

2.1 The Reality of Homestead Living [Excerpt]

There are lots of wanna-be stories out there in books and magazines on why and how to make the transition to homestead living. For the most part these fall woefully short of reality with the intention to simply sell you some information, good or bad—it's their business. There are, however, three books we highly recommend on homestead living that are both inspirational and down-in-the-dirt real.

Miraculous Abundance – Perrine and Charles Herve-Gruyer

This is how two adults with no farming experience have created an incredibly abundant farm on just one hectare (about 2½ acres) in France. As Charles says, “I don't do problems; I do solutions.” This changed our entire perspective on what's possible on small holdings. Also look for a few of their videos in YouTube that prove what can be done when not tainted by com-ag practices.

The Nourishing Homestead – Ben and Penny Hewitt

They knew what they wanted so they scraped together their pennies and bought some raw land that held the promise of their vision. This is how Ben and Penny went from a simple survival shelter to a fully functional homestead, complete with raising kids, community, animals, and lots of great food.

How to Shovel Manure – Gwen Petersen

The subtitle lays out the wisdom that comes from living the homestead life: “and Other Life Lessons for the Country Woman.” It's far from only a man's world; there's lots more to all of this that requires very different perspectives with a good measure of humor. This is an incredible array of advice that's been gained through years of experience—the real kind of advice not found in any other books.

Understanding Your Personality

Before anything happens toward acquiring or developing your homestead, first and foremost are yourself and those involved—mates, spouses, kids, and extended family. It's not about growing veggies and watching chickens fart around. It's about getting dirty, sweaty, muddy, cold, wet, thirsty, and just plain old bone weary tired. There will be cuts on your hands, ripped up clothes, worn out boots and then there's the next day on your homestead.

Accountability

If you're the kind of person who needs direction to get started with badgering to get something done, homestead living is not for you. It's about doing the right things at the right time when nobody is looking. This is accountability—whatever is necessary, required, or assumed such as getting out of your warm bed, booting up, opening the chickens, milking the goats, or tending the woodstove—no matter the weather. It's you or no one—accepting the consequences, good and bad, for your actions.

Responsibility

This is when someone else depends on you. Following through with responsibilities is about guilt toward disappointing others. It can push you, but only so far—the rest is up to you. Transitioning to accountability can be difficult and especially if you've always only been responsible. Shifting the buck to someone else doesn't work in homestead living. There's no doing your part for someone else, collecting a paycheck for your minimum effort, and going off to be entertained because homestead living is right in your face.

Tenacity

It's an absolute axiom to homestead living that nothing ever goes as planned. As you gain experience through mistakes and gather wisdom from reflection on what went wrong, you need to keep going. You can't give up and quit. If you tend to do this when the going gets tough, and it will, it all falls apart. If you need to make endless detailed plans before starting, very little will get done and tenacity won't matter.

Experience: Malabar Spinach Trellis – When assembling a small overhead trellis for Malabar Spinach (that grows as a vine during hot summer months) this PVC contraption was carried out to its location and back again five times over several days before finally getting it right. This was tenacity in action.

Attitude

Being hard-nose driven to get things done can easily leave others out of the loop while you flail around with whatever has your nut. In short order, you'll be on your own while they just sit back and watch the show. Likewise, for you, when they're onto something. Get everyone onboard, including yourself, to share the load and the joy of accomplishment. If you're a lone wolf, it will get very lonely.

Avoiding Insanity

You've probably heard this definition: Doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results. If something isn't working, step back, think about the situation, and ask for help or advice. But to keep on trying the same thing time and again, blaming everything from the weather to critters, you'll get stuck in the insanity loop. It's easy to fall for this. Be flexible—not insane.

Walking Around

Tom learned this as an officer in the Navy—"Expect what you inspect." Living by assumptions that everything is a-okay is a sure way to get overtaken by the natural forces alive and working nonstop within your homestead. It's not about control. It's about coexistence—give and take. If you'd rather sit on your butt—stay where you are because homestead living requires you to move, every day, rain or shine.

Morale

The manure *will* hit the fan. At these low points in homestead living, and there will be many, you need to be the optimist with your glass half full. If you can't be optimistic during these moments, at least be thankful that these challenges will pass. Like we all heard as kids, you can't cry over spilled milk. What's done is done and no amount of angst can change what happened. Throwing a fit when something just ain't right accomplishes nothing. How you control yourself during the low points will be your measure with everyone around you—all eyes will be on you to see if you can handle the heat.

Tolerance

Every aspect of homestead living involves humility and deference to everyone involved—tolerating the positive and negative with how each person approaches things. Doing this well requires finesse. If you've got it, good. If lacking, be honest and start practicing. Your homestead will be much better for the effort.

