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10 MUST-GROW GREENS

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Foster Farmers

Not all animals are lucky enough to have a safe, healthy home. As a foster parent, your farm could serve as the first stop on their journey to happier lives.

BY RACHAEL BRUGGER

When Maggy the Mustang entered a foster farm at the age of 3, she was pregnant with her second foal and had just been rescued from a herd in western Massachusetts that had never been handled. While she quickly learned the kindness a human touch could bring, she needed a lot of care and training from a willing and experienced foster parent.

Needy farm animals like Maggy can fill a special place on your hobby farm. Whether you no longer have animals but miss the pleasures that a rooting pig or a laying chicken bring to your farmstead, or you're already keeping animals on your farm but have space for others in need of a good home, you might consider becoming a livestock or equine foster parent.
Free up Space
Before committing to foster care, make sure you have enough room to take in an animal. The Farm Sanctuary, the largest farm rescue in the U.S., provides these space guidelines:
- 5 to 10 acres per cow or steer
- 1/2 acre per pig
- 1/2 acre per goat
- 1/3 to 1/6 acre per sheep
- 10- x12-foot shelter per 25 chickens
- Pond for ducks and geese

Farm foster parents are part of a larger community dedicated to the well-being of animals that have been displaced or are in need of extra TLC. Unlike a rescue or adoption, fostering requires a short-term commitment—be it 2 weeks or 2 years—to take care of an animal until it can be returned to its owner or rehomed at a permanent farm, shelter or sanctuary.

An animal can find itself in need of short-term caregivers for a variety of reasons, including an owner encountering an unexpected life change, such as divorce, military duty or job loss, that prevents him from being able to shelter or feed it properly for a couple of months; a local animal sanctuary acquiring abused or neglected animals in a law-enforcement investigation and needing capable hands to care for and train the animals until they can safely be placed in a permanent home; or a shelter simply exceeding its facility’s capacity, requiring it to partner with a farm to provide extra space for the animals.

The Right Stuff
While all foster parents have their own motives for taking in livestock, most do it out of kindness and a love for animals. While fostering doesn’t require a 10- to 15-year commitment, it’s important to identify why you want to foster and acknowledge the responsibility that comes with the job.

"Foster parents must be 100-percent sure they want to foster," says Tamala Lester, who runs Barnyard Sanctuary, a 501c(3) nonprofit in Blairtown, NJ. "Nothing is worse than taking an animal out of its home, it’s so upset, and then two weeks later you return it because you can’t keep it."

When Barnyard Sanctuary cannot accept an animal due to space constraints or temperament of the animals, Lester carefully selects foster farms to serve as the sanctuary’s satellite acreage. It’s important to her that the foster be experienced in handling the animal she’s taking in and be capable of giving it the care it needs, be it hoof trimming, moving bales of hay or other routine tasks. She visits the prospective foster farm for an interview and to observe the facilities to ensure the animal and keeper will be a good fit.

Just because you have a willing heart doesn’t mean you’re necessarily equipped to deal with an abused or neglected animal. "You have to be careful matching the foster parent with the right animal," she says. "Just like not all dogs are the same, not all sheep or goats are the same. Some kick, some bite, some head-butt. You need to be able to handle the specific animal’s behaviors."

Other organizations that you might work with as a foster could have an application process similar to Barnyard Sanctuary’s—it’s best to know this upfront. The Methuen Animal Care and Adoption Center at Nevins Farm in Methuen, Mass., which placed Maggy, primarily fosters horses and has a strict background check process. In addition to a site visit to the prospective farm, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which runs the adoption center and foster program, requires that the foster provide three references, one of which must be a livestock veterinarian, and those wanting to take in a horse must pass a riding and handling evaluation.

"Our equine foster program has become an incredibly important part of our program in general," says Melissa Ghareeb, manager of the Equine and Farm Animal Center at Nevins Farm. "Having dedicated foster families to help has allowed us to place and help many more horses than we could have helped without them. It truly is a community effort."

Step by Step
When applying to be a foster, it’s important to understand your duties and prepare your farm accordingly. Calculate the financial and time commitments involved in taking on another animal, and ensure your farm is zoned to keep the types of livestock you wish to foster.

Before you submit an application, Ghareeb recommends researching the specific needs of the animal you want to take in, including space and feed requirements. "For example, pigs are very smart and clean. They need plenty of room to root, but they also need a clean, dry shed to keep away from
Find a Partner

If you aren’t familiar with a foster program in your area, use these suggestions to find a reputable organization.

- Check the organization’s 501(c)(3) status, and find out how long it’s been in operation.
- Visit the facility. Ask how many fosters they use, if any, so you know what size organization you’re working with and you can better understand what to expect from the foster process.
- Talk with community members. Find out if they’ve worked with the organization and what they know about its practices.
- Call the ASPCA and local animal control. “If you’ve been to a facility with numerous complaints, think closely about who you’re working with,” Lester says.

the elements,” she says. While a site visit from the foster program will likely help you determine if you can provide what’s needed, doing online research and talking to extension specialists and neighbors who have experience keeping that type of animal beforehand will help you save time and heartache during the application process.

While each foster program works a little differently, you’ll want to discuss your responsibilities with the program manager before accepting an animal. Determine your financial responsibilities regarding food and medical care and what costs—if any—are covered by the program, as well as how they’ll be covered (e.g., reimbursement versus stipend). Ask if the organization’s insurance will cover human injury or illness related to the foster animal. “If a goat head-butts someone in the arm, will the organization cover the expenses of the injured person?” Lester asks. Barnyard Sanctuary’s insurance will cover most medical expenses except for communicable diseases, such as rabies, swine flu or bird flu. If your foster program doesn’t offer this benefit, see if your homeowners insurance will; otherwise, be prepared to take a substantial financial hit in the event of an accident.

Where Do I Go from Here?

Once you understand your role as a foster, set up a contractual agreement between yourself and the organization or person you’re fostering for that outlines these details as well as your legal obligations if the original owner doesn’t take the animal back. Then get to work setting up your farm to receive the new animal.

It’s important to prepare yourself for the unique difficulties a foster animal might pose. Large animals are susceptible to stress-induced illness called shipping fever and other illnesses during the moving process. Plus, animals coming from situations of abuse or neglect will likely need a lot of one-on-one attention. “Many of the animals that need fostering are compromised, so you want to make sure that everyone has time to settle in and get used to their new surroundings,” Gahrehb says.

Arrange a quarantine area for the animal’s first 40 days on your property. This prevents the introduction of disease to other livestock and keeps the newbie from being thrust to the bottom of the pecking order. “If you put a goat with borderline shipping fever into a herd of strange goats, they may head-butt to determine who will be ‘king,’” Lester says.

Set up a shelter and feeding area for the animal. If you are expecting baby poultry, have a warm, dry, clean place for them to stay while they mature.

Check pastures to ensure fencing is secure and that there are no poisonous plants.

Research specific dietary needs of the individual animal and buy feed before it arrives to the farm.

Arrange veterinary care with either your vet or one provided by the foster organization, and secure a way to transport the animal if required.

Finally, expect that you just might fall in love with the animal under your care. While it might not always be the case that you can adopt the animal that you foster, this is often an option. When Maggy was placed with her second foster mom, who was able to work with her and make significant progress in her physical and emotional transformation, the foster parent eventually committed to being her permanent owner. Whether you’re only available for the short term or looking for a foster situation that could lead to adoption, there’s a farm animal that likely needs your help.

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