

Black Forest Stables offers sanctuary in Maple Valley for endangered horses

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Black Forest draft horses won't always be on the fringe of the animal kingdom if Ursula and Vic Sivitilli have their way.

The couple hope to make their farm in Black Diamond a mecca for the majestic animals. Already, it's the only importer/breeder in the United States for the rare horses that have become an endangered breed.

The Sivitillis, who also own a five-acre farm in Maple Valley, opened Black Forest Stables in the summer of 2006 near the Green River Gorge. It's been an active place in the Black Forest draft world. A riding stable is being developed. Last month, a female horse was born. And this month, a representative of the Germany breeders association is scheduled to visit.

Germany is where this breed of draft horses is bred almost exclusively in the Black Forest of the country's southern region. In the German language, they're known as the Schwarzwaelder Kaltblut.

The breed originated about 600 years ago and was used heavily at one time in forestry work, due to its durability, strength and gentle nature that were well-suited for hauling logs over the steep terrain in the Black Forest. Machinery gradually replaced them, changing them from indispensable workhorses to an endangered species. By 1981, there were only 160 registered broodmares. The German government stepped took steps to protect and promote them, performance testing to assure that the best stallions and mares would be used in breeding. Many of the crowned stallions now live at the state stud farm and at private stud farms throughout Germany.

Ursula Sivitilli, originally from Munich, left Germany for the U.S. and Washington as a child. "I grew up here but was fortunate to visit Germany many times while growing up and hold onto the heritage" of the Black Forest draft horses, she said.

On a visit to Germany in 1999, relatives took Sivitilli and her family to the 500-year old national stud farm, Haupt-und-Landgestuet Marbach, home to many of the crowned Black Forest stallions. "One look at these magnificent horses" and hearing that their numbers were few "was all it took" to become determined to help the breed survive, she said. "It became our goal to bring some of these horses over to the states."

Black Forest Stables now has seven adult horses. The oldest is about 11 years old. They include a male named Montanara, the first of the Black Forest breed to be born in North America (March 2002).

In addition to helping keep the breed on solid footing, the Sivitillis own Black Forest Saddles, a line of therapeutic treeless saddles. And they're ready to help anyone import the horses from Germany by making connections with a large network of breeders there.

The Sivitillis have imported three pregnant mares over the years to establish their own herd. Importing them is a relatively complex process. After they're flown to the U.S., they go through a few weeks of quarantine before being sent to their American homes.

At about 16 hands tall and 1,250 to 1,400 pounds, they're considered a mid-size draft horse, which Sivitilli said makes them an easy-going companion.

"They're great to work with, very gentle. They're the golden retrievers of horses," she said.

Away from their prized animals, Sivitilli works part-time for REI as a tax analyst, and Vic is a consultant in the automotive industry. They have three sons – Tony, Alex and Dominic.

The Black Forest drafts are the couple's extended family – and one they hope will keep growing.

"Our goal," Sivitilli said, is to gain more recognition of the animals in the U.S. "and help re-grow the breed from near-extinction."



Ursula and Vic Sivitilli, the only U.S. importers/breeders of Black Forest draft horses, show off two of their prized animals – the newborn filly Margarita and its mother, Walesa.

CHARLES CORTES/Reporter

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