



**URBAN** HEIRLOOM SKILLS FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING  
**HOMESTEADING**

RACHEL KAPLAN WITH K. RUBY BLUME



# Urban Homesteading

Heirloom Skills for Sustainable Living

RACHEL KAPLAN

WITH

K. RUBY BLUME



Skyhorse Publishing

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This book is dedicated to the children who follow after us.

May they inherit a fertile and abundant world filled with people who honor the diversity of life teeming around us: from the tiniest microbe, to the wondrous chicken, to the beauty of human community.

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# Why We're Here

**W**e've been friends for nearly twenty-five years, sharing a life as community artists and activists in San Francisco's Mission District, and finding ourselves evolving toward the same urban homesteading lifestyle grounded in the urgency of the moment and the need to create real cultural change. We're neither partners nor roommates; we don't even live in the same city. But we share a love of the earth and a creative spirit, as well as our practices as body-centered healers, teachers, and activists.

Ruby created the Institute for Urban Homesteading in 2008 in Oakland, California, as a venue for sharing the homegrown wisdom she's gathered over the years. Rachel lives in Sonoma County with her partner and daughter, works as a somatic psychotherapist, and teaches homesteading skills. She also helps coordinate a group of homesteaders and backyard gardeners into the Homegrown Guild, an action-oriented project of Daily Acts, a nonprofit with a mission to transform communities through inspired action and education.

We wanted this book to represent voices other than our own because we find ourselves part of an outpouring of energy toward a diversified, healthy ecosystem in the midst of crowded urban intensity. We are part of an urban homesteading *movement*. All the people we interviewed live in the urban or suburban Bay Area. Our choice to restrict our interviews to homesteaders in our area reflects our lack of a travel stipend and not the reach of urban homesteading in this country, which is growing rapidly and expressing itself in diverse ways in different places, meeting the requirements of bioregion, economic necessity, and local sensibility. Each person or family we interviewed inspired us, and represented a foray into some part of the homesteading lifestyle we think is important. We chose homesteads that were small enough in scale to apply to a diversity of cities across the country, and captivated us with their creativity, beauty, or verve. We are grateful to everyone we spoke with for the generosity of their time, and for their ongoing and embodied commitment to birthing a regenerative culture.

As we interviewed different homesteaders, we found that no one has a handle on every aspect of homegrown sustainability. Each place is marked by the limits of space and time and skill and affinity. Some people focus on growing food and learning how to preserve it. Others have a leaning toward water, or compost, or recycling the waste stream. Some people have

fully devoted themselves to permaculture as a way of making a living. We are landscapers, nonprofit workers, students, teachers, greywater experts, architects, stonemasons, mothers, and fathers. These homesteaders are all homegrown urban farmers, busy experimenting with the space they have, and building their toolbox of sustainable living skills.

City people grow and butcher animals for food, milk the goats, and gather the honey, just like homesteaders everywhere. Everyone is trying to grow as much food, save as many resources, and connect as much with their neighbors as possible. We are all motivated by concern for our cultural moment and a desire to live the change we want to see, to be part of crafting a solution rather than perpetuating the problem. As you will see, there are some limits to our success, and some spectacular unfolding social experiments.

Throughout the book, unless otherwise noted, all photographs are by K. Ruby Blume, who also created the original art for the section headings and maps, and was the visual wizard for the entire book. Drawings throughout are by Marco Aidala.

A note on the inclusion of wise words, and on pronouns: Sometimes, the stories of these homesteaders are represented directly in the interviews we did with them. Sometimes we represent their voices by simply saying, "Trathen said," or "Jane said" because their words were the wisest ones we could find. Sometimes when we say "we," it means Rachel and Ruby. Sometimes, it means Rachel and her family of three. Sometimes "we" refers to the movement of urban homesteaders. We have done our best to clarify the use of this ubiquitous pronoun throughout the text. Whenever the "I" pronoun is used and no one else is credited, this is Rachel's voice. We've avoided the gendered pronouns "he" and "she" out of long years of practice in the gender-blendy west coast, and instead chosen the more inclusive "you" whenever possible. Please take this as our personal invitation for your own participation in the practices offered in this book.



