

June Newsletter

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What is Urban Homesteading?

By Sarah McElligott

Another “green” group for Iowa City; you may be asking yourself “so what is urban homesteading anyway?” So glad you asked! Urban homesteaders are a pretty diverse group, but there are some common themes. These are people who are making a conscious choice to make our world healthier by relying less on fossil fuel use in its many manifestations, from industrial farming to electric clothes washers. Urban homesteaders seek self-sufficiency and reducing their reliance on business and infrastructure for

things such as food, electricity, and many other things that can be created at home. We are seeking to reclaim knowledge that we have willingly given up in favor of industrialized, cheap, and easy products: including food.

Homesteading has its roots in the “back to land” movement of the 60s and the 70s: the urban exodus to the countryside to seek a stronger connection with the Earth and foodways, living off the grid and by the sweat of one's brow. Urban homesteaders are trying to seek balance of the benefit of urban life with the

same longing for a simpler, less consumptive lifestyle. Many of us start simply as gardeners with a small plot of organically cultivated vegetables, and our interests expand to include alternative energy, reusing and re-purposing things instead of carting them off to the dump, and trying to preserve our harvest to nourish throughout the year.

Whatever stage of urban homesteading you are at, from interest onward, your presence is welcomed in the group. We seek to build community, to learn from and to encourage each other.

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Make your Own Natural Cleaner

Strewing Herb Powder For Carpets & Area Rugs

1 1/2 cups borax
1/2 salt
1/2 cup ground peppermint
1/2 cup tablespoon rosemary
Anti-microbial essential oils of your choice. Mix the dry ingredients together and stir in 20-30 drops of essential oils in any combination you desire. Sprinkle on rugs let

stand overnight. Vacuum in the morning. You can also put it in spots you don't want pests like under your stove or fridge.



Another Safe Room Freshener. Toss a cotton ball with a few drops of essential oil in your vacuum cleaner reservoir.

United Natural Food Buying Club

Some members of IC Urban Homesteaders, belong to a United Natural Foods Buying Club which is open to new members. Formerly Blooming Prairie, [UNFI](#) offers members the opportunity to purchase bulk organic foods. If you are interested in more information, [contact Kate](#) for more information.

The prices are usually much lower if you buy in bulk. This is one way in which we work to make buying fairly-traded, organic products a bit easier on the pocket book.



Borage flowers have a crisp cucumber like flavor and can be used in salads or as a garnish.

Attract Beneficial Insects with Edible Flowers

Most of us know that attracting beneficial insects to our yards and gardens is a good gardening practice. Some insects prey on less desirable pests and others serve as pollinators. One of the best ways to attract beneficials is to plant a variety of flowers. Pollinators especially seem to be attracted to the colors blue, red, yellow and violet. Fragrance is another important attractant.

For many of us facing space restrictions, we hesitate when faced with taking up too much of

our precious sunlight planting flowers. One way to solve this dilemma is by planting edible flowers and herbs.

Many flowers can be used to add flavor to salads, drinks or deserts. I make a "May Wine" by soaking sweet woodruff violets and strawberries in a white wine.

Violets, lilacs and pansies can be "sugared" to decorate cakes. Mint leaves can also be sugared to create a unique "after dinner" mint. Nasturtiums add a zesty flavor and

may replace pepper or mustard in some dishes.

Day lilies blooms can be stuffed with goat cheese and served as an appetizer. (You can also do this with zucchini and summer squash blooms)

The best time for harvesting flowers is early in the day after the evening dew has evaporated. Wash gently and lay out on a cloth to dry.

When preparing edible flowers remove the stamens, pistils and sepals for best flavor.

The Importance of Play

Urban Homesteading hard work. It is far too easy to get caught up in all of the "busy" and forget to have fun. Often, I am reminded by my family of the old adage about "all work and no play"...

Previous generations countered this problem by hosting community-wide musical "jams", social dances, quilting bees and barn raisings. Part of our vision for this group is to bring back some of those traditions.

Thankfully we don't have to start from scratch. Iowa City is full of opportunities for those who would like to participate in traditional community-building fun.

My family and I regularly attend traditional dances held at the Center in Iowa City. We also attend performances and sessions by local folk-musicians. It makes the winter months

much more tolerable and provides a much needed respite from the busy planting and harvesting months.

I feel it is incredibly important to ensure that this knowledge is passed along to the younger generation. We proudly support local instructors of art and culture. My sons are students at the Cavan Fiddle Studio. We have taken English Country Dance classes from a remarkably talented local couple and Irish Dancing from Ghrá na Gaeilge Irish Dance studio.

There are other ways of connecting while learning traditional skills. Many of the local knitting shops host "knitters' breakfasts" or other similar events. There is a brew master club for those who would like to learn to make their own beer.

You can also do your own thing. I host a weekly craft circle among my circle of friends, during the winter

months. As soon as the harvest is in, we start getting together to work on handmade gifts for the holidays.

