

A woman, Susanna Thornton, is walking through a grassy field with several white sheep. She is wearing a white tank top with "THORNFIELD farm" printed on it, a grey baseball cap, and denim shorts. The background features a line of trees under a bright sky.

Farming's New Faces

Roanoke's young growers use social media and unique products to connect with consumers.

written by CHRISTINA NIFONG

Susanna Thornton of
Thornfield Farm



Meet the Young Farmers Growing Roanoke's Food

ANNA AND BRENT WILLS

Bramble Hollow Farm, Montvale
Offers pastured poultry, eggs and pork, including many hard-to-find heritage breeds. bramblehollowfarm.com

FAIN STOREY AND KYLE CALDWELL

Cedar Rush Farm, New Castle
Sells organically grown produce and eggs. facebook.com/cedarrushfarm

CAMERON TERRY

Garden Variety Harvests, Roanoke
Farms five plots of city land that total 1/5 of an acre. Sells vegetables and fruit raised with organic growing practices. gardenvarietyharvests.com

ARDEN JONES AND MICHAEL GRANTZ

Great Day Gardens, Forest
Produces sustainably grown vegetables, herbs and flowers as well as sourdough, wood-fired bread and pastries. greatdaygardens.org

RICHARD HARDY

Hardy Urban Harvest, Roanoke
Farms city backyards using natural growing practices. Sells lettuce, greens, root vegetables and exotic tomato varieties. facebook.com/hardyurbanharvest

Susanna Thornton unpacks a series of grey plastic totes filled with the bounty from her fields — golden onions, shining peppers, box after box of tiny, orangey-red tomatoes.

She sets them out in pretty baskets atop burlap-covered folding tables beneath a pop-up tent at Sweet Donkey Coffee House.

For the next three hours a stream of customers stops by. Many have signed up with Thornfield Farm, Thornton's Botetourt property, to pre-order their week's veggies, meats, flowers and eggs online.

These shoppers likely receive Thornton's email newsletter and follow her inviting Instagram feed. Their children might have attended her weeklong farm camp last summer or they may have sipped cider and hopped on a hayride in the fall.

For Thornton, the planting, harvesting, selling, it's about more than making a living; it's even bigger than growing good food. Thornton labors in oppressive heat and bitter cold, rarely taking a day off, all in the name of creating connection.

"We want shoppers to engage with their food in a positive way," Thornton says as she snaps a bite of a purple-flecked Dragon Tongue bean. "My model is less about the community supporting me as a farmer and more about me educating them about why it's better to eat food that's fresh and local."

Thornton is not the person that comes to mind when most of us think "farmer." She's a 32-year-old college graduate, who grew up on the land she's now farming, but spent a decade far from home and agriculture and only found her way back after a yearlong apprenticeship in Maine.

But if she's not your everyman farmer, she is one of a growing crop of food producers that's shaking up agriculture's status quo. Recent U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics show that for only

the second time in a century, the number of farmers under the age of 35 is on the rise.

Further data from the 2012 Census of Agriculture reveal more details of these young farmers: 69 percent have college degrees; the majority do not come from farming families; they work land holdings of less than 50 acres. They chose farming because of deeply held beliefs about the environment, the security of the food system, the importance of clean farming practices. Farming for them is less a job than a chosen lifestyle.

In Roanoke, Thornton is not alone in her use of social media, her consumer-focused marketing, her desire to build community among grower and eater. Or her age.





Thornfield Farm

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SUSANNA THORNTON

A walk through the Grandin Village Farmers Market — where Thornfield Farm sells every Saturday from April to November — reveals a third of the vendors are farmers under 40.

The result is a market with a creative vibe and intensely local, often unusual products, such as flats of microgreens, bright yellow pawpaws, shiitake mushrooms, meat rabbits, cartons of colorful eggs, locally milled grains and wholesome baked goods.

"The reason the Grandin market started was to be open to small-scale, sustainable farmers," says Maureen Best, executive director of Local Environmental Agriculture Project or LEAP, a Roanoke-based nonprofit that manages the Grandin Village market and several other local food initiatives. The market was set up with strict definitions of local (grown within 100 miles) and an emphasis on transparency, which created an atmosphere welcoming to young, innovative growers. "Farmers seek out other farmers with similar value practices," she says.



With land prices still relatively affordable in the Roanoke region and the city's profile rising among millennials, coming years could see even more young farmers looking to put down Roanoke roots.

URBAN FARMER MOVES TO TOWN

In October 2017, now-30-year-old Cameron Terry moved from Denver to Roanoke with his girlfriend and a dream.

