

# TIPS FOR PART-TIMERS



Holt, Sara Morgan, Pam and Peyton Sapp work as a team to look after their cattle.

## Strategies offered for herds with fewer than 50 cows.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

According to the USDA, the average U.S. beef cow herd has 43.5 cows. Besides scratching your head at the thought of half a cow, the other fact that probably jumps out at you is that there are a bunch of part-time cattle producers — or, as Midville, Ga., cattiewoman Pam Sapp labels her family, flashlight farmers.

How do folks like the Sapps tend to their cattle when they have full to overflowing lives? For example, Pam is county extension coordinator in Jefferson County, Ga., while her husband, Peyton, is county extension coordinator in adjoining Burke County. Their 15-year-old son, Holt, and his 11-year-old sister, Sara Morgan, show four species (ranch horses,

dairy heifers, lambs and goats), as well as participate in sports. The Sapps also have family members with serious, time-consuming health challenges.

Then, there is their friend, Lucy Ray, who works 50-plus hours a week in her job as county extension coordinator in Morgan County, lives 35 miles from her farm and cattle herd and has a

small Morgan horse-breeding operation.

Here are a list of time-saving tips from these overachieving part-timers:

### Forage management

Come Oct. 1, the Sapps get serious about praying for rain. As soon as it comes, they start overseeding their 50 acres of Bermuda grass pastures with a five-way mix of rye, ryegrass, vetch, crimson clover and oats.

“We call it the Midville special,” jokes Pam. The mix provides high-quality grazing and, as long as there is rain, quantity until late spring when their Bermuda grass gets growing again.

“We put the cows in a sacrifice paddock from mid-November until February and feed hay,” says Peyton. That means, hopefully, they only have to put out hay by tractor light for 100-120 days.

To keep the precious grazing resource as productive as possible, Peyton says, “We put the cows on it when it is around 12 inches high and move them to another pasture when they graze it down to around 6 inches. Grass grows grass.”

By design, the flush of top-quality forages also coincides with the 30-cow herd’s calving season, which is mid-November through mid-January. By the time the

**TOOLS TO**  
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Cattle producer Lucy Ray says calving ease is a huge factor since she only gets to see her cows once a day.



Ray chooses Angus genetics because she knows her females are going to do their jobs.

calves are old enough to make use of grazing, it is taking off.

### Buy, don't make

"We buy high-quality Tifton 85 hay," says Peyton. "I don't think people with small cattle operations can afford to make their own hay."

That's a thought backed by his ag economist co-workers, who usually put the economic threshold for having your own hay equipment at 200 cows or more.

Peyton adds, "For a small producer, buying bred cows for replacements makes sense. Buy 4- to 5- to 6-year-old cows that are preg-checked and will calve in your window."

However, that's one area where Peyton and Pam adopt the approach of do as I say, not as I do.

"We enjoy raising our own heifers," Peyton admits. "Plus, Pam doesn't like to make the big cash outlay for purchased replacements."

### Cattle handling and facilities

The Sapps made sure to put in a lane so they can easily move cattle to their working facilities. In the three years they've been at

their farm, Pam says, "We're trying to add gates where we need them. Gates and a lane are time-savers."

As for the working facilities themselves, she says, "We use panels, and our squeeze chute is old as Methuselah, but we have it set up so it flows."

"We work our cattle easily, and our cattle work easily," she adds.

Ray's facilities are still a work in progress, and she typically hauls her 12-cow herd 2 miles to her cousins' operation when she works them. However, she notes, "A feed bucket is the best cowboy in the

world. Mine will follow me anywhere with either a bucket or my truck."

### Prevention beats a cure

"Manage the details," says Pam. That includes both soil and forage testing.

Peyton states, "When you have a forage-based system, you have to take care of the soil and the plants."

Herd health is another area where tending to the details up front beats taking the time to treat sick animals. Pam says, "Preventative medicine is a whole

lot better than rescue medicine."

When they're implementing their vaccination and deworming program, the Sapps simplify scheduling a bit by doing the work themselves. However, they still work closely with their veterinarians.

"A veterinary-client relationship is so valuable," says Pam. "When they know you're competent and not going to wait until it is too late before you call, they help."

Once again, to keep scheduling conflicts to a minimum, the Sapps do their own preg-checking by taking blood samples and sending them off, rather than trying to line up a veterinarian to palpate the cattle.

### Bartering is big

"I'm all about bartering," says Ray. She has three University of Georgia students who pasture-board their horses at her farm. In turn for lower boarding fees, they help with feeding and fence repairs.

"We have a schedule for who is going to feed what. The only problem is they keep naming the calves,"



"We work our cattle easily, and our cattle work easily," says Pam Sapp, who says docility is a priority.

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The Sapps have been using Angus sires since 2006, and appreciate the reliability and consistency of Angus EPDs.



Holt and Sara Morgan Sapp show four species of animals and help on their family's cow-calf operation.

jokes Ray. "That doesn't work too well when I take a steer to the processor and bring back the meat."

A neighboring dairyman cuts her hay on halves and helps her put out hay. In return, he stores part of his equipment in her barn. Also, instead of paying to hunt her place, three deer hunters keep her pastures bush-hogged and help with fence repairs.

The Sapps don't have to barter, they raised their own help.

Says Pam, "One night, Peyton had to teach a virtual class. It was dark and cold, and I hurt my back, but we had to put out hay. Our tractor is old and cold. I told Holt and Sara Morgan, I need a team. They opened gates and flipped hay rings, and we got it done."

### Disposition is non-negotiable

At the Sapps', bad actors don't stay.

Says Pam, "Docility is a big thing for us. We work cattle as a family. The golf cart is our calving buggy."

"You can't band a calf properly if the mama is chasing you," says Peyton.

### Calving ease is critical

"We utilize EPDs (expected progeny differences) for calving ease," says Pam. "That's a huge thing for us. The last thing we want to see when we get home at 7 p.m. is a dead cow and calf."

Peyton adds, "If we do pull a calf, she usually doesn't get a second chance."

If they do find a heifer or cow struggling with calving, they're ready. They keep a calving kit by the back door with obstetrical lube, chains, a ratchet, a tube of CMPK (K Mag), iodine for navels, ear tags, and bands for the bull calves.

Ray is another believer in EPDs for calving ease.

"I haven't pulled a calf in five years," he says. "That's huge. I only see my cattle once a day."

### Choice of breeds

For the Sapps, reliable EPDs are a time-saver, especially with traits like calving ease and disposition.

Says Peyton, "The Angus breed, as a whole, has the most complete set of records on their genetics. Angus EPDs are reliable. You can get consistency."

When they bought their original herd of bred Gelbvieh-cross cows in 2006, they immediately turned in an Angus bull, and Angus sires have been a staple since.

Angus also rate high in another trait, and that's financial sustainability.

"With CAB® (*Certified Angus Beef*® brand), somebody is going to capture premiums on my calves. That should make them more valuable. We enjoy our cattle, but they have to pay the bills," says Peyton.

For Ray, it is a load off her mind to know her cows do their job.

"I like Angus for their mothering ability," she says.

### Attitude is everything

When you're overloaded, it is tempting to get overwhelmed. While people in the community and family are more than happy to give back to Ray, she says, "I'm bad to think I'm taking advantage of folks who are helping me. I have to get over that."

Pam Sapp adds, "Surround yourself with positive people and people of faith. And remember, you eat an elephant one bite at a time." |



Cattle producer Lucy Ray pasture-boards horses for a reduced fee in exchange for the horse owners' help with cattle chores.

Editor's note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.