds are traditional livestock breeds that were raised by farmers in the past, before industrial agriculture became mainstream practice. Defined as a breed that has been used in Canada for at least 50 years, they form the basis from which many of today's commercial breeds evolved.

However, unlike commercial breeds which are most often used in the egg, dairy and meat industries, heritage breeds take longer to come to market. Heritage breeds also have different requirements. "For example," said Peggi Holtz of the Heritage Livestock Club of Eastern Ontario, "they don't always do well in confinement and often need to be out on pasture which makes them unsuitable for large-scale commercial farming."

As a result of pressure from industrialized farm production and changing consumer tastes, heritage breeds are increasingly at risk of extinction. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the world loses two breeds of its valuable domestic animal diversity every week. In 2000, the Watch List for Domestic Animal Diversity identified more than 6,300 breeds of domesticated livestock. Today, more than 1,300 are now extinct or considered to be in danger of extinction.

"Heritage animals have much to offer our modern way of life," said Ms. Holtz pointing to the importance of genetic diversity for sustainable agriculture development and their importance to future generations. "Canada's livestock industry is dominated by just a handful of breeds," added Ms. Maus. "Many heritage breeds are being lost and with them the genetic diversity and ability to adapt to changing climate, conditions and diseases as well as changing consumer demand."

"A lot of the commercial breeds are developed from heritage breeds," Mr. Garner chipped in. "So if you lose a heritage breed you will potentially lose the basic stock that a lot of your other animals that you commonly have today are developed from."

While heritage breeds may not be the most practical choice of livestock for factory-style farming, they offer a number of distinct advantages to small-scale farms and hobby farms. Often sturdier, more adaptable to local conditions, and more disease resistant, explained Ms. Holtz, "heritage breeds don't have the high vet bills that other breeds do." In addition, pasture-raised animals help to control invasive plant species and have richer, more complex and robust flavors than their commercial counterparts.

Hawk Hill Farms: Preserving our Past and Protecting our Future

"If we don't preserve these breeds, we'll lose them," said Ms. Maus.

Mr. Maus, along with her husband Mr. Garner, have dedicated the past two decades to helping to keep the viability of heritage breeds alive.

The couple has bred a range of heritage livestock including Canadian horses, Kobe and Ayrshire cattle, Partridge Chantecler, and Silver Grey Dorking Chickens. However, what they are perhaps best known for are their efforts to preserve and promote heritage sheep, such as the Tunis.

"The Tunis is one of the oldest North American breed of sheep," said Mr. Garner, "Originating from the Tunisian mountain sheep, they came over to the United States in the mid 1700s either as a gift from the Bay of Tunisia or reparations for the war."

A type of 'fat-tailed' sheep, the Tunis was particularly well-adapted to hot and humid climates making them an ideal choice for farmers in the mid Atlantic and southeastern United States. Much like a camel would draw reserves from its hump, the Tunis deposits fat in the tail head as opposed to all over its body.

Inter-bred with the local sheep, the Tunis soon became one of the most common meat breeds up until the American Civil War when they became almost extinct. "They were almost wiped out during the war," explained Mr. Garner "when they were used to feed the armies."

Tunis – a very tender and fine-textured meat -- is well-known among culinary enthusiasts. "It wins a lot of awards and is listed on the Ark of Taste," said Mr. Garner. "It will always be one of the top breeds in terms of quality and taste." The Ark of Taste -- an international catalogue of endangered and delicious heritage foods -- is maintained by the global Slow Food movement.

Tunis fleece - suitable for a wide variety of knitted and woven fabrics - is also highly prized. "The spinners and weavers need quality fleeces," said Ms. Maus. "Most commercial production is not focussed on fleeces so if we - as a heritage livestock club - don't preserve them, then the fleeces that they need to do their crafts will be gone."

In addition to farming, Ms. Maus and Mr. Garner are actively involved in a number of events dedicated to raising awareness, connecting producers to consumers, and promoting the advancement of raising heritage breeds for niche markets.

"It's important to talk to people and building awareness about heritage breeds of livestock," said Mr. Garner who attended the Glengarry Pioneer Museum's recent 'Stitch in Time' event. "The heritage breeds have a place and we need to maintain the stock."

Ms. Maus is also heavily involved in sheep farming associations and heritage clubs. Currently Chair of Ontario Sheep Farmers association's District 10 chapter, she is also a board member of the Heritage Livestock Club of Eastern Ontario.

Over the years, Ms. Maus has written extensively about her experiences on the farm, presented a number of talks across Ontario and offers a series of workshops to new and experienced farmers. "If you want to see change to allow our industry to thrive, the best way is to get involved," said Ms. Maus. "We to share what we have learned with other producers."

Worm control in livestock: On ongoing battle

Parasites can prove costly, time consuming and frustrating for farmers to deal with. They can also be deadly to livestock.

"When we were breeding horses, the vet recommended parasite testing the horses prior to treatment. Then we would treat the horses for parasites and then re-test them to see if the drug worked" said Ms. Maus. "While that was best practice, but all of the sudden a \$20 treatment was nearly \$100 per horse and we had 17 horses. So, I figured it was time I learned how to do my own fecal tests."

