

# MidwestLiving



## Open to Possibilities

FALL INTO SOMETHING NEW

SOAKING IN THE MAGIC OF THE BLACK HILLS

A DREAMY FARMHOUSE WITH CHARM TO SPARE

HARVEST PASTAS AND THE MOST CHOCOLATEY DESSERT





# BEGINNER'S PLUCK

*A pair of condo dwellers from Chicago decamps to a farm outside the city, trading dinner parties and oat milk lattes for a life that moves at a walk.*



WRITER **JOANNA LINBERG** INTERIORS **MARGARET RAJIC** PORTRAITS **ALISHA SIEGEL**



Palmer Farm is named for the couple who adopted it: Margaret Rajic Palmer and Matt Palmer. "We're hard users of the kitchen, three times a day," Margaret says, so their renovation of the property's 19th-century farmhouse prioritized that worn-out space. They economized by mostly keeping the

existing layout, aside from moving the fridge a few steps around a corner. Prepainted Shaker-style cabinetry (glammed up with brass hardware) tucks under wooden countertops; floating shelves and ripply subway tile air out the wall above.

# ON PALMER FARM

in Barrington Hills, a pastoral suburb outside Chicago, Margaret Rajic Palmer and husband Matt Palmer have no need to binge-watch TV. They have chickens.

“These girls are some of the busiest, most dramatic little creatures you could meet,” Margaret says, laughing as she pulls open the Dutch door of the 1,600-square-foot farmhouse. Sure enough, at the creak of the hinge, seven hens (and one “oops, I guess you’re a rooster”) abandon the grass they’ve been pecking. The whole mob speed-walks to the door, squawking their demands for a treat. Except Birdie, who pulls her head out of the ground a full minute later, notices she’s alone and careens wildly across the driveway before ducking into the flock like she hopes no one will notice.

A little late and a little uncooperative is Birdie’s way, Margaret says. She would know: She and Matt watch the flock’s antics with the riveted attention most of us gave Ted Lasso. They live and work on the 5-acre farm (she as an interiors photographer, he in the tech field) and are slowly rehabbing the property, dedicating themselves to morning and evening chores, planting vegetables, collecting eggs, and learning to live by the sun and seasons.

If this all sounds like your favorite daydream, Margaret and Matt understand. Both in their late 20s, the Palmers spent the previous decade embracing the urban hustle of New York City and Chicago. They had full work schedules and weekends packed with concerts and coffee dates. But in the back of their minds, they had a five-year plan to give it all up for land and the slow life. Margaret even started horseback riding lessons.

Then the pandemic hit. “All the reasons we were staying in the city—the restaurants, the people—that went away,” Margaret says. “We found ourselves

(Top) Matt took their move to the country as a cue to pick up carpentry. So far, he’s built new barn doors, barn stalls, raised garden beds and a mounting block for Margaret and the horses. (Bottom) Margaret’s office (and Bear’s snooze spot) has original plank walls and floors. They were already painted, so the Palmers embraced that. They just touch up the white as needed.

on a whitewash stain. Black paint turned the ho-hum stair railing into a showpiece. (Middle) Margaret’s office (and Bear’s snooze spot) has original plank walls and floors. They were already painted, so the Palmers embraced that. They just touch up the white as needed.



Margaret took up riding as an adult, so Barrington Hills’ equestrian trails were a huge lure. “Most are on private land, but almost everyone allows riders,” she says. And people actually use them to visit one another: “I ride over and have a pop in my neighbors’ barn! I won’t ever get over it; it’s the most special thing.”

If being nose-to-muzzle with nature was motivation to move out of the city, then mission accomplished. Buckley, a chestnut paint horse, can't help but peek in through the carriage house's original Dutch door, which looks newly sharp in Benjamin Moore's Wrought Iron 2124-10.



visiting my mom in Barrington every weekend and falling in love with everything it had to offer.”

Five years turned into right now as the couple unloaded their condo, found a former dairy farm and moved in with Margaret's mom during renovations. They earmarked the carriage house's in-law suite for light updates to host guests, planned a fuller remodel for the Cape Cod-style farmhouse, and launched an Instagram (@palmer\_farm) to document the journey.

