



Patrick and Maria Simms, along with their son, Porter, keep Rough Swan Ranch in working order.

Working for the Farm

Maria and Patrick Simms hold full-time jobs to keep their farm business growing

ROUGH SWAN RANCH



By Jeanie Senior

For eight years, Maria Roeder-Simms and Patrick Simms rented in Hood River and looked for the farm of their dreams.

“It just took a long time to find something affordable and suited to us,” Maria says.

They eventually found 21 acres off Snowden Road, with fields and woods, a house and numerous outbuildings. The seller had knocked \$50,000 off the asking price, which put it in the couple’s price range.

Their place, now named Rough Swan Ranch, wasn’t what you would call farming-ready, however.

“Brush everywhere,” Patrick says.

They brought in 60 Boer goats to mount an offensive against the snow-berry, Oregon grape and assorted other thick undergrowth. Aided by Patrick’s chainsaw and a group of pastured pigs, the clearing went fairly fast.

Four years later, the herd of goats is long gone and Rough Swan Ranch reflects Patrick and Maria’s hard work. There are lush green pastures, a flourishing garden and a large flock of healthy chickens roaming the grounds. There are a few cows, a couple of llamas and a couple of goats grazing in one pasture. By early summer pigs will be pastured across the lane.



Porter helps Patrick gather eggs, which are staples in the farm's community-supported agriculture shares.

The couple sells its organic free-range eggs at the Hood River Farmers Market, and later this summer will sell organic pastured pork as well. They again will sell community-supported agriculture shares in the farm for people who want priority on eggs, pork and chicken.

There is a cost to living a pastoral life in an idyllic setting: Maria and Patrick both work full time to support the farm and pay the mortgage.

Maria is a paramedic for the Klickitat County Ambulance service. She rotates among stations in White Salmon, Dallesport and Goldendale. In the past, she commuted to Hillsboro and Stevenson.

Patrick, a union carpenter, works heavy construction and drives to his job in Portland five days a week. His days begin at 3:30 a.m. The commute takes 90 minutes in the morning and two hours in the afternoon if he is lucky, and traffic and weather cooperate. The upside to his early rising is that

“on weekends he accomplishes so much before I even wake up in the morning,” Maria jokes.

They agree it would be wonderful if they could devote all their time to farming and expand their production.

“Or we would love for the two of us to have half-time jobs,” Maria says.

But the reality is that they can't afford to pay the mortgage and only farm. They spent last year at a dead run: They raised 50 hogs and sold pork and eggs at three farmers markets.

“We wasted food from our garden because we didn't have time to harvest it,” Maria says.

It also turned out to be the kind of year familiar to many small business owners, with unexpected expenses whittling away the profit. They had to buy a bigger horse trailer to transport the pigs to the processor, buy more freezers and get a new pickup. In August, the well went out, with 50 thirsty pigs who also needed a mud hole to cool down.

Fortunately, the well problem was fixed swiftly and the bill, though hefty, was far less than they feared.

“We tested ourselves really well and we made it,” Patrick says of 2013.

“This year, we are trying to focus more on family time,” Maria adds.

“We both grew up on farms and we remember how good it was to have fresh eggs and meat,” Patrick says. “We really wanted our kids to have the same quality of life.”

Patrick has rebuilt a number of the farm's outbuildings to his own higher standards. He recycled lumber to other uses, including a small greenhouse that lets them start seedlings and work around the shorter growing season at their place, which is at 2,000 feet elevation. They expanded their garden, and Patrick has planted more blueberries and raspberries.

Patrick and Maria grew up in Washougal and have known each other since they were young. Their fathers worked for Bonneville Power Administration, and the families were friends.

After high school, Patrick and Maria went in separate directions until they got together at their 20th high school class reunion. Maria was a single parent with a daughter, Madison. Patrick was divorced. Now, they have a son, Porter, who starts first grade at Whitson Elementary next year. Madison will be a senior at Columbia High School.

Patrick laughs when asked for the source of their farm's name, Rough Swan Ranch.

When they brought in the herd of Boer goats to clear the land, Patrick says, he contacted the Boer goat organization to register the goats. Where the form asked for the farm name, he printed Rough Sawn, a reference to his occupation as a carpenter.

The form came back with a typo. Maria loved the name, Rough Swan, so it stuck. A friend drew the cowboy hat-and boot-wearing swan in the logo. ■