

FAMILY ON THE FARM

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Catie describes herself as chronically curious. Her curiosity and the bounty of the forest make it an endless resource of educational opportunities and family fun. Although she always loved being outdoors, Catie did not grow up with the woods as her backyard. She moved often between the Montpelier, Vermont area and Florida. But her grandfather was a dairy farmer, so she was no stranger to working outdoors. In fact, she met her husband Mark while working on an educational farm and relates that their early dates were “work dates” on a neighboring flower farm. They would take additional weekend shifts to be together outdoors.

When they married, Mark already owned a 60-acre woodland in Leicester. The property included a small cabin with no running water or electricity, where they lived while clearing a house site and building the house, and all while Catie was pregnant. The couple moved into their home a month before their oldest daughter was born. They now have three children — two girls and a boy — who have grown up on Foxglove Farm with the woods as their backyard.

Together, Catie and Mark are a dynamic team. Their



CATIE

relationship with the forest is partly economic since they sugar and sell maple syrup. But, for Catie, it's more than that. It's her outdoor classroom for their homeschooled children. “It's kind of a sneaky way to keep the kids engaged in learning,” she says. A recent lesson involved making bar graphs and next is “minnow catching” and recording all the data for the project. “And what's great is that they are so excited because they get to be outside.” And Catie gets to spend time with them. That quality time was a big driver to launch their sugaring operation as a family endeavor.



Catie and her family.

Catie's superpowers include how to research things and talk to people, which she has used to find information about and understand their woodlands. There's a bit of humility in this kind of learning, being willing to admit that you don't know. "Maybe I should have learned this already but didn't so now I need to figure it out," she says. Her children have learned from her that asking questions, researching, and talking to other people is a very powerful way to learn. Rather than teach them "hard facts," she has taught her children how to think. Catie's degree is in philosophy so critical thinking and alternative education styles are definitely in her wheelhouse. The forest is her alternative "infrastructure." There are trails they use, a bridge at the beaver dam, special places they gravitate to. "I love

the bridge area with the water just trickling underneath. It's so peaceful," Catie says. There's also a lean-to that's a great place to host other home-schooled students. The family has hosted events with up to 50 kids. Catie just loves the "energy of all those kids playing wildlife biology tag in the backyard." She is open to public school classes, but it hasn't happened yet.

The children are aged 13, 12, and 10, so most groups are in that age range, although sometimes younger siblings tag along. Catie recalled a tour led by Steve Hagenbuch of Audubon who talked about different habitat for birds that included "snags." She mentioned how the kids repeated the word "snag" a bunch of times and that these three year old twins went dancing down the trail making up a little song about snags. "They had learned about snags! Some kids can sit down and write a paper and it will be great. Some kids will sing a song and that's great. The end goal is the same. They learned," says Catie. Home schooling, with the forest as classroom, has allowed Mark and Catie's children to discover and further develop their own strengths through deeper engagement.

Although the woods provide an educational opportunity, there's more than that for Catie. "I love the sense of community, the way woodlands afford me a chance to talk to other people about a common thing." She attends woodlands' events for the interaction with other woodland owners, for the sense of community and connection! The family attends the Northeast Organic Farmers Association annual conference for the child-friendly programs. "And the kids look forward to it every year!" she says.

"There is huge potential for all groups to include programs for children."

Catie believes that child-friendly programs would help to change the optics of many events and address both a gender and age bias. Catie and Mark are young compared to the average Vermont landowner, and they want their children involved. For them, land ownership is a partnership that should include both parents and their children. "If the children have to stay home, that usually means that mom is home too. So if there were more opportunities for children, there would be more female participation, more mother engagement," Catie states. She thinks that child-friendly programs could encourage young families to up their level of participation or help grandparents get their grandchildren engaged. Catie is pretty passionate about this idea. "The thought just keeps percolating that we need to get our kids to the table, at least interested in joining the table because there are fun things for them to do and learn." Catie is a catalyst for change, especially with her network of homeschool families and her participation in natural resource-based organizations.

Catie's thoughts for the future of the land involve the next generation. "Someday, I would like it to be their property, and they need to have a sense of connection to the land. They're getting that every single day with their outdoor learning and little hidden games." In actuality, Catie sees this connection as providing a sense of place for her children, irrespective of the place. She notes, "When I go home near Montpelier, I feel a sense of relief because it's familiar, like home. That sense of place is a critical gift for kids."

