Chapter 1

Heading for the Country

In This Chapter

- Determining whether this is the life for you
- Deciding which operations to get into
- Getting ready to go

So you think you want to move away from the hubbub of the city and move to the peaceful life of the country. Doing that offers so many rewarding consequences, but you also have to keep some challenges in mind before taking the plunge and buying the farm. After all, you want it to be a pleasant experience that doesn't do you in!

One of the best parts of hobby farming is the wonderful feeling of getting your hands dirty, growing a small crop of farm-fresh vegetables, and ending up with something you can actually eat and enjoy. Or perhaps you experience the joy and wonder that occurs after you care for a pair of animals who've given birth. You can proudly show off your crops and newborns to your friends and relatives, saying, "Look what I did!"

But the downsides include simple inconveniences such as being farther away from the grocery store, eateries, or even the fire department. Most farm areas are also more exposed to dangerous weather just because they're out in the open. And then you face the issues that come from drought, insect attacks, and too much work but too little time.

But with all the trade-offs, you just may find the country life is the best thing that ever happened to you and wonder why you didn't embark on that journey sooner. In this chapter, I touch on some of the pros and cons to consider and point you to other places in the book where you can find more-detailed information.

Analyzing the Lifestyle

Think about why, really, you're considering the move and the lifestyle change. Are you trying to escape the city, or do you truly enjoy being one with the earth and getting your hands dirty on a daily basis? If escape from city hassles is your motivation, just be aware that you're trading one set of hassles for another. In this section, you discover some of the pros and cons of country life.

Looking at some drawbacks

Moving from the city or suburbs to the country isn't always a smooth transition, especially if you decide to build your own place. For instance, if your homestead isn't close enough to the city's or county's services, you may need to get your own propane tank or use some other alternative power source (see Chapter 7), dig a well that can cost several thousand dollars, and set up a septic system to deal with household wastes. Besides the initial costs of building these types of systems, you have to put in time and money to maintain them. Chapters 2 and 3 go into more detail about these utilities.

Even if public services such as power, water, and sewage are available, you'll still run into some problems — power outages, road washouts, or a drought that can threaten your crops.

Ask yourself whether you're willing to deal with the trade-offs, such as not having the opera nearby but instead going to the local high school musical for your cultural entertainment. Are you willing to give up short trips to the store for clean air and a quieter life? No traffic for no movie theater around the corner? Chapter 2 discusses some other sacrifices you may not have thought about.

And consider the concept of fitting into the neighborhood. You want to do your thing without making enemies of those who are already up and running. Respect what's already going on and try not to make big changes that may cause rifts between you and your neighbors (such as deciding you don't like the odor coming from your neighbor's pig farm and attending every city council meeting to voice your opinion about it, hoping to get the operation to cease and desist). You can't always pick your neighbors, and making a big investment in land, animals, and equipment means you can get yourself into a situation where you can't easily walk away. Look and *smell* before you buy! Chapter 4 discusses some ways you can ensure you're a good neighbor.

And of course, farming is hard work. There will always be a fence to mend, an animal shelter to build, or planting and canning to tackle. Although many

tasks can wait, some of them have to be done immediately. Much of this book explains what kinds of work you may be taking on.

Looking at a few rural benefits

Despite the challenges and rigors of farm life, you do get some benefits that you don't find elsewhere — quiet streets, being able to see stars and meteor showers at night, and neighbors who tend to look out for each other and lend a hand when needed.

Growing your own food and knowing just what kinds of processes and chemicals were involved (if any) is one of the joys of farm life. And homegrown fruits and veggies just taste better. After you've eaten your own fresh-from-the-garden tomatoes, you won't be satisfied with a store-bought one again.

Having animals can be a lot of fun (but a lot of work as well). You can raise animals merely for the joy they provide, or you can get them to help you in some way — by pulling equipment, giving you meat or fresh eggs, or giving you fiber that you can turn into beautiful fabric.

