

Farm Profile

Hilltop Cottage Farm

“Farming’s not going to make me rich, but it will make me happy,” says Natalie Smith, owner of Hilltop Cottage Farm in Robert’s Island, Yarmouth County.

Natalie moved to the Yarmouth area with her husband, Paul, and their son Daniel, now 12, three years ago. Originally from Ontario, Natalie had worked in the corporate world in the field of business operations. Her life changed when she and Paul read *The Self-Sufficient Life and How to Live It* by John Seymour and realized they needed to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. They decided to move to Nova Scotia, despite knowing little about the province and having no friends or family here.

Hilltop Cottage Farm is located at the end of a dirt road in an idyllic spot near the coast. It’s easy to see why the Smiths fell in love with it. They learned from their neighbor, a relative of the family that had owned the property for the previous 175 years, that their land was well-suited for agriculture. The original family had grown food to sustain themselves and had also kept sheep and foxes (for fur) and had a strawberry U-Pick. When the Smiths’ Nova Scotia income fell short of their projections, they realized their property had the potential to generate additional income through farming.

Natalie’s skills gained from business operations have served her well as she’s developed her farm business, but “we’re still on the steep side of the farming learning curve,” she says. She’s received a great deal of help from neighbours and farming peers, as well as from the Department of Agriculture’s Western Regional Office and AgraPoint.

Currently, they grow two acres of vegetables and keep 40 hens. Natalie became interested in the Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) model because she had limited production capacity herself. She partnered with several other vegetables growers and meat producers to form the Yarmouth Farmers Food Basket (<http://www.yffb.ca/>), a multi-farm CSA that offers seasonal and 52-week vegetable shares, as well as meat and fish shares. This past season, they had 80 members, 40 of whom are signed up for 52-weeks.

In addition to working with local farms to create new business opportunities, Natalie has contributed a great deal to South-west Nova. She’s committed to being a part of the community, as she’s found that she loves rural life and having relationships with other people in the area. She has served as a volunteer fire fighter, and is currently the President of the Yarmouth and Argyle Farmers’ Markets and Farmers Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS), as well as being involved in other community initiatives. “When we moved here,” she said, “The first question that local people asked us was how long are you going to stay? When you go into a situation where you want to contribute and earn your stripes, people see that you want to do something for them rather than just for yourself and they respond to that.”



Natalie's approach to community engagement is instructive for others who are new to farming and rural living, some of whom struggle with feelings of isolation or not being accepted by their neighbours. Natalie says she hasn't felt excluded from her community at all, despite being a 'come from away.' "I was used to proving myself in the corporate world," she said, "So I had confidence in myself and engaged the community with the expectation of success."

Natalie loves the challenges of farming and the chance to control her own destiny. "When at a certain stage in life, you decide to do something radically different from your previous career, it requires a whole new skill set and exercises your brain in different ways. I'm working as many hours now as I did at my previous job for lower wages, but with passion and a love of what I'm doing."

Natalie encourages other newcomers to farming to make sure they have a real passion for agriculture or they won't be able to overcome the challenges. She also notes that the farmers she sees that have been really successful are those that created partnerships with other farmers and community businesses with similar outlooks.