Living in the garden of earthly delights, demonstration garden of the Institute of Urban Homesteading, Oakland, California.

Start Where  
You Are



# Knit It Up

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save  
So much has been destroyed  
I have cast my lot with those  
Who, age after age, perversely  
With no extraordinary power  
Reconstitute the world*

—Adrienne Rich<sup>1</sup>

The weed growing up through the cracks in a city sidewalk—that sharp green shard of life persisting against all odds—reflects nature’s resilience. It’s also a metaphor for the uprising earth consciousness growing in our cities—small, surprising, commonplace. Spreading. Across the country, citizens are looking for solutions to the seemingly intractable problems of our time, and evolving new ways to live. Picking up the shovel and the hoe, turning their closets and roofs and backyard decks into places to grow food and their yards into chicken coops, urban farmers are reclaiming heirloom agrarian practices as strategies for artful living. This book tells the story of this grassroots do-it-yourself cultural explosion rooted in the urban earth, a homegrown guild of people generating resilient, local culture in response to the urgency of the moment and a collective awareness of our need to be the change we want to see.

The more I know, the less I sleep. There is something decidedly brinkish about our era. We are bombarded by desperate stories—collapse of the Arctic ice, clear-cutting of the forests, massive oil spills, catastrophic droughts and floods, volatile nation states, dangerous levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the air, the depletion of oil, and the overwhelming power of corporations to devour the world at will—all conspiring to create fear and dread. We are told we are powerless until we begin to believe it. The convergence of the seemingly unstoppable forces of climate change, the savagery of global corporate capitalism, and the downward spiral of our predatory economy all lead to an inevitable conclusion: We are coming undone. We are unraveling.

Knitters know all about unraveling. You knit along for a while, until you drop a stitch or add a stitch or do something else peculiar that just doesn’t work. If you want it right, you have to unravel, and knit it up again. Or sometimes you unravel by choice because it’s just not coming out quite the way you planned. Re-knitting always takes less time than you think,

A family of strangers travels along the city streets, seeking the heart of people and place. A circle is drawn on the pavement in flowers. The world is an altar. Our actions are sacred. (Blume Family ritual procession, collaboration between Keith Hennessy and K. Ruby Blume, 1992.)

and there you are again at the place you left off, with a piece of fabric that looks and feels right.

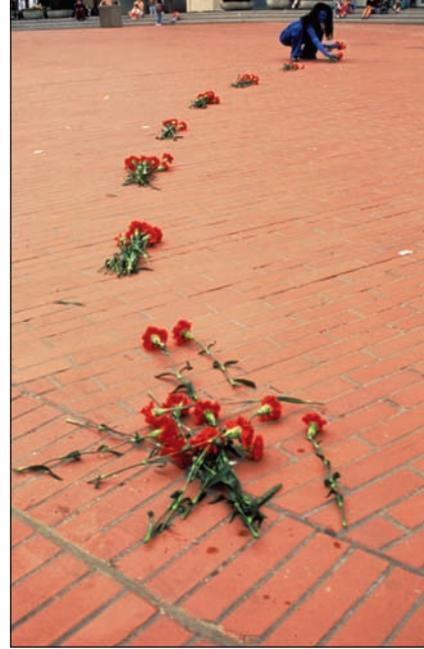
This homegrown metaphor takes us only so far; we can't unravel back to the beginning of our disastrous misalignments with people and place that, in our country, permitted the genocide of the first peoples; the dispossession, oppression, and slavery of others; and the short-sighted desecration of natural resources leading up to our current environmental and economic predicaments. Unlike strands of wool on our needles, we are people who have to work from where we are. But there are lessons about process and outcome in the knitting metaphor and operating instructions for how to proceed—when we make mistakes, it's best to go back, sort out what's worth saving from what needs to be let go, and get back to the work of stitching together again. The urban earth has been shattered by hundreds of years of neglect and abuse; our relationships are fractured and deformed by long stories of hate and race and class. We've made something lopsided and misshapen, and it is time to weave another tapestry, tell another story about how we can live together with this planet.