"The most important investment you can make is in yourself. Stop postponing plans waiting for the right time. Making one change can turn dreams into reality. Do more of what really matters." Warren Buffet

Humor

At times, homestead living will get overwhelming. With a little reflection you'll see that this too shall pass so it's time to lighten up. Give a complement—crank up some music—sing and dance. This is important because when you unwind, others will smile and homestead living becomes very good.

Assessment

Now for the hard part. At the end of this section is a worksheet that will help assess who you really are and whether or not your personality fits with homestead living. Don't boost your strengths and don't sugar-coat your weaknesses. None of this means you can or cannot be successful. A lot will change with experience—no matter your background, homestead living is always a great equalizer.

Homestead Economics – Time and Money

Maximizing Available Time

As a newbie to homestead living, you'll likely require outside income—trading time for money. This means considerable hours at a job with transit to and from employment. This also requires great discipline and efficiency in your routine like getting up early for a half-hour of prep before departure in the morning. Then, on return, you can hit the deck running and get much more accomplished.

That's when the race begins until you follow the headlights home. It may seem like an hour or two would be too little to accomplish anything meaningful. Not so. It's the little bits every day that accumulate into moving mountains. With tenacity and efficiency, it really does get done.

Section 9.5.1 – Check out what was accomplished over six years in developing our forest garden.

Money Issues

This is something that can really mess with the mind when it comes to homestead living. There are multiple ways to look at this—none can be ignored.

- Homesteads never come ready-built. There will be infrastructure required along with development of soil and land. This cannot be done on the cheap. The objective is enduring quality.
- Unless you are independently wealthy, the property will have a mortgage. This must be first priority or your homestead experience will be short lived.
- Close to this is taxes, primarily property, usually with semi-annual billing, and annual personal taxes. These also can't be ignored or when the tax man cometh, your homestead could go away.
- Then there's monthly utilities: electric, water, septic, cell phones, and internet. Forget about frivolous entertainment...you'll be too busy for that.
- Transportation must be reliable and flexible, especially if commuting from the country. If you can work from home that's good but all the stuff you'll need for your homestead has to get there somehow.
- Retirement cannot be ignored. One day you will get old with opportunities no longer viable. How you invest in yourself today will be your comfort in the future.

- Finally, you have to eat. Being self-sustaining takes many years, but only if you can produce all you'll need. On marginal homestead land, producing everything will not be possible.
- Until major monthly expenses are out of the way, you're beholden to an income stream you can count on. Without this, you would build on a house of cards that *will* collapse along with your homestead living dreams. Get this straight and keep it secure while things fall into place.

Experience: Living Debt Free – Genny paid off her mortgage in just five years, including construction. It took two steady incomes, lots of discipline, and hard work. Over the years, things were added and improvements installed—this continues today. A neighbor in our valley, Leslie, did the same as Genny in paying off his mortgage and construction costs in five years by working two jobs. And both of these were accomplished when interest rates on mortgage loans were at 15-17% (early 1980s). It can be done, but only with discipline.

Money from Your Homestead

One of the great illusions is that homestead living can be self-supporting. Yes, you might be able to make a few bucks selling some eggs or veggies, but that's about all from most marginal land. Without expertise and connections, it's only slightly possible to make a go of it. Also realize that you are and will not be the only homesteaders with this imaginary dream of a self-supporting homestead. What works is to be unique but there are only so many ways to be unique—that's when you've got to learn how to hustle.

If you go into homestead living without expertise and contacts while expecting to support your operation from your efforts, think carefully before making an avoidable mistake based on erroneous assumptions. If you've got a niche, test first to see if this would work—while maintaining your secure income stream.

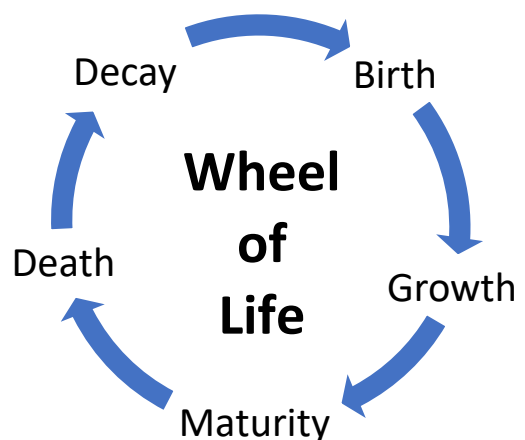
Hobby-Loss Rules – Basically, if a business, even small, generates a profit in three out of five consecutive years, the IRS will assume that you are engaged in an activity to make a profit. However, just because you make a few bucks, this doesn't mean you can write off a new tractor as an expense.

New Way of Life

Joining the Natural World

No matter the scope of your homestead, be it backyard or in the country, you will be interacting with the natural world. If you're squeamish with insects, spiders, snakes, and critters then you may try to control these members of your homestead—you'd fail because they've been at this for a very long time. You'll be coexisting with them so get to know who's there with you.

