



Shepherding a *Dream*

The rolling countryside of northern Virginia stretches out for mile after picturesque mile, with properties delineated by wooden fences and homes sheltered under giant oaks—an idyllic setting for Gum Tree Farm and its woolly flocks of merino sheep.

TEXT KAREN CALLAWAY PHOTOGRAPHY MARCY BLACK SIMPSON STYLING MELISSA STURDIVANT SMITH



Opposite, above: Merino sheep graze peacefully amid Gum Tree Farm's pastoral fields. This page: A woven throw from the company's soft-as-a-lamb offerings drapes across the table, where woolen pillows rest in the surrounding chairs.



The soprano-pitched bleating of tiny lambs is music to Franny Kansteiner's ears. The Alabama native grew up loving horses and dreaming of a rural life. When she and her husband, Walter, moved from Chicago for him to attend seminary in Virginia, they settled on a farm, where she taught riding lessons and worked on an equine-themed magazine based in Middleburg.

After the couple had children, a neighbor presented the family with a lamb. Soon the one became three—named Faith, Hope, and Patience—and Franny had the beginnings of a new vocation. When an acquaintance taught her to spin and knit, she started creating handmade woolen items as gifts for family and friends, who quickly asked if she might offer more of these luxurious pieces for sale.



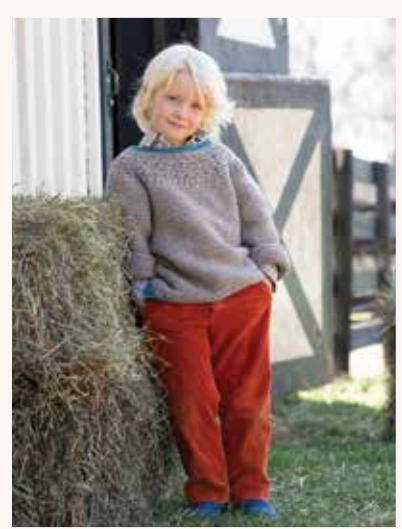
Clockwise from center left: Hare sculptures dance upon the farm's gate—a nod to the couple's years spent in England for Walter's job. The herringbone-patterned Circle Shirt comes in a half-dozen color combinations. Skeins of merino wool will soon become sweet knitted hats and sweaters (inset).



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Opposite: Fingerless mittens are the perfect wintertime accessory. This page, clockwise from below: Customers will find a cozy collection of capes, ponchos, and barn jackets, as well as handwoven organic wool throws, in Gum Tree Farm's inventory. Artist Diana Reuter-Twining created the rabbit sculpture for the garden.



"The business that began in the barn moved to our dining room table," she says. "I'd leave the front door open, with an 'honesty box' on the table. If people found something they wanted, they'd leave something in the box." It wasn't long before this simple venture became a full-fledged enterprise.

With the title of "founder and designing shepherd," Franny is well-versed in all aspects of Gum Tree Farm's business, from birthing lambs and shearing sheep to designing the beautiful clothing and homewares that compose the inventory. Inspiration for her designs comes from myriad places. An Austrian cape given to her by her mother led to the line's first wrap, while the Circle Shirt, with pockets made from circles of contrasting fabric, takes its cues from an exhibition of Henri Matisse's cutouts. Customers will find both stitched and knitted garments, and also an adorable wee range for babies.



Opposite: "Everyone knows how to do all the jobs, from feeding to hoof trimming to pulling lambs," says Franny. "That is the beauty of sharing our lives with our animals—they are literally part of our family." This page: The cape made of lightweight tobacco cloth is trimmed in leather and guinea feathers.



The company's home goods have their origins in need, as Franny has used the wool "for just about everything, from washcloths to lampshades." Her own gracious abode brims with soft furnishings found among her sumptuous wares. All of her products are made organically from the ultrafine merino wool provided by her three hundred beloved ovine residents, who are raised organically as well.

With the ever-growing demand for Gum Tree Farm's merchandise, Franny now works with a network of talented artisans, from dyers to spinners and weavers, who share her passion for this ages-old process. "Not many shepherds get to see their wool all the way through to production, and not many designers get to grow their own fabric," she says. "I feel lucky to get to do both."

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