Envisioning Your Farm

Your motives for moving to a farm, whether you want to raise plants or animals or both, tie in with choosing a location. And if you're not going solo, a lot of what you decide depends on what the rest of the family has to say, because everyone wants some input on such a big change. The bottom line is that you need to look at a lot of interrelated issues that go into making your farm dream come true. In this section, I discuss these considerations from different angles.

Size matters: Comparing a small hobby farm to a for-profit operation

Whether you're looking at a true hobby farm as opposed to a fully for-profit farming venture clearly impacts your perspective on the shape your farm should take. *Hobby* means doing something for the fun of it, not necessarily to make a living. Moving to a small hobby farm means you'll likely be pouring more money into it than you get out (if you get something out of it at all). And most likely, you'll be working in your "real" job and commuting into town every day. This leaves less time for your farming chores and challenges.

If you're looking to go after a for-profit venture, your decisions will be quite different. Odds are, if this is the case, the farm will be your only job, so you need to put more thought into planning, management, budgets, and marketing. If your bottom line depends on what you put into and subsequently get out of the farm, you may not be as free to buy all those fun toys that tempt you (such as a backhoe or a top-of-the-line computerized greenhouse). You'll need to be prepared to suffer monetary losses — and these can be substantial — until you're able to get the farm fully productive and then profitable.

Choosing your venture: What you want to do with your farm

Before you can decide where to locate your hobby's headquarters, you have to decide just what you want to do with that farm. The best hobby farms begin with a vision, so think carefully about your goals. Write down your answers to some of the following questions:

- Are you interested in having animals, and if so, which ones have captured your heart? (See Chapter 9 for some typical farm animals.) Do you want these animals as companion animals or to serve a working purpose, such as providing you with eggs or fiber or even helping out with farm chores?
- What kinds of plants do you want to grow, and just how much do you want to deal with? Do you want to supplement your grocery list, grow some to sell for a little bit of profit, or maintain a subsistence-level operation? Chapter 13 gives you information on growing plants, and Chapter 14 gives you some tips on getting those plants started.
- What are your social goals? Do you have a desire to do the farmer's market or roadside stand circuit, where you get to interact with the general public? Do you have an interest in inviting strangers to your home so *they* can have a farm vacation?

In this section, I describe some of what you can do on your farm. After you figure out what you want, you can think about what you need — in terms of people, skills, time, labor, money, natural resources, and so on — and plan how to get there.

Raising animals down on your farm

What kinds of animals you decide to bring into your family is a personal decision. Each animal and type of animal comes with unique needs, some more demanding than others. You need to think about what's right for you. Animals all need to be fed and watered daily, and some need some extra care above

and beyond those basics. And even within a species, individual animals have unique personalities and quirks that can be endearing or more work than you signed up for.

Deciding which animals you want

At the very least, you want some sort of alarm animal. Most people opt for a watchdog. Especially if your nearest neighbor is a mile away, a dog can contribute to your sense of well-being and can warn you if something is amiss. Dogs are social animals, so treat them as part of the family.

Also, a couple of cats are great to have around to help keep the rodent population down. Everybody works on the farm!

Here are some other animals to consider:

- **Horses:** Horses need the most amount of work because they have to be groomed and exercised daily, but they can provide a lot of joy when they take you for a ride across the meadows or up into the mountains.
- **Fiber animals:** Animals such as sheep, alpacas, Angora goats or rabbits, and llamas have to be kept in such a way that their fur or wool is protected.
- **Meat and dairy animals:** You may keep some animals, such as chickens, cows, sheep, or goats, because you want them for the meat. Goats and cows are common milk producers. Health and nutrition is an especially big consideration for animals who produce anything you plan to consume.
- **Companion animals:** Not every typical meat animal ends up as dinner. Even cows can serve as pets.

Chapter 9 discusses some of the common and a few exotic animals who live on farms.

