

Climbing Tree Farm

Schuyler & Colby Gail
Journey into Farming

NEW LEBANON

EARLY INFLUENCES

Schuyler: "When I was born, we lived at my grandmother's farm [in Berlin, NY], where she grew up. When I was five, we moved to Williamstown, and there was no farming going on at our house. But actually, since before Caretaker Farm was a CSA, we got our vegetables from there, so that was always part of our life. And then in high school I started volunteering there after school."

Colby: "My dad grew up farming on my grandparents' farm, but once he reached adulthood, he gave it up, and so I wasn't exposed to it as a kid. I met Schuyler, and she had some interest in farming, and that was really my first exposure to it."

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Schuyler: "We came back here and went to live at my grandmother's farm. This is the hundredth year that my family has lived there. For me, the family history stuff, hearing these stories about the great times of the past, that influenced me."

FARM BEGINNINGS

Schuyler: "First we got the sheep to eat the grass around the barns, because it was killing us to see the barns go."

Colby: "That worked really well, and then they started having babies, so we decided we were in the meat business."

Schuyler: "And then we got chickens because we were already tied at home with the sheep. And then we liked having the chickens, and we could only buy chickens in a large number. I think we bought like 25, and then that was too many eggs for us to eat by ourselves. So we put a few eggs in a mini-fridge in front of our house, and then people wanted more eggs..."

Colby: "It's always building on itself, and there's always a lot of experimentation, so every year we're trying something a little bit different than the last."

FINDING NEW LAND

Colby: "We always knew that our situation on her grandmother's land was temporary, and so we've been looking for a place of our own for five or six years. Conventional real estate really wasn't working out, so we started looking with the Columbia Land Conservancy into farmland to rent or lease. This place came up and we started talking with the owners directly. We bought a piece of their land and one of the buildings on it and here we are."



Schuyler, age four, poses with the family goat circa 1985.

Schuyler: "I think that having come from a place that was my family's for a hundred years, it's important to me that our land can be our kids'. We chose to live here partly because we like it, but also because there's a lot of conservation land on this road. We know it hasn't been fooled with and polluted, and that it's not going to be a big strip mall right here, so [there is] security for the future. But also the people that we bought it from, it was their family land, and it's important to us that it's a place that they can come back to and feel proud of and connected to."

MANAGING A BUSINESS

Schuyler: "Both of us are terrified of debt. We don't ever buy anything that we don't have money to buy, with the exception of this house."

Colby: "We had pretty good luck with marketing from the get-go, and that probably spurred us on, and caused us to get deeper into it."

Schuyler: "We've never grown anything we couldn't sell."

Colby: "Really, the way I look at it is that we have to be able to turn a profit from this or else it's just not reasonable, it's not viable, and if that point comes where we aren't breaking even, then we have to call it quits."

FARMING PRACTICES

Schuyler: "I was a vegetarian since childhood, until this last year... We're concerned about animal welfare and environmental things, and that shapes the way that we eat and also the way that we raise animals... I think it's more by instinct, what's kind."

Colby: "We're new to this place, but we plan to be here long-term, and doing something like farming, you have to be really careful and conscientious about just about every move you make, that you aren't damaging the land irreparably. So every decision seems pretty important, to keep things sustainable and producing in the future."

FINDING BALANCE

Schuyler: "We want to reduce the work as much as possible so that we can go swimming in our pond and do other things besides work all the time. We want it to be a pleasurable place to be, in addition to a work place... We just came away from living next door to my grandmother and seeing her get older, and we won't be able to do this when we're 80, but if we set up our fields correctly, then hopefully we reduce the work enough that we can do it for a long time."

WHY FARMING?

Colby: "It's great to be able to be your own boss. It's great to be able to work from home, work with your family."

Schuyler: "That's the thing that we like the most about it. There's nobody telling us what to do, and we're able to be home with our family, and it's a creative process. It isn't the same every year, and there's nothing to get bored with."

Colby: "It's a fun project to do together."

Schuyler: "I think it's actually been good for our marriage, to have to work together. It's like doing a puzzle together or something. One person can't make all the decisions, one person can't have all the solutions."

Colby: "It's been really fun and encouraging, and we've found a bit of a community here. People inspire each other and help each other out. It feels good. I think there's been a bit of challenging each other. Not competitiveness, but spurring each other on."

Schuyler: "I think [we are filling] a social need. In addition to being healthy for people, it makes them feel good to support a local farm and to know where their food comes from and know that it's healthy and treated well... We feel like it's an important job. I like that it has a purpose, a purpose that you can see, that you can eat. I like that. And I think that it will teach our kids good values, too."



