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Shepherd's Tale: Here's a Yarn For Eco-Knitters

**Ms. Gibbs Sells Shares
In Natural-Fiber Farm;
Know Your Nanny Goat**

By **ROBERT TOMSHO**
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EDGARTOWN, Mass. -- When Susan Gibbs launched her Internet wool and yarn business last fall, she was afraid nobody would notice.

These days, the self-taught shepherd has shareholders and an online following. Emailers she has never met help name her sheep and goats. The fleece from her Martha's Vineyard Fiber Farm is sold months before it's sheared.

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Robert Tomsho


Ms. Gibbs named a batch of newborns after herbs and spices, including Oregano, above.

At times, the attention has bewildered the former television news producer. "I had no idea it would take off the way it did," the 37-year-old Ms. Gibbs said one recent morning while toting bales of hay and buckets of water to her flock. "We definitely tapped into something."

She discovered the passionate world of 21st-century knitting, a quirky realm that is growing fast, with help from the Internet. About 53 million American women knew how to knit and crochet in 2004, up from 35 million a decade earlier, according to a recent study by the Craft Yarn Council of America.

For many in this new generation of knitters, any old yarn won't do. Some eco-minded

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• **Photos:** [One Farm's Woolly Wonders](#)³

knitters sell yarn made from unraveled thrift-shop sweaters. Aiming to reduce fuel consumption, other knitters lobby their fellows to avoid using yarn produced more than 100 miles from their homes. Zealous about using only natural fibers -- and knowing precisely where they come from -- some buy their yarn from individual shepherds or travel to the British Isles, Scandinavia and other countries to examine fleece while it is still on the animals.

"It is like a fever that has spread," says Kathleen Lyons, owner of Textile Travel, a Cape Cod travel agency that specializes in knitting-related tourism. "It is a whole universe."

Susan Gibbs ventured in last fall as a way to support her passion for raising sheep and goats.

Up to that point, her short career as a shepherd had been bumpy. Inspired by a how-to book about raising farm animals, she acquired her first four sheep in 2003 after buying an old farm in Catskill, N.Y. Unfortunately, their wool turned out to be intolerably coarse and scratchy. She tried raising goats for ethnic food markets but couldn't stand looking the critters in the eye. "They were just walking meat," says Ms. Gibbs, who continued adding to her fleece flock, a kid here and a ewe there.

By the time Ms. Gibbs moved to a Martha's Vineyard townhouse last year to set up housekeeping with her boyfriend, she had eight sheep and 15 goats of various breeds, with more on the way. A local nonprofit group let the flock graze on its land free of charge. Even so, her proceeds from selling yarn didn't come close to covering the cost of hay, other feed and medicine. Ms. Gibbs took a job at the local chamber of commerce while she tried to figure out what to do.



Susan Gibbs

She came up with a twist on so-called "community supported agriculture," or CSA, a form of alternative financing more commonly used by produce growers. In return for an upfront investment that helps cover planting costs and reduces the growers' risk, CSA participants get a share of the crop. During harvest time, one Arkansas farm offers shareholders a weekly basket containing at least 15 pounds of vegetables. Other CSAs specialize in herbs or flowers.

In late September, Ms. Gibbs announced her plan in a posting on Etsy.com, a craft-oriented Web site. For \$100, investors could buy 1% of the Fiber Farm's spring shearing delivered as yarn or as a less-processed form of wool suitable for spinning.

Jordi Waggoner, an Internet designer from New York City, was surfing the Etsy site when the pitch was posted. A dedicated knitter of socks, she had once spent \$58 on a skein of yarn made from the shed underbelly hair of musk oxen. Compared to that extravagance, investing in the Fiber Farm seemed like public service. "It just somehow felt right," says Ms. Waggoner, who bought the first share.

When interest in buying the shares slumped, Ms. Gibbs offered to give one away. Bloggers spread the word, and within a few days, more than 750 yarn enthusiasts had entered the drawing, which was won by a Seattle teacher.

By New Year's Day, all 100 shares for the spring 2008 harvest were gone and Ms. Gibbs began selling interests in this fall's shearing, a mohair affair that will feature her Angora goats. So far, shareholders have invested about \$20,000 in the Fiber Farm, which also sells yarn from earlier shearings online and at local farmers' markets. Susan Dress, office manager of a boatyard in Marblehead, Ohio, signed up for a share in the fall harvest, in part, for political reasons. "I have been thinking a lot more about where the things we buy come from," she says. "We're giving away too much of our infrastructure and jobs to other countries."

Ms. Gibbs offered her shareholders online updates. She talked about herself, her work and her animals, sometimes posting pictures of young goats butting heads with chickens or leaping from hay bales. Calling themselves the "groupies group," some shareholders set up a fan club on Ravelry.com, a knitting Web site. They discussed their own lives, knitting and Ms. Gibbs.

Shareholders also suggested yarn colors and animal names. At their behest, Ms. Gibbs decided to name her nanny goats after famous nannies such as Mary Poppins, Mrs. Doubtfire and Nanny McPhee. As birthing season approached, the group voted to name the newborns after herbs and spices.

Basil, Sage and Chive came along in February. Then, early on March 17, Ms. Gibbs posted two pictures of a newborn Angora goat named Parsley, calling him the "tiniest little peanut of a kid that we have ever seen."

Shareholders gushed. "What a beautiful baby," one wrote back. "Awww! Parsley is just too precious," said another.

The outpouring made Ms. Gibbs's posting the next afternoon all the more difficult. "I have very sad news to share with you and I can't figure out the best way to say it," she wrote. "Little Parsley didn't make it."

In subsequent days, shareholders advised the shepherd to take care, get rest and not blame herself. In exchanges on the groupie's blog, some mulled how best to pay tribute to the animal. "Perhaps we could all grow some parsley," one suggested.

In the end, another idea won out. And so, when visiting knitters gather for this weekend's shearing at the Fiber Farm, Susan Gibbs will tell them about her plans to expand her flock and start a shepherding camp for those who want an even closer view of where their wool comes from.

She'll also show them some new yarn, dyed a soft shade of green and named after the departed Angora.

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