

Unleashing The Homesteader Within



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*Let's get together and get some land
Raise our food like the man
People people
We gotta get over before we go under
—James Brown, Funky President*

Imagine sitting down to a salad of peppery arugula and heirloom tomatoes that you grew yourself. Or a Sunday omelet of eggs laid that morning, served with a thick slice of fresh sourdough, butter and apricot jam—all home-made, of course. Or imagine toasting your friends with a mead made from local honey. Where would you have to move to live like this? A commune in Vermont? A villa in Italy?

My husband Erik and I have done all of this in our little bungalow in Los Angeles, two blocks off of Sunset Boulevard. We grow food and preserve it, recycle water, forage the neighborhood, and build community. We're urban homesteaders.

Though we have fantasies about one day moving to the country, the city holds things that are more important to us than any parcel of open land. We have friends and family here, great neighbors, and all the cultural amenities and stimulation of a city. It made more sense for us to become self-reliant in our urban environment. There was no need for us to wait to become farmers. We grow plenty of food in our back yard in Echo Park and even raise chickens.

Once you taste lettuce that actually has a distinct flavor, or eat a sweet tomato still warm from the sun, or an orange-yolked egg from your own hen, you will never be satisfied with the pre-packaged and the factory-farmed again. Our next step down the homesteading path was learning to use the old home arts to preserve what we grew: pickling, fermenting, drying and brewing. A jar of jam that you make of wild blackberries holds memories of the summer, and not the air of the Smucker's factory.

When you grow some of your own food, you start to care more about all of your food. **Just where did this come from?** we'd find ourselves asking when we went shopping. **What's in it?** At the same time, we began to learn about cultured and fermented foods, which have beneficial bacteria in them. Few of these wonder-foods are available in stores. The supermarket started to look like a wasteland.

A little history

The idea of urban farming is nothing new. Back in the days before freeways and refrigerated trucks, cities depended on urban farmers for the majority of their fresh food. This included small farms around the city, as well as kitchen gardens. Even today, there are places that hold to this tradition. The citizens of Shanghai produce 85% of their vegetables within the city, and that's just one example of a long Asian tradition of intense urban gardening. Or consider Cuba. Cubans practiced centralized, industrial agriculture, just as we do, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Overnight, Cubans were forced to shift from a large, petroleum-based system to small-scale farming, much of it in cities. Today, urban organic gardens produce half of the fresh fruits and vegetables consumed by Cubans.

The United States once was a nation of independent farmers. Today most of us do not know one end of a hoe from the other. In last half of the 20th century, a cultural shift unique in human history came to pass. We convinced ourselves that we didn't need to have anything to do with our own food. Food, the very stuff of life, became just another commodity, an anonymous transaction. In making this transition, we sacrificed quality for convenience, and we then we learned to forget the value of what we gave up.

Large agribusiness concerns offer us flavorless, genetically modified, irradiated, pesticide-drenched frankenvegetables. They are grown in such poor soil—the result of short-sighted profit-based agricultural practices—that they actually contain fewer nutrients than food grown in healthy soil. Our packaged foods are nutritionally bankrupt, and our livestock is raised in squalid conditions. The fact is that we live in an appalling time when it comes to food. True, we have a great abundance of inexpensive food in supermarkets, but the disturbing truth is that in terms of flavor, quality and nutrition, our great-grandparents ate better than we do.

There is hidden cost behind our increasingly costly supermarket food. The French have a term, *malbouffe*, referring to junk food, but with broader, more sinister implications. Radical farmer José Bové, who was imprisoned for dismantling a McDonald's restaurant, explains the concept of *malbouffe*:

I initially used the word 'shit-food', but quickly changed it to *malbouffe* to avoid giving offense. The word just clicked—perhaps because when you're dealing with food, quite apart from any health concerns, you're also dealing with taste and what we feed ourselves with. *Malbouffe* implies eating any old thing, prepared in any old way. For me, the term means both the standardization of food like McDonald's—the same taste from one end of the world to the other—and the choice of food associated with

the use of hormones and Genetically Modified Organisms as well as the residues of pesticides and other things that can endanger health.

