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RELATIONSHIPS

Country comforts

Whether doing their rounds of daily chores or hosting visitors throughout the holidays, this couple is at home on the farm.

MULTIMEDIA PHOTOS



Bob and Lynn Schutte have been married for 47 years. At Northern Lights Tree Farm, they aim “to be in service of education and hospitality,” Bob says. (Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard)

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Lynn and Bob Schutte’s website says it all: “Welcome to Northern Lights Christmas Tree Farm, located 15 minutes from town but a lifestyle back in time.”

Since taking early retirement as an elementary school teacher in 1994, Lynn has been building a busy life with Bob on their Pleasant Hill farm. What started as a Christmas tree farm, has become a full-fledged “agritainment” venture. In addition to the 80 acres planted in noble, grand, Douglas and Fraser fir as well as Scotch pine trees, the Schuttes raise angus, Hereford and black baldie cattle (130 head at last count), turkeys (double breasted and heritage), chickens, pumpkins, gourds, corn and alfalfa.

Beyond the cultivation of trees and the care and feeding of animals, the Schuttes have become an institution among local schoolchildren. Starting in early October, they open their farm to the public and hundreds of school groups, offering a bounty of farm fun they call Colonial Harvest Days.

“Our mission is to be in service of education and hospitality,” Bob says. And when it comes to children, the focus is on making their visit educational, Lynn adds.

Early in the season the Schuttes fashion a 100-by-20-foot Mayflower replica out of hay. The “Hayflower” has a second level poop deck made from plywood so the kids can go underneath to see how cramped it was, Lynn says. Ever the educator, Lynn provides study units to teachers. And to make sure it’s all fun, there’s authentic 17th century games and music.

For his part, Bob takes kids on a hayride and talks about life on a working farm, including a lesson in physics that involves launching pumpkins from a catapult-like trebuchet. The boys especially love the big splat, Bob says.

“We try to make everything as relevant as we can,” Lynn says. “We teach them about bats, owls and spiders.” She once had a tarantula that escaped from his cage. “Poof, it was gone,” she says. “Once I talk about the missing tarantula, I have the students’ full attention.”

Back to the land

This second career (Bob is a mechanical engineer who still works occasionally as a consultant) started in 1986 when the couple decided to invest in their future. They had been living in Eagle River, Alaska, northeast of Anchorage, and raising two boys when they heard from a brother-in-law that a former dairy farm was for sale.

“We knew we liked Oregon,” Lynn says.

Like many of us, the Schuttes had a vision of life in the country. Lynn had grown up in Hollister, a rural town south of San Jose, Calif., and was an avid member of 4H. It was her 4H experience that led Lynn to a stint in the Peace Corps in 1963.

It took a year to close the deal, and it would be many more years before the Schuttes were ready to leave Alaska. In the meantime, a nephew, familiar with tree farming, suggested they plant some of their acreage in Christmas trees.

When the Schuttes finally made the move to Oregon, they already had a good crop of trees going. The couple rented out the existing two houses on their property and built an expansive log cabin along a scenic patch of river frontage. Initially, Bob says, they raised wheat and oats.

“What we found dealing with commodities is there’s not much money to be made, and there’s money to be lost.”

Holidays on the farm

Through October, the Schuttes open their farm for Colonial Harvest Days and sell some of their produce and gift items from a country store Lynn set up in an old barn. This year she was excited to carry a new line of autumn decorations called Steam Punkins.

During most of November, they’re busy processing wholesale trees for shipping, working all the way into Thanksgiving Day. It’s a busy time, what with the farm and store also open for holiday sales the day after Thanks-giving.

People coming for Christmas trees can choose and cut their own, or buy one already cut.

There are also wreaths, ornaments and treats worthy of a winter outing.

“We have an espresso machine in the store,” Lynn says. “We have pumpkin pie lattes, black widow mochas, cookies.”

Does the family make time for a Thanksgiving feast?

“I roast the biggest turkey we have grown!” says Lynn, who prepares the meal throughout the day for 8-12 guests. The outdoor work stops by 4 p.m.

“Our guests each contribute a dish to share, either by bringing it or preparing it in my kitchen,” Lynn says. “I love having Brussell sprouts, baked yams, great stuffing and lots of mashed potatoes and gravy.” Desserts abound, too, with fresh pumpkin pie, pecan pie, apple pie and a stuffed sugar pie pumpkin.

At each place setting, Lynn puts a clam in honor of the first Thanksgiving, when early settlers didn’t have silverware to eat their food. “We usually go around the table and each person shares their blessings,” Lynn adds.

Wedded bliss

The Schuttes, married for 47 years, are proud of the farm life they’ve built, and there’s no talk yet of slowing down. Their grass-fed beef is available at the farm, and Lynn also sells it at Springfield’s SPROUT market on Fridays and at the Lane County Farmers’ Market on Tuesdays.

Those turkeys, raised seasonally, are sold by special order. With 80 laying hens, they also sell a good many eggs.

About 10 years ago the Schuttes decided to share their beautiful riverside farm for special events. Wedding season begins in late spring and continues through the fall. The setting, along a serene stretch of river, is not only romantic, it’s like a journey back in time.

Hit the farm

To order a turkey for Thanksgiving from the Schuttes’ farm, call 541-746-5161. Starting the Friday after Thanksgiving, Northern Lights Christmas Tree Farm is open daily for holiday

tree sales, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., through Dec. 24. Choose and cut a tree, or pick one that's ready to go. Wreaths, ornaments and holiday treats in the barn store. The farm is at 36777 Wheeler Road near Pleasant Hill. 541-746-5161; northernlightschristmastreefarm.com.

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