Catie and Mark have met with an estate lawyer to begin an estate plan but they're discovering that it takes much longer than anticipated. Although the plan is not yet finalized, they are having the important conversations between themselves and their children. With three children, they know that they can't predict the future, but it's important that the land stays intact, that it reflects their value system. "We have snapping turtles and beavers and bears and deer. I don't want to see that lost," she says. "It's a constant conversation that Mark and I have." It's also important to Catie that her family stays intact, that the legacy she and Mark have built keeps her children connected. And that's why they engage their children in these conversations too. "We've always been open with our children, willing to have conversations that other families might avoid."

Mark is a forester, so management was always in his realm. He's written the forest management plan for the property and does the work. However, Catie says that she has taken a much more active role in the last few years, driven by her innate curiosity. As a team, Mark and Catie consult each other in their respective fields of interest — he with management, she with education — but they recognize who does the actual work! Recently, Catie

has taken a greater interest in the introduced species that Mark has been working to eradicate. "I at least want to get better at identification," she says.

The last timber harvest on the property was about five years ago, and Catie admits quite honestly that she did not have much room in her brain to absorb what was happening. "We had three children in three and a half years; Mark was getting his masters; and we had just built a house. My brain was at capacity," she says. She's now more engaged and understanding more about harvesting and management; she credits Marks as being a great teacher!

Catie has also thought about completing a Women's Game of Logging to learn about chainsaw use. "I've used a chainsaw before but it's definitely not my favorite. Give me a pair of loppers," she says, "Something that's safe, reliable, and strong." That said, Catie is not one to be intimidated. "I'm so good at putting myself in situations that I find horrifying. I'm almost drawn to the things that scare me. I can see the benefit and I'm not going to let fear stop the benefit." Catie definitely embodies the "just do it" attitude. She says that she never wants to look back and wonder - what if? Another of her superpowers!

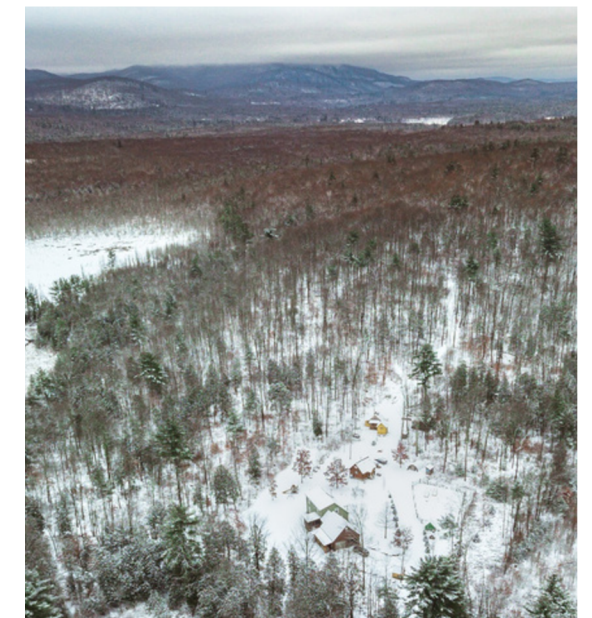
As a testament to the hard work and

dedication of Catie, Mark, and their children, Foxglove Farm was recognized as an Outstanding Tree Farm in 2024. With this honor comes a celebration and, for Catie, celebration invites community. "For me personally, I just need community," she says, "and am eager to do anything to foster it." They celebrated their achievement with a picnic and Tree Farm tour for about 50 woodland owners.

Catie's suggestion for other women landowners is all about community. "Find your community. Get involved," she offers. "Don't be afraid to ask questions." Catie recognizes there are fields where women are not traditionally involved, so "not knowing something might make you feel like you don't deserve to be there." Other women woodland

owners can find their seat at the table and discover their own superpowers by following Catie's example and asking lots of questions. If Catie has any advice for the younger generations, it's: "Get to the table. Sit and listen. The more we see young people at the table, the more normal it will be," she says, "So just get there!"

Vermont is everything to Catie and Mark. Foxglove Farm in Leicester is where their love of the land, the hard work, and the bountiful opportunities all come together. Catie acknowledges that there are challenges living in a place where the cost of living is so high but for her, the sense of peace and beauty make it acceptable. "I will pay more for a gallon of milk in order to live here, in one of the most beautiful states in the country," says Catie, "That's the compromise."



Aerial view of Foxglove Farm.



The family standing with their outstanding tree farm award.

