

Contact Lyle to discuss this career path: Phone - (802) 323-3761 Email - spudkitt@pshift.com

For Lyle Edwards, the path to becoming a successful dairy farmer was short and direct. He knew from the time he was a toddler that he wanted to be a dairy farmer. Though his father was a stone cutter, his grandfather and 4 generations prior were all farmers, making him a 7th generation farmer. Originally from Groton, Vermont, he now owns and operates, with his wife Kitty, Spring Brook Farm, a certified organic dairy farm in Westfield, Vermont. At Spring Brook Farm they milk 45-50 head, selling the milk to the Organic Valley Milk Cooperative. They also raise heifers to sell to other organic farmers in the region. Kitty also works off the farm as a registered nurse.

Lyle did not go to school beyond High School, but he is indeed a lifelong learner and voracious reader. Lyle learned the Voisin method of rotational grazing in the 1970's by reading Andre Voisin's classic *Grass Productivity*, and uses this technique on his farm today. The majority of Lyle's education has been grounded in on the job learning and getting timely mentoring from some early organic farming pioneers. Some of his learning has also come from experiencing hard times.

“You’ve got to work first. If you think you want to do it you’ve got to work on a farm first to really know.”

The only jobs he has had are working on farms. One of these jobs was crucial to his decision to become a small scale organic dairy farmer. When he was in his early 20s, he went to Florida to work on a couple of large scale dairy farms where they milked up to 1200 cows! The prevailing philosophy of farming at the time was to “get big or get out”. To

Lyle, this was not farming and he moved back to Vermont. In 1976 he rented a farm in South Peacham, borrowing money to get a bulk-tank, 24 head and “a few wrenches”. Over the years, he rented several farms throughout Northern Vermont. His final rental was in North Troy where, through a serendipitous occurrence, he was able to buy cows and equipment from his friend and mentor, Claude Sheriden. He was encouraged to go organic by his neighbor, Jack Lazer.



Lyle and Kitty

Lyle's failures have also provided him with valuable educational lessons. A broken marriage (Kitty is his second wife) and a misguided partnership with another farmer led Lyle to bankruptcy. He has started from nothing twice in his life, but his love of what he does and perseverance have contributed to the success that he and Kitty enjoy today. Over time he built his business until he and Kitty were able to buy the farm they now own in Westfield.

His advice to anyone wanting to become a dairy farm is to keep it simple and pay attention to financial management, which is the most difficult part of farming. He boils success down to doing 4 things: milk well, feed well, breed well, and clean well. Kyle also recommends going to work on a farm to determine if you actually like the work before investing time and resources to develop an operation. This will provide valuable experience and opportunity to learn from different mentors.

Contact Mari and Laura to discuss this career path: Phone - (802) 505-9850 Email - farmers@eatstayfarm.com

Mari Omland and Laura Olsen are co-owners of the diversified Green Mountain Girls Farm, located about two miles from Vermont Route 89 in Northfield. They consider themselves not only 'grassroots farmers,' but 'relationship farmers,' because their combined diverse interests have led to the development of several niche-sized enterprises within a single larger farm.

After six joy-filled years of effort, their shared vision for healthy natural systems, high quality products, community engagement, neighborly collaboration, and creative decision making has carried their dream into a prospering venture. Mari

“I learned a lot about how to write clearly and express myself. That was a really important skill—to express the ideas I had. We need to communicate to customers what we want to sell.”

says, “It’s all about the caring. I am fortunate to find work that I really love. I never had a job I didn’t love.” While in high school she figured out what she most loved to do and pursued that dream in the Vermont Green Mountain Girls Farm collaboration.

Although sustainable farming is their goal, Mari points out that they first needed to establish a culture of ‘restorative agriculture,’ where the history of the hill farm land itself is re-discovered to provide a rich environment for fruits, vegetables, livestock and

people to flourish. The broad scope of this enterprise has tapped into all the skills and ingenuity of these two creative individuals. **“Farming takes you back to the basics...Every type of skill is needed” says Mari, and that includes knowing about soil science, biology, chemistry, mathematics, and even computer science.**

Mari’s college degrees at Williams College and George Mason University and world travels, as well as Laura’s degree from the University of Vermont and experience in organizational planning, provided the foundation for their adventure. Mari and Laura are helped by several qualified helpers to complete their daily tasks. Meghan Farley, a recent Johnson State College graduate and neighbor, contributes her enthusiasm and creative writing skills to support the communication aspects of the Farm.



Laura and Mari milking goats

When asked about advice for students who might want to enter this field, Mari offered these suggestions:

- 1. Know yourself**—“Find out what you are good at. Look in the mirror and determine what you love to do...and where you have found repeated success.” Then follow that dream.
- 2. Make an offer to prospective employers** —“Don’t wait for a job description that has your name on it...tell people what you can do for them.”
- 3. Keep your options open**—you never know what might come along.

Contact Lila and Dave to discuss this career path: Phone - (802) 525-1313 Email - ttfarm@gmail.com

What's your current work?

Own and operate 188 acre farm, raising animals for meat and eggs.

What was your educational pathway to end up in this job?

For seven years (ages 14 to 21) Lila trained as an Olympic horsewoman in Vermont, Virginia, and Florida. Every day she was around horses learning the value of hard work and the intensive organization needed to fulfill a vision. In 2004, Lila graduated from Johnson State with a degree in elementary education. In his 20s, Dave was an accomplished rock climber. After son Sam was born, he learned carpentry.

How did you get involved in farming?

We were vegetarians for years and began to eat meat when Lila, pregnant with our second child, began dreaming about roasted chickens! It became clear that all people need a diverse selection of healthy choices, and that buying organically grown veggies from China and California is having just as damaging an impact on the world as factory farming. We began to buy more local products, (chickens for roasting among them) and then to grow our own.

What is your typical day like?

No day is the same. Lila awakes between 4 – 7 AM to do record keeping. Records are essential to raising animals, especially to meet state and federal documentation. Two of our three kids are home-schooled, while one goes to school. After breakfast, the two stay-at-home kids work with us until noon with chores. After lunch, kids do school work, while Lila and Dave continue chores. Family has dinner together, after which additional chores or homework for kids. It's not unusual for Lila and Dave to work until 10 or 11 PM.

What specific skills, technical and interpersonal, are needed in your work?

Writing and computer skills, specifically for accounting and bookkeeping (spreadsheets). Financial and economic planning skills. For interpersonal skills, because its a family run business, need to be able to compromise.

What kind of training could you have used that you didn't get in High School or beyond?

Work on farms.



Lila, Dave, and their family at Tangletown Farm

What did you learn on the job that you didn't learn in the classroom?

We learned the hard way; made lots of mistakes, but learned from each one. Lila thinks sometimes the focus on success means you hear only the good stories, not the ones that reflect challenges, failure, and all of the hard work—sometimes too romanticized. A lot of knowledge about animals was learned from on-farm experience, such as how groups of animals have different behaviors, styles, and “comfort zones.”

What do you wish you had known before getting launched into the work place (the world of work)?

Lila started working at age 12 and sees herself having a good work ethic and willingness to do whatever. However, she was not prepared for how to live on her own. Managing a budget, food, and daily living expenses was difficult. Dave agrees—he has a great work ethic too, but transition to full adulthood was hard.

If you could change anything looking back, what would you change or do differently?

They would have had more fun. Both were way too serious far too early. In terms of farming, she would have done a better job of crunching numbers and doing the business planning side of things. They had a vision and went for it fully. Consequently, they experienced some cash flow issues. With a better understanding of things we could have avoided this dilemma.