With no training options available at the time, Ms. Maus took to the internet to learn on her own. "The science background helped with that," she acknowledged.

Being able to perform her own parasite testing proved even more helpful after Ms. Maus and Mr. Garner began raising sheep. One of the biggest challenges to raising sheep on a pasture-based production system is managing internal parasites which can lead to reduced wool yield, reduced lamb production and even death.

There are a number of ways a farmer can identify infection in their flock, such as looking for clinical signs like weight loss, diarrhoea, lethargy, and a low condition score. Sadly, the impact of parasites on sheep aren't always easy to spot for the inexperienced eye until it is too late. "The time lag between sampling, shipping to the vet, and getting results," said Ms. Maus, "could result in life-threatening levels of parasites for the sheep."

Widespread resistance of these parasites to the most common anthelmintics (dewormers) makes managing parasites even more difficult. "Resistance to the drugs used to control internal parasites is a huge issue in the livestock industry," said Ms. Maus.

By learning how to test their flock, Ms. Maus and Mr. Garner were able identify individual carriers, determine whether or not treatment was warranted, and choose the right dewormer for the specific situation. "The stats are only 20 per cent of your sheep carry 80 per cent of your parasites," explained Ms. Maus. Being able to target which sheep are most in need of treatment helps reduce overuse of drugs and the potential for developing a resistance.

Their efforts are paying off. After more than a decade of breeding and raising sheep, Ms. Maus and Mr. Garner have been able to ship all their lambs to slaughter for the last two years without the need of anthelmintics.

Tackling Parasite Problems: Farmers flocking to Dunvegan for FEC training

Keen to expand her knowledge and assist other farmers in properly managing parasite infestations, Ms. Maus began testing samples for other sheep and horse producers. "They started asking if I

would train them," she said. "So I started training producers on an ad hoc basis and realized the demand was so great I needed to develop a course."

"I started offering the course three years ago," said Ms. Maus who has trained more than 65 producers through her on-farm workshop. The workshop - suitable for a range of livestock - has brought in horse, cattle, goat, llama and sheep producers from across Ontario.

Limited to five participants per session, this three-hour workshop provides a combination of lecturing, question periods, videos, and hands-on training on how to identify specific parasites and do a Modified McMaster Fecal Egg Count (FEC).

A fecal egg count (FEC) is a simple procedure that farmers can perform at home to get a rough idea of the parasite load their livestock is carrying. FEC tests also enable farmers to find out whether or not a dewormer is still effective or if the gastrointestinal parasites have become resistant to it.

Knowing what parasites are, being able to detect which type of parasites your flock is carrying, when they pose a risk to your stock, and how you can control them is vital for minimising production losses.

Yvonne Marot -- a sheep and cattle farmer from Mississauga Ontario -- learned first-hand how devastating anthelmintics resistance can be. "I've got 80 sheep grazing now. Initially we had a few problems, we got some new sheep and we think they had been dosed with anthelmintics. They were very resistant to parasites, so a lot of sheep died," said Ms. Marot. "You can't afford to get the vet in all of the time but you want to be on top of what's happening with your flock, so if you can catch something early that really helps."

By learning how to test for parasites, identify the different species, and get a rough idea of the parasite load her sheep were carrying, farmers can take steps to actively preserve their flock health while saving themselves a lot of time, money and heartache.

"I'm super-excited to be able to access this kind of course," said workshop participant Lyndsey Smith. Ms. Smith, a sheep farmer from Kinburn, Ontario, currently runs about 250 ewes and is planning to expand significantly in coming years. "Our flock health is one of those things you can always improve on but there isn't actually a tonne of information out there that's cohesive and complete for parasite management for our sheep," Ms. Smith explained. "Being able to actually look at each animal and assess what we have in regards to parasites is pretty powerful because one of the major challenges of sheep production is trying to keep them alive and so the more ways we can understand their health and how we can keep them healthy, the better."

News of Ms. Maus and Mr. Garner's workshops spread quickly throughout the industry. "I really don't need to do much advertising at this point. All the workshops were fully booked by late spring," said Ms. Maus. "Demand was so great province-wide," said Ms. Maus, "that Ontario Sheep Farmers has hired two vets to run my course in several locations throughout Ontario."

"This is a niche that we needed and Laurie filled it," agreed Ms. Marot. "The hands-on experience is what we need because we're going to have to learn how to do it on our own."

While similar courses in the United States and Australia can cost as much as \$350, Ms. Maus and Mr. Garner wanted to ensure that small producers had access to the information and skills they needed to protect their animals.

"Bob and I have decided to subsidize this course as we saw the need," explained Ms. Maus. "We're doing this for the agriculture industry and especially for the livestock."

Rather than paying a monetary fee, participants are asked to bring a bottle of wine or other payment-in-kind from their own farms. "It brings a laugh and actually we have received some wines I would not have bought. We have quite a decent wine cellar now," exclaimed Ms. Maus who has also received handmade socks, honey, and homemade lasagna. "We had to bring something from our farm," Ms. Marot chimed in. "I've got nice grass-fed Galloway cattle so I brought a roast."

Those interested in attending a workshop at Hawk Hill Farms are advised to book early to avoid disappointment. For more information or register for a workshop, call (613) 527-1897.