

Less is More at Bluestone Mountain Farm

Rhonda Dortch lives on 15 acres overlooking the Greenbrier River. She calls her piece of heaven Bluestone Mountain Farm.

“One day in the fall, I took a trip to see the colors. I’d never been as far as West Virginia. I thought, ‘Oh my!’ It was beautiful. I needed a break from commercialism and wanted to expand my farm and business. It seemed like a great piece of land. I felt a deep connection.”

She moved from North Carolina where she was running an educational/organic farm to Summers County in 2011. It wasn’t until 2012 that she began leasing the land she now calls home.

Bluestone Mountain isn’t your typical farm. Dortch lives as far off the grid and as close to the land as possible. She is Greenbrier Valley Grown certified as well as Animal Welfare Approved.

“I’m against genetically modified seeds, plants, and livestock. I rarely go to the grocery store. I might have one bag of trash once a month. Almost everything goes back into the farm.”

For example, all the feathers that come from processing her chickens and turkeys go back on her field and get plowed into the ground. It adds nitrogen into the soil. She burns paper products and uses the potash on the garden.

“Everything can be circled back into the farm. It can be used here,” Dortch stresses. “The more you streamline what you really need, you’ll find you need less.”

That ‘less is more’ philosophy is one shared by a growing number of small farmers in southern West Virginia. Dortch found that out after putting an ad in the local paper for some ducklings. She heard from a man living in Sandstone, about 20 miles away. He was looking for fresh, GMO-free food. The two struck up a friendship and together created a chat group, <http://westvirginiafarmers.org/>. Members can ask questions about farming techniques, where to find certain items, and bartering.

“I needed some bees. I was chatting with a 75-year old woman who said she’d love to barter a hive of bees for a bushel of tomatoes. I said, ‘You’re on.’”

Dortch also barter for services. She met a man that will help fix farm equipment, process chickens, and repair her 4-wheeler. In return, she pays some of his utility bills. It’s a win/win.

Dortch’s main income from the farm comes from her Bluestone soap. It’s made of goat’s milk. It’s a value-added product that she can sell anytime of the year. It’s not perishable.

“It’s healing soap made with essential oils. I have 39 different kinds from soaps that treat everything from eczema, poison ivy, and acne to bars that keep the bugs away, cleans grime, and then there are my aromatherapy soaps.” says Dortch. “They are not harsh. They are herbal soaps.”

In addition to a small herd of goats, Dortch keeps cows, donkeys, turkeys, endangered heritage Ancona ducks, Embden geese, several hives of bees, and five working dogs. She raises heritage crops like bloody butcher corn for cornmeal and heirloom tomatoes and produce.

“I guess I have farm ADD! It’s fun, all the things that I do, and I want to do and learn more,” she stresses.

It’s not an easy way of life.

“It’s not like going to work and punching a clock. I work seven days a week from morning till I go to bed at night,” she says.

Dortch has chosen to sell her produce, meats, and products online and at select farmers’ markets, festivals, and specialty markets. Her online and word-of-mouth advertising is working.

“The Greenbrier Resort called the other day. They said they were doing a Farm to Table event. They wanted several chickens. I was thrilled about that! It’s a great way to promote my business.”

Dortch admits her bare bones farming isn’t for everyone, but it suits her just fine.

“It builds such strength. This is definitely a way of life. Every day is so different.”

To find out more about Bluestone Mountain Farm and Dortch’s approach to farming, check out her website at <http://www.bluestonemountainfarm.com/> and Facebook page at Bluestone Mountain Farm.