Urban homesteading is happening in small and large cities across the country, a homegrown response to this potent need for a new, life-giving story. Urban homesteaders are relearning heirloom skills that have been abandoned in the relentless march toward convenience; valuing thrift and community self-reliance; and tending to our home places in an intentional repudiation of the cultural forces of speed, need, and greed. Urban homesteading is also part of a global movement for change rooted in respect for indigenous peoples and values, a cadre of environmental first responders and a network of progressive social change organizations seeking peace and reconciliation at every level. All of these together forge an opportunity to rewrite the story of our relationship to the earth and the possibility of remaking culture around an ethic of care and stewardship for this place that is our shared home.

This is a David and Goliath story—backyard gardens competing with Monsanto's patents on the gene pool, rain barrels and greywater versus the worldwide privatization of natural resources, bicycles against the power of Big Oil. Garden by garden, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, each partial effort is a step in the right direction, our participation in the human immunological response to our diseased world.<sup>2</sup> Will it work? The outcome is uncertain. Is it worth trying? Without a doubt. The tragedy of living in a "Christian" country that repeatedly rapes God's creation can be combated only by learning to cherish and tend the kingdom of God, which is among us, now.

Battles like this have been won before—the tobacco industry once ruled the roost, and now it's the chicken no one wants in their backyard coop. Despite what politicians and commercials teach us at every turn, our daily actions can remake the world. Urban homesteading is a story of the

Bringing up our children to respect life is central to the homesteading way.  
*Photo by Lauren Elder*





*Photo by Dafna Kory.*

power of community and the joy in following an artful course of living in a time of contraction and fear. This is a book about action, about things we can do to reweave the web by living in place, but it's also a book about how we think about our actions during this time of unraveling. It's a hopeful vision in a hopeless time. Urban homesteading is a proactive response, a series of earth-based actions that make an immediate difference in the places we call home.

When we speak of a system being unsustainable, what we're really saying is: This cannot last. Sustainability is the ability to exist over time. We have to get real about our current lack of sustainability as we face the end of many systems in the twenty-first century, and take up the good work of re-imagining ones that can endure. The urban earth practices in this book show how we can radically reduce consumption and maximally increase community self-reliance and joy in living, both of which are necessary for positive social change and progressive human evolution. They will help ground you in the reality and freedom of limits. Some say this is an "old" way, and it is. But it's also a new way of relating based on reciprocity and cooperation, of living in partnership with the earth rather than treating it like our personal garbage can.

Now is the time to answer the call. You've probably picked up this book because you hear it, and because you want to answer in your own way and bring your best offering forward at this time of unraveling. Ultimately, this is a book about reverence and our love for our beautiful world, about our grief in seeing her die and our complicity in her dying.

This book weaves in the voices of many people who live an urban homesteading lifestyle. While there are differences between us all, everyone feels creatively motivated and spiritually connected on our urban farms, and in the midst of breakdowns of all kinds we write to remind you that the force of necessity motivating these practices is beautiful, raw, and vivid, and that god is in the broccoli. Our work reflects a commitment toward a regenerative, living culture, rather than the consumptive consumerism our country has refined to a sick art. We opt out by digging in.

And so we find ourselves in our backyards fighting gophers, pulling carrots, harvesting rabbits and eggs, tending bees, and gathering raspberries, grapes, broccoli, and kale. We save our seeds. We pee in a bucket and dump it on the compost bin. We harvest our rainwater and drain our bathtubs into the garden. On hot summer afternoons you'll find us preserving jars of peaches, plums, and nectarines that have fallen from the trees. We bring people together to learn how to can, make yogurt, hold a meeting, or turn a lawn into a garden. We experience our practices in the urban earth with the bees and the animals and the things we make with our hands as spiritual, a prayer to the life force and a vehicle for our own connectivity and sense of purpose.

