

# To Wear an Apron

Story & Photography  
by Katherine Dunn

## From Minnesota to Portland

From a young age, I dreamt of having a farm with gardens and animals. It took 44 years, but the dream came true in the form of Apifera Farm.

Needing a change, I had moved from Minneapolis to Portland and found a charming little bungalow where I could garden almost year-round. I also became friends with a charming neighbor who happened to be a landscaper and shared my passion for plants and farms. Our friendship turned into a marriage and within a year, we found a run-down farm in the Willamette Valley complete with a 100-year-old barn.

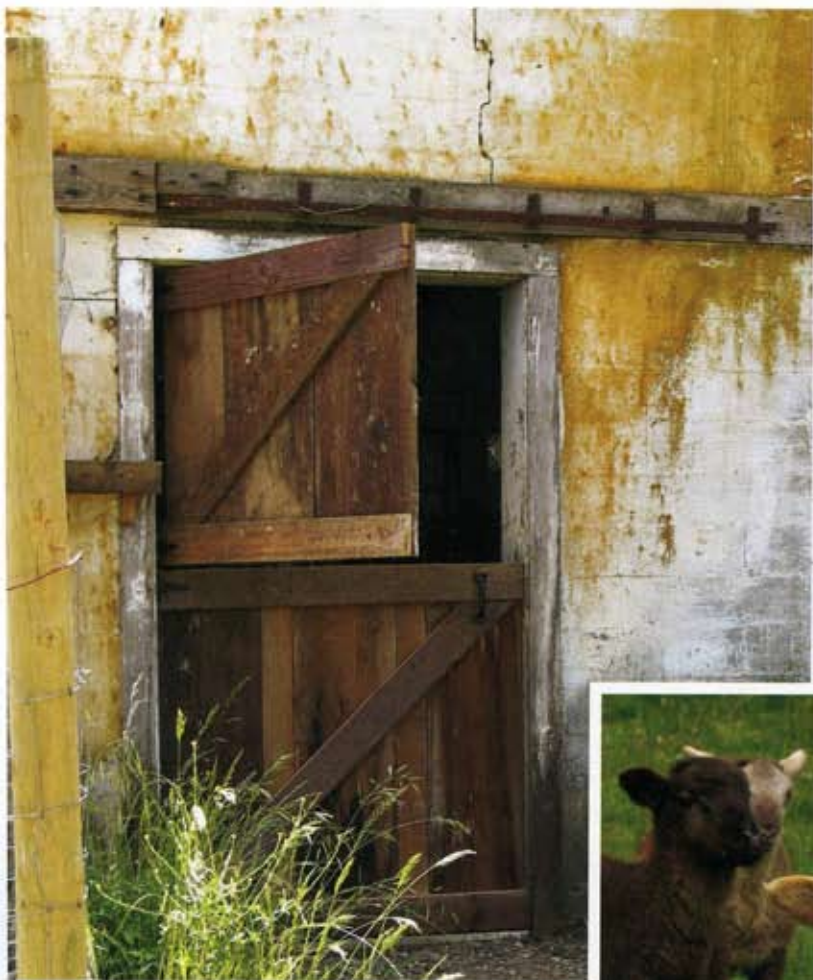
I felt like the farm just wanted us ... it needed us to help get it back on its feet.

## Fields of Lavender

With 22 acres, we planted fields of lavender. The farm's soil and sloped hills were perfect for the draught-tolerant plant, and I also recognized the potential to make different products from it. We started our field with 1500 plants in 2004 and in one year, we were growing 4000 plants, which is when the work really began.







We were living out a dream, but believe me ... there were days of true despair. I have never worked harder in my life. We spent back-breaking hours the first year weeding (no pesticides are used on the farm) and tilling by hand. Can you believe it? We didn't have a tractor for two years! What were we thinking? The first winter was very wet, and we found out exactly where the field needed better drainage. That year we lost about 500 plants.

### *Evolution of a Farm & Art*

As we were planting and weeding, we started a small flock of sheep to help maintain our pastures. We set out to mend fences, renovate the 100-year-old barn and the very outdated house.

After three years of hard work, I realized that our "to do" list was only 25 percent finished. But I realized that the farm evolves. It's really the same way I paint ... I have an idea, start working on it, but then it evolves and you have to let go and trust the process of changes and unknowns that are sure to arise. You have to follow the muse when it gets you.

I am proud to say that we are now at a stage of living as self-sufficiently as possible by eating our own vegetables, lamb and eggs. The orchard is growing and we are also restoring our riverfront into a natural habitat.





## *Products With Whim*

While my husband now does most of the weeding, pruning and fieldwork, I focus on selling the lavender bundles and making other lavender-based items. From the start, I knew I wanted simple products, and only products that I myself would actually use. One thing I learned fast was that it is best to keep your products very simple. I also wanted my sachets to be less "frilly" than things I was seeing. Frills are just not my thing. I add simple artistic touches to the plain newsprint packaging, such as a stamp of the farm's copyrighted trademark that reads: "When you see a flower say 'thank you bees.'" And nothing ever goes to waste. We take the stems of the de-budded bundles and sell them as fire starters.

## *Primitive Folk Dolls & Aprons*

I've also started making primitive folk dolls that are completely hand-sewn and stuffed with lavender buds. Each doll is a one-of-a-kind, made without a pattern, which allow me to "play" in the process of creating.

Recently, I made a series of donkey dolls donning aprons. Aprons? Yes, aprons. I am beyond enamored with wearing aprons myself, and love to add them to my dolls. Aprons just sort of make me happy, I don't know why. Perhaps it's because I'm at an age when I need a bit more "coverage" around my hips, if you know what I mean, so I have taken to wearing aprons over my jeans or shorts. I even wear them riding.

I started buying some great vintage aprons from sellers, but honestly ache to make some myself. I have an old sewing machine waiting for me to do so, but for now, I sew

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by hand and haven't yet tackled an apron, simple as they are. I yearn for one made out of thick felt!

## *Full Days, Full Heart*

My days are full. I do quick barn chores in the morning, and it's like my trip to the coffee shop. It gets me going. I tend to e-mails and office things, and try to be drawing or doing some kind of art for the afternoon. Lavender orders get packed up at night and shipped off within two days. There's always something to do, to experience, or learn. And it all feeds my soul and my art. It might not work for everyone, but I like to paint intensely for hours, then take the donkey for a 15 minute walk, or visit the lavender field, or sit with the chickens. And of course, during March lambing season, it gets pretty exciting around here.

With the artist studio looking out at the barn and fields, I work while looking out at sheep, my house, the goats, and of course my beloved mini donkeys. Chickens have free range, and there's always a dog at my feet.

So, at the end of the day, I count my blessings as I am able to do and be many wonderful things — an artist, mother to sheep and donkeys, and a friend to lavender. One of our goals here is just to be good stewards to this land. It's a privilege to live here. There's still so much to fix, but I get to soak up all that the farm gives me, and then re-release it on paper or canvas ... or even a folk doll, and put it out into the world.

It's my gift. 🍷

*To learn more about Katherine Dunn and her adventures on Apifera Farm, visit [www.apiferafarm.blogspot.com](http://www.apiferafarm.blogspot.com).*