— *The World is Not for Sale* by José Bové and François Dufour

So what are the strategies urban homesteaders can follow to avoid *malbouffe*? Farmers markets, co-ops and natural food stores serve as good supplements to the urban homestead, but we've found that growing our own food, even just a little of it, rather than buying it, not only results in better quality food, it has changed our fundamental relationship to food and to the act of eating itself. Now, now not only do we know our crops are free of pesticides and GMOs but we discovered an entirely new world of taste and flavor that big agribusiness had stolen away from us. Growing your own food is an act of resistance. We can all join with José Bové in dismantling the corporations that feed us shit.

We've also shifted from being consumers to being **producers**. Sure we still buy stuff. Olive oil. Parmigiano reggiano. Wine. Flour. Chocolate. And we're no strangers to consumer culture, not above experiencing a little shiver of desire when walking into an Apple computer store. But still, we do not accept that spending is our only form of power. There is more power in creating than in spending. We are producers, neighbors, and friends.

Think you don't have enough land to grow your food? Change the way you see land.

Before you start thinking that you have to move somewhere else to grow your own food, take another look around. With a couple of notable exceptions, American cities sprawl. They are full of wasted space. As a homesteader, you will begin to see any open space as a place to grow food. This includes front yards as well as backyards, vacant lots, parkways, alleyways, patios, balconies, window boxes, fire escapes and rooftops. Once you break out of the mental box that makes you imagine a vegetable garden as a fenced off parcel of land with a scarecrow in it, you'll start to see the possibilities. Think jungle, not prairie. The truth is that you can grow a hell of a lot of food on a small amount of real estate. You can grow food whether you're in an apartment or a house, whether you rent or own.

Do you have 4' x 8' feet of open ground? If you don't have a yard, do you have room for on a patio or balcony for two or three plastic storage tubs? If you don't have that, then you could get a space in a community garden, a relative or neighbor's house, or become a pirate gardener, or an expert forager—some of the tastiest greens and berries are wild and free for the taking.

Think you don't have time? Think again.

We homestead at our own pace, to suit ourselves. Some things, like bread baking, have become part of our regular routine. Other kitchen experiments, like making pickles, come and go as time allows. More ambitious projects, like installing a greywater system, take time up front, but save time once implemented. It's unlikely that we spend any more time on our food-producing yard than we would on a traditional lawn and roses type yard. You can set up your urban (or suburban) farm so that it takes minimal time to keep it going—we talk about ways to do that in this book.

Sometimes, when life gets too crazy, we don't do anything beyond the barest maintenance, and eat a lot of pizza. Nothing wrong with that.

Besides saving time, with the exception of a few ambitious projects, like converting to solar, everything we talk about in this book is also cost-effective. Homesteading is all about reusing, recycling, foraging and building things yourself. Seeds are cheap, composting is free. Nature is standing by, waiting to help. And as oil prices continue to rise along with the cost of food, learning to grow your own may be one of the wisest investments you can make.

The paradigm shift

Urban homesteading is an affirmation of the simple pleasures of life. When you spend a Saturday morning making a loaf of bread, or go out on a summer evening after work to sit with your chickens, or take a deep breath of fresh-cut basil, you unplug yourself from the madness. Many of us spend a lot of each day in front of a computer. Homesteading hooks us into the natural world and the passing of the seasons, and reminds us of our place within the greater cycle of life.

Our style of homesteading is about desire. We bake our own bread because it is better than what we can buy. We raise our own hens because we like chickens, and we think their eggs are worth the trouble. Erik bicycles everywhere because that's a thrill for him. There's mead brewing in our guest bedroom because you can't buy mead at the corner liquor store—and because fermentation is the closest thing to magic that we know.

Maybe you aren't so into gardening, but would like to brew your own beer. Maybe you'd like to tinker with a greywater system for your house. Maybe you want to make your own non-toxic cleaning products. Try it! Start by doing just one project, one experiment, and you may well unleash the homesteader within.