We are here to say: there is a life in the earth for you. There is birth and abundance and death and regeneration and joy. We are on the side of the seed, growing through the cracks of our profound and tragic mistakes, the particulate scaffolding of the natural world still calling to us, teaching us the true order of things. We are sitting. We are listening. Knitting, unraveling, and knitting again.

A family tends their garden plot at the La Tercera Community Garden, Petaluma, California.  
*Photo courtesy of Terry Hankins/Petaluma Argus Courier.*



# The Empire Has No Clothes

*The only recognizable feature of hope is action.*

—Grace Paley<sup>3</sup>

All the systems that sustain us—food, water, shelter, medicine, family, and community—are at risk from the ongoing disintegration of life brought about by global capitalism's profound disrespect for natural limits. In this past decade alone, the decay of basic support systems has been staggering. With corporate control of our government becoming more entrenched, it is hard to imagine a future that will hold the processes of life and the needs of humans and other living creatures as its guide. It's past time for us to redesign our cities and our lives with an ethic of care at its core, remaking local systems based on the model of the earth itself—adaptive, lush with diversity, and fertile with possibility. Rather than continuing to direct our life energies toward a system that is degenerate on every level—personal, social, and environmental—we advocate the relearning of skills and strategies to maximize interdependence, community resilience, and a sense of sufficiency in living locally.

The dangers we face are large and undeniable. Our situation is urgent—and growing more so—but it is not too late to change direction. Escalating climate instability, along with peak oil and its relationship to the current economic redistribution of wealth, underscore the urgency of our situation. The processes of recovery and change, localism, and the empowerment of do-it-yourself culture support the practices of urban homesteading, which are a direct response to the cultural challenges we face.

## Climate Change and Peak Oil

Climate change and global warming are finally front and center in mainstream consciousness as emergencies warranting immediate attention. It is no longer debated by any reputable source whether human activity is the culprit, specifically the use of nonrenewable fossil fuels, industrial agriculture, and the ongoing devastation of the earth's forests and waters. Yet despite

The patterns of nature reflect resilience, cooperation, integration, and beauty.

the clear and present danger, global carbon emissions per capita continue to rise, increasing the likelihood of large-scale climate catastrophe and putting our lives and the lives of other beings at risk.

There is an immediate need for citizens, especially in countries that consume the vast majority of resources, to sharply limit the carbon in the environment by

employing conservation strategies and curtailing energy use wherever possible.<sup>4</sup> Global industry, the prime culprit in generating carbon emissions, has a huge role to play, but enforcing systemic change is remarkably difficult as long as industry controls the mechanisms of political power and a majority of resources. So although change is needed at all levels and should be fought for, actions taken by individuals and local communities are more immediate and will show more tangible consequences in our lives. It seems clear that change in this arena will have to come from the grassroots, or not at all.

“Peak oil” refers to a point in time when the maximum rate of global extraction of the nonrenewable resource of fossil fuel is reached. H. King Hubbard predicted in the 1970s that we would shortly reach the point of peak oil in the United States. He was laughed out of the room, but had the last laugh himself as his predictions proved correct. Evidence suggests that global oil production has already peaked and begun its inevitable decline. Many former oil-producing nations, including our own, reached peak oil production decades ago. Others are approaching peak oil while our global needs for this nonrenewable resource continue to increase unabated. While there is still plenty of oil to be pulled from the earth, extraction is becoming more difficult and costly, making inevitable further disasters like the Gulf of Mexico oil spill of 2010. Unless we wean ourselves from oil, the decline in extraction will lead to a precipitous rise in oil prices and the fuel that runs our entire economy will become more and more scarce. It is easy to see how this combination of factors is a disaster in the making for individuals and communities, particularly marginalized and impoverished ones.

