



Melissa Awtrey

Location: Brandon, TX » **Products:** Goat Milk Soap »

Size of Operation: 81 acres » **In Business Since:** 2009 »

Farm Credit Partner: Lone Star Ag Credit

In 2007, Melissa and Allan Awtrey pondered a backyard swing set, setting in motion events that would change their family's life. The couple's suburban home, in Plano, Texas, had a problem. Its tiny lot couldn't accommodate their three kids' play equipment. The solution, they decided, was to acquire a small farm for weekend getaways.

With financing from Lone Star Ag Credit, the Awtreys purchased a 53-acre Texas farm. Six months later, they concluded that the 100 miles between homes was too far. "We sold our house in the suburbs and never looked back," Melissa says.

It wasn't long before the farm inspired the Awtreys to start a cottage industry. The family bought a couple of dairy goats and started producing goat-milk soap. Initially, the Awtreys used most of the soap they made—48 bars would last all year—but after a neighbor sold some of their lavender-scented product to co-workers, demand soared. Before long, they were selling their Mason Jar Farm soap at a nearby feed store and a local dairy. In 2014, Melissa started selling at the downtown Hillsboro Farmers Market.

"We have been growing bigger each year, but [this] was a turning point for the soap company," Melissa says. "At last count, I make around 3,000 bars a year using more than 60 fragrances."

While Allan worked full time as an information technology manager, Melissa expanded Mason Jar Farm's product line, adding goat-milk lotion, shampoo bars and other homemade bath products. Everything is made with natural ingredients. She also created a website that sells bath products, toys and needlework made by the family. In 2016, Mason Jar Farm started selling grass-fed beef.

To keep up with demand, Melissa now has 40 goats that provide raw materials for the business. They also have chickens, pigs, rabbits, ducks, donkeys, cows and a carriage horse named Pete. In 2012, the family bought a 1926 farmhouse and more land. In 2015 they purchased hay equipment. Lone Star Ag Credit financed both purchases.

The family has grown, too. Melissa and Allan now have six children, toddler to teens, none of whom are interested in swing sets, even though that was the first thing the Awtreys added to the farm. With 81 acres available to them, the children play in open spaces, garden, ride horses and learn to drive the tractor. And they help raise the goats, bottle-feeding about 25 kids each Spring, and hand milking every day.

"I would not change anything about what we have done," Melissa says. "Moving out here was the best decision for our family, and Lone Star has been with us since day one."