Farming Journey

Originally from:

Schuyler: Williamstown, MA

Colby: Utah

Types of Training:

Apprenticeship and self-education

Land Search Length: 6.5 years

Land Source: Purchase—match made through Columbia Land Conservancy

Climbing Tree Farm

First Year: 2005, new land in 2011

Location: New Lebanon, NY

Land Base: 20 acres

Markets: Lebanon Valley

Farmers' Market and supplying local restaurants and markets

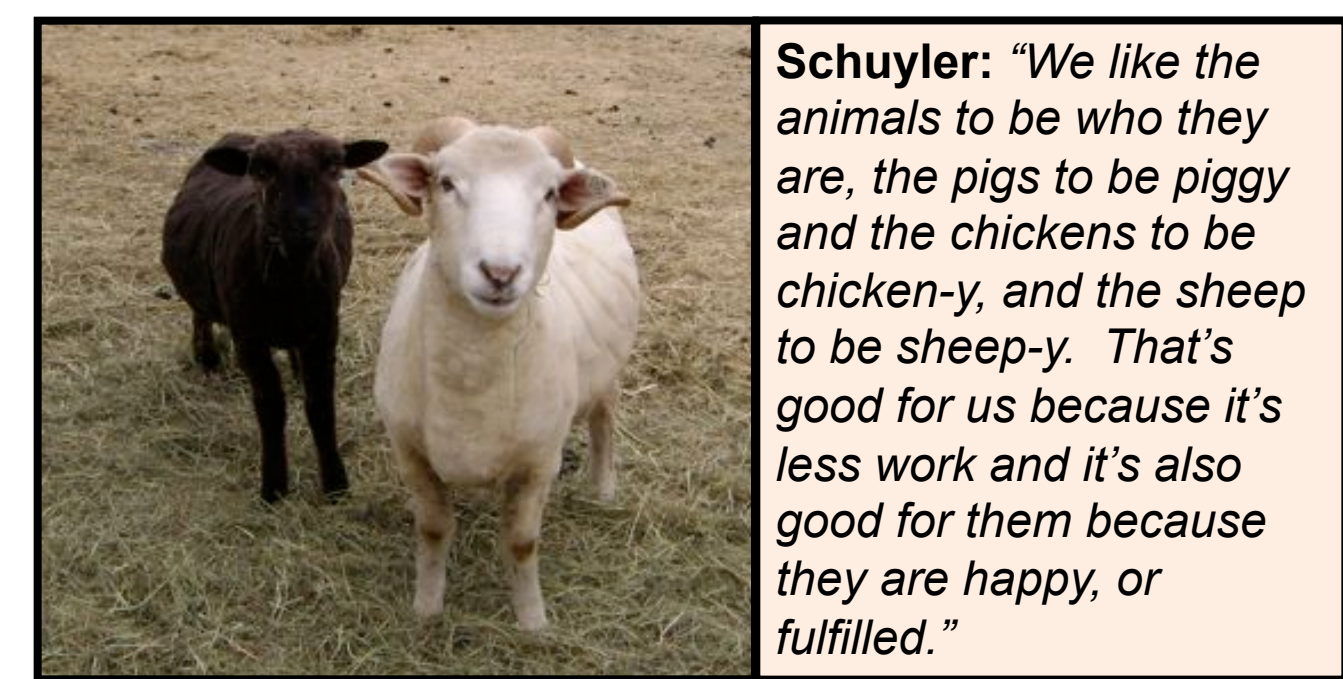
Products: Pork, chicken, lamb, and eggs

Land History



Schuyler's grandmother and her sisters work in the fields of the family farm in the 1930s.

Schuyler: "[My great grandfather] got off [the train] in Albany, and he found a real estate agent and said, 'I'd like to buy some land.' So they drove out and drove to Berlin [NY], and I think that was one of the first places that he saw. He bought 5,000 acres."



Schuyler: "We like the animals to be who they are, the pigs to be piggy and the chickens to be chicken-y, and the sheep to be sheep-y. That's good for us because it's less work and it's also good for them because they are happy, or fulfilled."

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Creating Home: **Schuyler:** "I think we're really happy here. Maybe it'll wear off, but it feels like we've arrived, we're beginning, so that's a good feeling."



Recycling Materials: Above, canvas from old billboards are used to create hoop houses. **Colby:** "I salvage a lot of material from construction jobs of mine... We've tried really hard to do things on a budget, and do things creatively so that we don't have to put a lot of money into tools or infrastructure."



Children on the Farm: Huck plays outside with the pigs. **Schuyler:** "It's gratifying to see Huck outside. He's the happiest outside, and your kid might not get that if you weren't home all the time, and you weren't outside all the time. Just seeing him climb trees, and dig a hole for like six hours, that makes you want to [farm]. The fact that he really gets where his food comes from..."