IC Urban Homesteaders will host events and pass along information about various community events which may be of interest to our members on our blog:

[Iowa City Urban Homesteaders](#)

Hope to see you out there!



Upcoming Events

“Like” our group on Facebook to be part of the planning process for future events. Event invites will likely be sent out from that group.

Since the organizers are mostly out-of-town or otherwise occupied later in the month. I will just encourage everyone to attend many of the other FREE community events on the calendar below. Friday Night Music and the Farmer’s Markets are going

strong so be sure to check out all that your community has to offer.



June 2010

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8 Container Gardening for Teens @ICPL	9	10 Iowa City Green Drinks	11	12 Earthsources Gardens: Soil-mates
13 Reelmower Demonstration	14 Earthsources: Natural Pest Control	15	16	17	18	19 Backyard Abundance Potluck
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30 Earthsources Gardens: Vermicomposting			



This year I will space the carrots much farther apart and I will be able to plant lettuce- something I never thought I could successfully do with the rabbits in the yard!



The Story of our Raised Bed Garden

Risa Dotson Eicke
Master Gardener

After buying our first house in 2007 with a backyard that includes a pear tree, an apple tree, a locust tree, several lilac bushes, squirrels, rabbits and shrews, my husband and I decided to put a garden in the one sunny spot in the yard. After calling Iowa One Call, we discovered that a cable and electric line went right through the middle of our future garden spot! With this setback, we decided to spend 2008 working on a sheet mulch compost on our garden spot. Instead of tilling, I laid flattened cardboard boxes (including pizza boxes) on top of the grass. All the grass clippings collected throughout the summer went on top of the cardboard. All the apples and pears that fell to the ground (a LOT) went on top of the grass. All the leaves raked in the fall were put on the top layer, and the pile was left to sit over the winter. It's an amazing thing to watch such a large pile get covered in snow and then slowly shrink over the winter until it's practically flat when spring comes around again! I checked to see what my finished compost looked

like- only to realize I had way too much nitrogen with all of that fruit! The pile was very wet, and hadn't really composted at all.

I shoveled the partially decomposing material into my compost bin and we decided to make a raised garden bed. We looked at our options at the hardware store, and found railroad ties on sale. Since we wanted to re-use material, we purchased several for the raised bed. They were 8 feet long, weighing over 100 lbs. a piece, so it took some effort to get the ties hauled into the backyard. We cut some in half to make our bed 4x8'. It looked great.

Then we started to do research and found out that in an organic garden bed, it isn't good to use railroad ties due to the creosote and pesticides they put on the ties. It wasn't obvious that they even had chemicals, until I put my nose close and smelled them. Frustrated, we took apart the railroad ties and were back to square one.

At the hardware store again, we chose some red cedar eight foot long 2x6s. You have to drive around to pick up the

boards, and then climb a deck that's about one story above the ground. With my husband up on the deck, handing the 8' boards down to me below, one of them slipped and landed right on my toe! It was enough to make me limp for a couple of days.

The cedar was cut to make the 4x8' garden size, stained (not nearly as toxic as the ties) with galvanized 1/4" hardware cloth on the bottom (to keep the shrews out), 1/2" pvc tubes curved across with bird netting on top to keep the rabbits (and our cats) out, and filled with 100% compost from the Iowa City landfill.

Now we have carrots, beets, peppers and onions planted and despite evidence of some shrews making their way into the garden under the netting (it's hard to secure it all tightly to the ground) the veggies grew way larger than I imagined they would. This year I will space the carrots much farther apart and I will be able to plant lettuce- something I never thought I could successfully do with the rabbits in the yard!

Preserving the Harvest



When many people think of preserving, they think of traditional items such as jams, jellies and tomato sauce. When you are gardening on a smaller scale or purchasing from local farmers and CSA farms you don't always have the quantities of food necessary for this type of food preservation. This doesn't mean you have to give up on the idea altogether. If you only have a small harvest; find a recipe you like, make a large batch and preserve what you

don't eat. If nothing else strikes your fancy, you can make vegetable stock to be used in recipes at a later date.

This practice is useful even when you do have a large harvest. I prefer spending my time preparing a large batch of soup to be frozen or canned, rather than chopping, blanching and freezing ingredients to be used at a later date. It seems much more efficient time management to me. For freezing meals, I use re-usable plastic

freezer containers. They stack nicely in my small freezer and are great to have around for lunches. The half-pint size holds just the right amount of pesto for a meal. Herbs can be frozen in ice cube trays and popped in bags.

In future issues, this section will be devoted to discussing various preservation methods or storage tips for those items currently in season.

Seasonal Recipes: Greens

The greens are starting to bolt after the heat last week but they are still hanging in so they need to be used up quickly. This first greens recipe is a variation of my friend Tara's recipe.

It is fantastic over rice, beans cooked in broth or used as an omelet filling.