Understanding the care involved

If you do bring animals into your life, you're responsible for their care. That means daily attention as well as stepping in when they need more help. Even daily care can be a real chore — during a blizzard, for instance, you may need to trudge through the snow to haul water so the animals have something other than ice in their bowls. Also, animals do get sick, and when that happens, you have to deal with it or suffer the consequences. Sometimes animals have difficult births, and you have to help or else the young one may not make it. Chapter 11 gives you the basics of animal care, and Chapter 12 goes into what to do when animals need medical attention.

You may end up with an animal who just doesn't get along with the rest of the herd. Deciding how to alleviate the situation can be tough, and you may be faced with having to get rid of the critter in some way, or if the troublemaker is a male, perhaps castrating him. That may be a very difficult decision — what if that male is your best stud and has produced perfect offspring?

What many forget when it comes to animals is the need for a thick skin in order to deal with the harsh realities of life, and especially death, on the farm. Some newborn animals just don't survive. Sometimes you have too many babies in one year — more than your farm can support — and you have to give some up. Or favorite animals can become sick or injured and need to be put down. If you choose to have animals on your farm, you can expect to incur losses every year. Are you ready for this harsh reality?

Using products from animals

It can be particularly cool to be able to say that the sweater a friend is admiring is one that you hand-knit from yarn that you hand-spun and hand-dyed after gathering the fiber from the goat you raised. Chapter 17 explains how to get fiber from the back of an animal into something you can use to make beautiful garments or accessories.

If you're going to expect meat from your animals, you need to find a reputable butcher or dress out the animal yourself. But in either case, you know where the meat came from, what the animal was fed, and how he or she was treated. See Chapter 16 for help in finding a butcher.

Good care can go a long way to a better-tasting meat, milk, or cheese. As the commercial says, "Great cheese comes from happy cows."

Planting a garden and raising crops

In addition to enjoying fresh country air, reaping the fresh fruits and vegetables of your labor is part of the fun of embarking on a hobby farm in the first place. Growing your own food can be so rewarding. You can't beat garden-fresh fruits and veggies, and preserving produce allows you to enjoy the harvest year-round. (See Chapter 15 for some ideas on using and preserving food items.)

Although some crops do well only in certain climates, you still have an abundance of choices for which fruits and veggies to grow on your farm. Your biggest limitation is how much work you want to put into the venture. For the best results, check with your local cooperative extension service (`www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension`) to see what grows well in your area.

Look for seeds at the local country store or go online to find an even wider selection. You can get your plants started on a healthy life in a lot of ways, from starting them in a greenhouse to using compost and fertilizers to dealing with pests. Chapter 13 helps you decide what to grow, and Chapter 14 helps you get those plants started and names ways of dealing with pests that threaten your crops.

Going organic can be a little more work, but you may discover it's healthier for you and the environment, and other people may be willing to pay extra for your tomatoes if they're certified organic. *Organic* means using only natural materials in your crops. In other words, the fertilizers and pesticides you use contain ingredients that originated from *organisms,* or living things; no artificial chemical materials are allowed. See Chapter 14 for some help with going organic.

Having some fun: Agritourism and the social scene

Part of what you choose to do with your farm may be related to how you want to interact with people and expose them to farm life. Get people to come to your farm and show them what life is like with a farm tour, or let people come and pick their own fruits or veggies.

Country folk enjoy some home-grown activities that just don't happen in the city, such as the county fair or farmer's market or a good old-fashioned barn dance. You can certainly run a vegetable booth at the market or set up a dance in your own barn. Farms offer so many opportunities for having fun that don't cost much at all. See Chapter 19 for some ideas.

Considering a location for your farm

How much acreage can you handle? The more, the better may sound great at first, but consider that you have to maintain that land, which may mean doing a lot of mowing, controlling weeds, planting, harvesting, and even fence building. On the other hand, if you plan to start your operation small, you may want plenty of room for expansion.