His big idea was to farm small urban plots that belonged to other people, then

DOUG AND LUCY OVERSTREET

Idlewild Farm, Bedford
Offers pastured pork and chicken,
as well as sustainably farmed eggs.
idlewildfarmva.com

STEPHEN AND ALEX KAPLAN

Kaplan's Welcome Home Farms,
Glade Hill
Wild-crafting and cultivating gourmet
mushrooms and produce. [facebook.com/
kaplanswelcomehomefarms](https://facebook.com/kaplanswelcomehomefarms)

BEN AND CARLY COLEMAN

Mountain Run Farm, Bedford County
Offers grass-fed beef and pastured pork,
specializing in chemical-free farming
practices. mountainrunfarm.com

AMY AND BRYAN WILLOUGHBY

Patchwork Farm, Floyd County
Sells organically grown vegetables,
fruit and herbs. idigpatchworkfarm.com

MATT AND RACHEL PALMA

Restoration Acres Farm, Forest
Offers sustainably-raised, pastured
chicken, pork, turkey and eggs.
restorationacresfarm.com

SUSANNA THORNTON

Thornfield Farm, Fincastrle
Offers organically grown vegetables,
fruits and flowers, as well as pastured
beef and eggs. thornfieldfarm.com

DANIEL AND KELLY KEY

Truffula Farm, Roanoke
Sustainably grows and raises garden
vegetables, honey, chickens, ducks,
rabbits, hogs. Offers baked goods
and cocktail bitters. [facebook.com/
truffulafarmva](https://facebook.com/truffulafarmva)

LEXI ROHAJN AND MARK COHEN

Wingstem Farm, Goose Creek Valley
Sells sustainably raised eggs, produce,
mushrooms and hops, as well as soap.
wingstemfarm.com



Cameron Terry



Garden Variety Harvests

sell the vegetables he raised at market. He'd be using land in a more productive way, spending his days doing something he loved, increasing the supply of local food, educating people along the way and not going into debt in the process.

His girlfriend's parents offered their yard as a starting point, so Terry got busy prepping beds there.

The pieces really began to fall in place when Terry connected with Roanoke Community Garden Association and they told him about a partnership with Carilion Clinic in Southeast Roanoke's Morningside neighborhood. RCGA would have community gardening plots for rent and Carilion would fund an urban farm to be used as teaching tool and way to raise food to be donated to the community. Carilion was looking for someone to plan, plant and harvest that space.

"I felt very fast that I was in the right place trying to do the right thing at the right time," Terry says.

As the growing season wound to a close, Terry's business, Garden Variety Harvests, had secured five yards and plots across the city.

"It's all gone better than I expected, truthfully," he says. "I had skepticism that the farming community would embrace my idea."

"Small farming is the way of the past and the way of the future."

CAMERON TERRY

But, Terry says his produce has sold well at the Grandin market. As he expands production, he plans to sell more to area restaurants, who he says are hungry for fresh, local vegetables and herbs.

"I know I'm not going to get rich," says Terry, who graduated from film school in 2009, intending to create documentaries. But he thinks Roanoke is the right place to allow him to build a good, growing life.

"Small farming is the way of the past and the way of the future," he says.

CHOOSING FARMS DESPITE CHALLENGES

The hurdles that stand in the way of success for all farmers — young and old, new and experienced — are high.

USDA statistics show that 12,000 farms closed nationwide from 2016 to 2017. One million acres of farmland were lost in that same year. Fifty percent of farms across the country documented less than \$10,000 in sales that year.

Land is expensive to acquire; the need to buy seed, equipment and other supplies upfront drags growers into debt; small farmers struggle to gain access to customers when shoppers can buy food more cheaply and conveniently at supermarkets.

All of which makes it remarkable that anyone, at any age, chooses farming.

But that's exactly what Daniel and Kelly Key did.

The couple bought six and a half acres and a 1920s house at the Southeastern edge of Roanoke City two years ago. Their land is steep, rocky and shaded — which has forced them to be innovative with what they grow and how they grow it.

In addition to working full-time jobs, Daniel and Kelly raise rabbits, chickens, ducks, hogs, vegetables, mushrooms and bees. They bring a range of products to the Grandin market every other week: eggs and produce, as well as Kelly's baked goods and cocktail bitters.

Their to-do list is never ending — weed, build, research, plant, harvest, can, deliver. "We have a lot of hopes and dreams right



now," says Kelly, 31. "We're trying to figure out how much we can handle."

They raise rabbits for meat — about 50 a year — which they sell to area restaurants. They'd like to expand that part of the business, but it's more complicated than simply scaling up.

"Because we're so small right now, everything is incredibly inefficient," Daniel, 32, explains. "If we invested in infrastructure, it would be easy to double that number."

The Keys moved to the area in 2014 after working on farms in Massachusetts and California. Daniel's parents own Key Living Options, a business that staffs small group homes for people with intellectual disabilities. He works there four days a week.

The couple began by gardening in their rental home yard, then farmed for a year at the Catawba Sustainability Center. But growing on ground that wasn't theirs taught them they needed to find a farm of their own.

Now, they're free to clear land and improve soil as they see fit. But they still struggle with the everyday realities of farm life: how to beat the bean beetles and keep predators from killing the chickens. How to give the rabbits pasture time without letting them escape. Where

Starting November 17 and ending March 16, a Grandin Village Winter Market is held monthly, every third Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., inside the CoLab on Grandin Rd. The West End Farmers Market runs every Tuesday, all year, from 3 to 6 p.m., behind Freedom First Credit Union on Patterson Avenue.

best to invest the limited time and money they have.

"Usually we just deal with what comes at us," Kelly says.

As hard as it is, though, this is where they want to be: doing right by their animals, choosing farming practices that give back to

the environment. Most of all, participating in a community that works together to sustain itself.

"To me, it's all about the people," says Daniel. Eating food raised by neighbors, helping one another, learning from other growers. "It's just such a much more meaningful experience." ☆