Wheel of Life – Around 1900, a botanist from England, Albert Howard, made an important insight into the life cycle of all living things called the Wheel of Life. When observing carefully through any aspect of the natural world, you will see this in action. Realize that you are living within the Wheel of Life—right now.



This process occurs every day. Take trees, for instance: new leaves emerge in spring, branches grow from photosynthesis, and when done, leaves fall to the ground and decay back into soil. New leaves emerge again in the spring and the trees keep on growing.

One day, your days will be done. The real question is how well you served your time in the natural world so that the next cycle of life will have an equal opportunity to do well. What you do today matters.

About 8 Years of Decay



Fresh soil from a decaying tree

Photo 2.1.1-1 (b)

About 6 Years of Decay



Insects working a tree stump

Photo 2.1.1-2 (b)

In the natural world, insects are the hard workers. This is their food with the result being humus for the soil. The same holds true for animals in their death. We have numerous skeletal remains from those that died on our homestead. Likewise with offal after harvesting their meat; none can be found in just a few months. Without active insect populations, life on this earth, and on your homestead, would cease. Do everything you can to keep your insect buddies happy, well fed, and propagating.

Leaving the Urban World – Ten Big Changes

This doesn't necessarily mean packing up and moving to the country. It simply means forsaking shabby convenience for quality results. Nevertheless, this won't be easy. Anyone born after 1900 in America grew up with rapid industrialization and especially during the past 30 years with technology and the internet. In fact, the reason you're reading this material right now is because of these changes.

This, however, has made us dependent on these tools, or so you may think. Take away your computers, cell phones, and streaming services—what's left are the people and animals of your homestead. They've been there all along, living life without the dire so-called need of these distractions. When you limit these in your life, much more gets done on real priorities that really matter.

1. Bodily Functions – If you're out in the country, most likely there's no sewer service. This means a septic system or even an outhouse—yes, these are still used successfully today. There's no more flush and forget it. And, there's different types of toilet paper: single-ply instead of cushy urban stuff.

2. Goodbye to Processed Food – Maybe not immediately, but eventually most of this will go away. This means knowing how to cook and that means all sorts of tools and utensils the likes of which you may have never seen or used, like an apple corer, a foley mill, and a cabbage shredder.

3. Working with Hands – You’ll get callouses, cuts, and splinters along with mud and dirt sometimes embedded so deep that it may takes days to come clean. Work gloves will always be close at hand—the right kind that actually survive what you’ll put them through.

4. On Your Feet – You’ll spend so many hours getting stuff done that one day you’ll realize you were upright, vertical, and mobile for eight or more hours. Like gloves, the right footwear will be your best friends. Then again, you might just do away with boots and go barefoot.

5. Public Utilities – When the wind blows, trees come down and electricity goes out. If the water is brown, a repair is ongoing or the fire hydrants are being flushed. There’s no use complaining, but it’s also wise to take a look around—maybe it’s your wires or water that’s the problem.

6. Convenience – If out in the country, nothing will be nearby yet you’ll still need access to materials, tools, clothing, and food you can’t produce. It’s the result of centralization. You’ll get very efficient with your trips while combining needs with budgeted progress toward projects.

7. Priorities – With homestead living, focus changes from wants to needs with this controlled by the weather and the seasons. When the timing is right and the climate is cooperating, all else goes to second place while the necessary things get done.

8. Cooperation – Just because you say this or that is first priority doesn’t mean that’s the first priority for the homestead. This comes down to communication, in kindly and friendly ways. It’s also important to be tolerant of the needs of others and to be flexible in day-to-day life.

9. Frugality – As priorities change, so too will be how you spend your money. And this will change your perspective on the quality of your purchases. Durability will outweigh enticing advertising. Quality, even at a greater cost, will still be working long after planned obsolescence.

10. Simplicity – This especially applies to tools. The more complex, the more likely it will have problems. This also applies to vehicles—they must be reliable before fancy. And with cell phones, computers, and tablets—they’re all useful but you’ll likely be too busy for many of the bells and whistles.

Bottom Line

- Embarking on homestead living is markedly different from urban-dependent living. It’s like the moniker from President Harry Truman: “The Buck Stops Here.” It all comes down to you and the changes you are willing to accommodate in living the homestead way.
- Cause, effect, and unintended consequences are always a huge consideration in every decision involving homestead living. There is no escaping your responsibility and your accountability.
- Financial discipline needs to be started now. This is how you’ll find your way into homestead living through a frugal lifestyle that foregoes frivolous spending. This is how you will acquire your own homestead land and how you can gain financial freedom through homestead living.
- When moving into homestead living, you will become part of the natural world around you—soil, plants, insects, weather, and everything that comes with your micro-ecosystem. How you choose to live within your ecosystem determines the success of your homestead living.