*“We have a little house,  
so we only have the things  
we use every day.”*

MARGARET RAJIC PALMER

The dated kitchen got new cabinets and appliances. A small second bedroom upstairs became a roomy bathroom. And the two painted, applied beadboard, wallpapered and hung additional barn doors until the old house was ready for next-gen living. “We basically touched everything,” Margaret says.



The couple did a lot of the work themselves, relishing the hard labor and new skills. Putting the land and barns in order was even more rewarding. They cleared an overgrown trail by hand, one weekend at a time. Matt googled “how to build more barn stalls,” then actually did it. “It’s been so satisfying seeing the results,” he says.

After two years, Matt finally invested in a tractor. Margaret recalls their Halloween party last year, when he “accidentally” left the garage door open so everyone could see. “He’s the most modest person, yet he did this weird tractor flex,” she jokes. “He’s all in.” They both are—and not just because of pride of place (or tractors). “I struggle with anxiety, and having a routine that’s done with my hands, like getting up and taking care of the horses or weeding, it rightsizes any mental situation,” Margaret says. “This is the most rewarding long game. It’s a lifetime project for us.”

*(Above)* Until about 50 years ago, the living room was the entire farmhouse. The Palmers painted the fireplace and walls, and chose durable furniture and fabrics. “There’s a million ways it could have looked better design-wise,” says Margaret, who photographs homes professionally. “But we like to cuddle up with our dogs. It feels good to have parts of your life feel like you.” *(Above left)* Evie sits by a secondhand bookshelf the couple outfitted with fresh paint and drawer pulls.



## GET OUTTA TOWN

*If rural life beckons, consider Matt and Margaret's advice on finding land, raising animals and staying grounded.*

### START WITH CHICKENS

Requiring little space, hens offer eggs, entertainment and an important toe-dip into caring for animals.

### GET THE LOWDOWN FROM A LOCAL

"To really glean the vibe of a township," Margaret says, "visit the feedstore." Her rationale? "The person who owns it will probably be honest because they have nothing to gain or lose if you move."

### LOOK FOR FENCING

Pastures, paddocks and fencing are extremely important for larger animals—and extremely expensive. Put a premium on property that already has them.

### TAKE IT SLOW

"We knew nothing! But when we took things one step at a time, they became manageable," Margaret says. "Focus on one project, as hard as that is." Matt adds to not be discouraged by

celebrity homesteaders: "It takes awhile to get to that point. It's OK to build up to it."

### WATCH, READ, VISIT

Oak Abode, a YouTube channel hosted by a Wisconsin couple who homesteads, is must-watch TV. "To learn the way they do things in the same climate as us, that's so huge," Margaret says. The Palmers also pore over how-to books; Madigan Country Woods' *Beginner's Guide for Raising Chicken*

is a favorite. And don't be shy. Take questions to your neighbors, who have been where you are and probably have the answer.

### JUST GET A TRACTOR

Mowing took Matt five hours on a riding mower. Now? One hour. They used to clear land by hand, 1800s-style. These days, Matt does it in 20 minutes by attaching a brush hog to his versatile tractor. "It's a Swiss Army Knife. It's the best," he says. **MWL**

(Left) "In the fall, the bugs are gone, the ground isn't sloshy like in the spring, and the leaves and everything else are gorgeous," Margaret says. She and Matt make the most of the season, hosting a big Halloween party and parking around the firepit to catch the sunset. (Above) Margaret's office has French doors that open to a patio and outdoor dining area. Her

work for interior designers and publications gave her a roster of pros to turn to for advice during the reno. (Below) Margaret papered the kitchen's table nook with Sandberg Wallpaper's Raphael in White, a subtle pattern she fell for while shooting a client project. A wraparound banquette makes the most of the small space, which is the home's only indoor dining spot.



The couple removed a freestanding bench in the mudroom to have more wiggle room for the dogs, then DIY'd the beadboard walls and barn door to Margaret's office, all painted in Benjamin Moore's Essex Green HC-188. Margaret's longtime client, Kira Obermeier, designed the window seat cushion and consulted on many finishes in the home.

*"We purposely don't plan trips in the summer or fall for fear of missing out on the best time of year here. I haven't for a second missed having more options."*

MARGARET RAJIC PALMER