The significance of peak oil is not that fossil fuel is going to “run out” tomorrow or next year or even in ten years. The significance lies in the fact that as fossil fuel gets more difficult to extract (already happening), prices rise (already happening), political instability arises (already happening), the gap between rich and poor widens (already happening), and our ability to continue with business as usual is compromised (already happening). Compounding the environmental impacts of global warming, we face a potential cascade of economic and political catastrophes. This is the story of apocalypse that our fear and habituation feeds.

But we have a choice about whether or not to contribute our life force energy to this story or to direct our will to the world we want to bring into being. This is nothing short of an initiatory moment for humanity: Will we grow up out of our need to consume whatever we want when we want it (like a child or an adolescent) or learn to care for the earth, the source of all nourishment (like an adult)? It’s time to stop pretending that each of us doesn’t have a role to play, and to tend the piece of earth we’ve been given.



The contraction of energy availability and its ramifications throughout our world are referred to as “energy descent.” Understanding the impact of energy descent leads to four important conclusions.

1. The future is local. Reduced fossil fuel and a reversion to a renewable energy lifestyle will radically change our systems of food production and distribution, transport, communication, energy, medicine, and government, bringing them closer to home. The sooner we get a handle on how to generate equitable resource production and distribution at the local level the better.
2. If we wait for government action before jumping on board, it will be too late. Change like this has to begin. In Congress. In the boardroom. In your home. You only have control over one of those things. Exert it.
3. Our actions are more powerful close to home. Thinking locally and acting locally works.
4. Working with others toward shared goals is more effective than working alone.

Climate change and peak oil together should be a profound wake-up call compelling the need to redesign our human systems toward resilience (our ability to recover) rather than toward our current mode of addiction (our tendency to do the same thing over and over again, even if it kills us). Each of us needs to embody true change at the level of our beliefs, our attitudes, and our actions. This is a process that can be learned, and is available to all of us.



Original silk screen by K. Ruby Blume. Bee courtesy of Evan Barbour.

## Resilience and Recovery

Resilience is the ability of a system to recover from shock, trauma, or change. The more resilient a system, the more shocks and impacts it can withstand and still recover. As systems—cultural or ecological—lose the strength of diversity, they become vulnerable to disruption or collapse. Nature is the ultimate example of resilience, with its systems of multiple planned redundancies and complex relationships between organisms responding in different ways to threat. Fungi have the ability to begin the regenerative processes within a landscape after fire, paving the way for other microorganisms and animals to return to the devastated area and continue the repair work. Animals contain population through the checks and balances of the food chain. Nature grows through an

understanding of limits and through the conservation and recycling of resources. We must learn to do the same. Inevitably, nature will be our strongest teacher in the process of change, or the agent of our harshest consequences. To quote Paul Hawken, “There are no economies of scale; there is only nature’s economy.”<sup>5</sup>

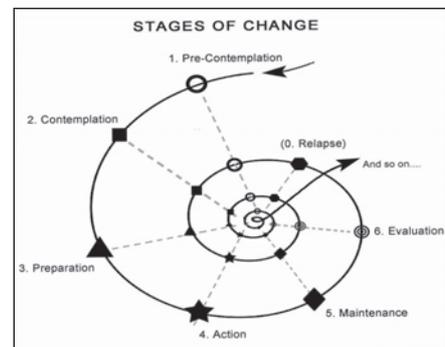
While individuals and sometimes communities possess resiliency in the face of difficulties, the more common human reaction to threat is a frozen or traumatized state of fight, flight, or freeze. People (and cultures) in this state can’t make good choices or think clearly through a problem or creatively get out of a box. This frozen reactivity keeps us repeating the nightmares of the past, unable to see what is really happening in front of us, doing the same things and imagining a different future. Yet the imperative is clear. We need to find a way beyond our terrifying possibility—the collapse of our environment and our civilization—and we need our thinking to be crystal clear, creative, and responsive to the challenge facing us.