Is there anything exotic (either animal or vegetable) that requires a specific climate? What you want to grow or keep on your farm can impact where you locate. For example,

- If you absolutely love Walla Walla onions, you need to live in the northern part of the country; if Vidalias tickle your palate, the south is for you.
- If you think *qiviut* (the fiber from a musk ox) is the ultimate, you need to be in the colder northern climes.
- If you want to grow exotic flowers, you may consider an area that's warm year-round (or invest in a greenhouse).

The possibilities are endless. Even if you decide to stay in your current state, not venturing too far away from family and friends, you have to decide which part of the state to settle in. Different areas have different natural features, soil quality, and the like.

Even within specific areas, different zoning laws may apply. Will you even be able to have animals on your land? Can you get a permit to build a barn as big as you want it to be? Chapter 3 talks about permits and zoning laws.

Finding the right amount of land in the right location with a perfectly acceptable house already on it is certainly possible; however, if your needs are pretty specific, you may have to build from scratch, which often means building your own dirt roads, getting a propane tank, and having someone dig you a well and septic system. Chapter 3 discusses some of what you have to consider when picking out a location, and Chapter 5 lists some of the outbuildings you're likely to need to build.

Preparing to Take the Rural Plunge

So maybe you've examined all the pros and cons of hobby farming and have decided it's exactly what you want at this time in your life. Good for you! So many have gone before you (including me!), and it's a wonderful lifestyle if you're up to it. In this section, I discuss some ways to get yourself ready before you start hunting down properties.

Getting your feet wet

Dreaming about the joys of farm life is often a lot different from the reality of managing an actual farm. However, you can get a feel for the lifestyle before you actually dive in. Try some of the following ways to get your feet wet:

- **Rent a farmhouse for a year or two.** Spending time in the community is a great way to figure out whether living way out there works for you.
- **Take a farm vacation.** Stay in a guest house on a farm where the fun activities include actually doing some of the farm chores.
- **Chat with a farmer.** Talk to a local farmer who's out in a field as you drive by and ask what he or she likes and doesn't like about the lifestyle. Strike up a conversation at a farmer's market. Attend a fair or a seminar about agricultural issues, and chat with the people around you.
- **Browse in a country store.** Visit a store that sells animal food and gardening supplies to farmers. See what kinds of tools and accessories you'd need if you were to take the plunge (I discuss tools in Chapter 6). Talk to the salespeople or even to the customers, and check out the community bulletin board by the doors.

- **Just go for a drive in the country.** Go out on a Saturday afternoon and observe what's going on.
- **Peruse books, magazines, or Web sites that cater to farmers.** Get an idea of the kinds of tasks farmers deal with on a daily basis. I list some resources in Appendix A.
- **Take a class or workshop.** Several places offer courses designed to help the prospective farmer get some skills with plants, animals, and machinery. They explain what to look for in soil, how to deal with financing, and even provide help with marketing. For instance, you can take online courses specifically for beginning farmers from Cornell University (`beginningfarmers.cce.cornell.edu/onlinecourse.html`) or Penn State (`bedford.extension.psu.edu/agriculture/BeginFarmer/FarmCourse.htm`).

  Or attend free or inexpensive workshops or seminars on specific activities, such as composting, sheep shearing, milking, or organic farming. Check the local papers or do an Internet search to find opportunities in your area.
- **Get a mentor.** Look into programs such as Iowa's Farm On program, which matches beginning farmers with old pros who plan to retire (`www.extension.iastate.edu/bfc/programs.html`).

Do plenty of research, but don't feel you have to be an expert in everything farm-related. Use your resources — read, call your cooperative extension office, talk to farmers — and then prepare yourself for a little trial and error and dive in!

Looking up local laws

Before you start anything, you have to know what's copasetic, kosher, cool, or just okay with the local laws. What you want to do isn't necessarily what the laws let you do. Check with the city or county before you embark on your endeavors. See Chapter 3 for info on dealing with zoning laws and the permit process.

Something that may seem innocuous to you may be illegal because it's really, really bad for the environment. For instance, capturing and keeping deer can lead to fines or worse. Get in the habit of checking laws.