Braised Greens in Coconut Oil

1 pound of any mix of greens.
2 cloves garlic

2 Tbsp fresh herbs of your choice
1/4 cup sunflower seeds or pine nuts
1/4 cut slivered almonds or pecans
1 Tbsp Coconut Oil

Heat the coconut oil in a fry pan. Add garlic and fresh herbs and sauté for 1 minute. Add seeds and nuts and sauté for another minute. Add greens and braise lightly. You can add a splash of balsamic vinegar for flavor.

Creamy Salad Dressing

2 cups fresh greens (I use chickweed)
1/2 cup plain yogurt
1/2 cup olive oil
1 Tbsp lemon juice
1 tsp honey
1/4 tsp salt
3 garlic cloves
fresh ground black pepper
Blend all of the ingredients in a blender or with an immersion blender. Serve over your favorite green salad.

Product Review: Sport Solar Oven



I had been talking about investing in a solar oven when I happened across a CBS report comparing solar ovens. I probably would have purchased the much advertised Global Sun Oven but the CBS report recommended the Sport over-all so I decided to research the issue.

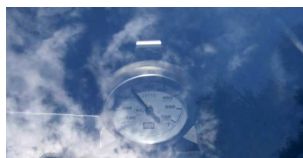
The Sport Solar is made from lightweight, recycled materials and designed in a manner which allows it to hold up to weather and windy conditions.

The package I ordered was shipped to me for \$190.00 and included reflectors, the thermometer, two ten inch cooking pots (pictured at right) as well as a water pasteurizer.

A similar Global Sun could have easily cost \$300-\$400.

As with any solar cooker, you are limited by weather conditions as to when you can use the Sport successfully.

Cooking with the sun is also time intensive because food cooks at a lower temperature. A solar oven is best used to as a slow cooker. Pop dinner in around noon and let it cook all afternoon. In my



experience, while it is still possible to burn granola in a solar oven, few other food items are in danger of overcooking.

I have seen reviews which say that the Sport Solar Oven will only heat to 260 degrees however, as you can see above, I have managed to heat the oven to 300 degrees and higher when using the reflectors. The tem-

An empty oven warms quite quickly and food begins cooking right away. Oven temperature seems to hover right between 200 and 250 when baking which seems to be the industry standard.



Two ten-inch cooking pots are included with the oven.

As a final selling point, due to its rectangular shape, the Sport oven will hold two cooking pots, bread pans or a smaller cookie sheet. With the most other ovens you are limited to 1 pot cooking.

The oven has definitely been worth the investment and we are glad to have researched designs before we made our purchase.

Iowa City Urban Homesteaders is a community-building group for people who want to live more sustainably, locally, and frugally in the urban setting. Serving Iowa City and surrounding communities

Featured Local Producer: High Prairie Fiber

By Abi Hutchison



www.prairiefiber.com

I started spinning in 1975 while living in the Arizona desert on a drop spindle my husband made from a chunk of wood I had rescued from the ditch and dowel that had been laying around the garage and soon acquired a spinning wheel. learned to weave from a local Navajo weaver who wanted to learn to spin on a wheel. moved to Iowa, found a weaving mentor, and began selling yardage and handwovens to shows around the midwest. Acquired 4 children, a house with 10 acres, a few sheep, went to school for 11 years, children left home and then back to fibers since I had all those empty bedrooms to stash stuff. Wanted to have more control over the processing so started accumulating equipment that wouldn't fit in the house so built a straw bale building to house the machines. Started processing for friends, got more involved in dyeing and playing with color and then blending colors and texture, and then designing roving blends, colorways, and yarns.

Fiber have been the constant in my life in one form or another. living in rural Iowa can be isolating, but fibers are an ongoing connection to the larger community of those who use and love natural fibers. For me, processing fiber is a collaboration with a sometimes known but often unknown person who will take the yarn or roving and add their own skills and imagination to make some kind of final product. it's that connection through the process that makes the whole project meaningful. For 18 years I helped run an at risk preschool and mentoring program and what I learned working with 3 and 4 year olds has shaped the way I approach color and fiber...hopefully with constantly fresh eyes and a love for the tactile and unexpected. it has also brought me into contact with many generous people willing to share their skills and experiences as part of the process of handling on a tradition. What you give comes back to you tenfold.

Specifically, I have a fiber processing mill and studio where I take raw fleece and turn it into batts, clouds, roving, pre-felted sheets or yarn. I treat each fleece individually and do my best to process in a way that brings out the best in character and quality of that sheep's yearly shearing. I do custom

processing, blending, and dyeing for others as well as making my own fibers that I sell through my web site, at local shows and the Farmer's Market in Iowa City. I rarely take the fiber to a completed project...my part of the process is to gather options and possibilities, and then pass the responsibility for final decisions (and making something that fits) to the next person in the

Reasonably priced at \$24.00 the sampler pack (right) is a great deal for those interested in felting.



line. For me, that's all the fun and none of the responsibility.

Selling at the market has been a rare pleasure. it's an opportunity to meet the people who take home the fiber, often, to custom design yarns and colors with customers, to see the eventual finished product, to help fan the interest of the young ones who have just learned to knit or have just acquired their first drop spindle.