## Can We Change?

Even as global consciousness about our situation rises, it remains difficult to harness our energies toward cultural regeneration. We see this especially when we look at our social institutions, but also when we look at ourselves. What is it that makes it so hard to change, especially when the problems we face are so serious, and have been so well articulated? Part of our limitation is our understanding of change as something that just “happens,” as opposed to a process that requires our participation, awareness, and agreement. Denial, addiction, and a lifestyle of affluence also insulate people from the need (or desire) to change. And finally, a pervasive sense of pessimism about the powerlessness of our actions immobilizes many of us. If we are to make sense of the situation we are in, each of us has to go through our own individual process, confronting our habitual mechanisms of avoidance and denial to overcome our fear and conditioned cynicism. This process can only happen in stages, and will require patience, cooperation, and a little bit of humor.<sup>6</sup>

The Stages of Change, highly successful with addicts in recovery, seems particularly apt for our relationship to fossil fuels and our inflated sense of planetary entitlement.<sup>7</sup> The Stages include *recognition of a problem*, a *willingness to contemplate change*, *planning for possible new behaviors*, and a time for both *activating a plan* and *integrating the changes*. Within the process lies the inevitability of relapses and cycling back again. This model requires a shift in awareness and a personal desire to participate in making change happen. It works best within a context of community support, over time. An awareness of the cyclical nature of the process helps us keep renewing our commitment toward new behaviors, which cannot happen overnight. Change really is two steps forward, one step back.

In terms of the ecological and cultural problems we face, *pre-contemplation* on a social level began about forty years ago with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and the emergence of a broader ecological movement. *Contemplation* of the problem followed, and beginning steps toward change were enacted: early attempts to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel, the back-to-the-land movement, and the inevitable pushback from industry. The cyclical and recursive nature of the process is evident in the progression of these cultural movements.



The Stages of Change, a spiral journey. People progress through different stages at their own pace, which might include relapsing, on their way to making successful change. (From Prochaska and DiClemente.)

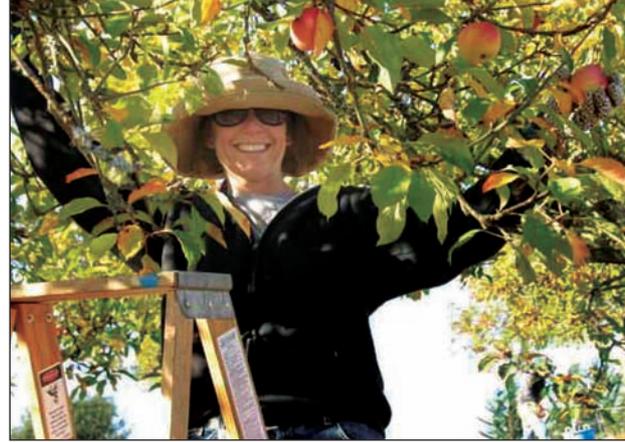
Our culture is growing now into the next level of *change*, evidenced by social movements addressing the environmental crisis with direct actions toward revising how we live today. Urban homesteading is just one of many creative approaches to this problem. The Transition Town movement is another, as are the growing numbers of young people from all strata of society training to become organic farmers, solar installers, and water conservation experts. There will undoubtedly be setbacks along the path, but as the diagram illustrates, this kind of change is cyclical and continues to ripple outward, especially as new habits are created and maintained. Engaging in the cycle of change with compassion for oneself and acknowledging the magnitude of the problem will be necessary to successfully take on an urban homesteading lifestyle. No one can do all of this, but everyone can do something. Don't worry about how or where to start. Just pick something you love, and do it.

In the wake of recent natural and man-made disasters like Hurricane Katrina and 9/11, research has been done on human resilience that reveals interesting trends for recovery. Dr. Alicia Lieberman's studies on the brain development of young people who witnessed trauma or violence show that their experiences of spirituality, animals, nature, and creativity were instrumental in sparking their recovery.<sup>8</sup> Judith Lewis Herman's research into trauma reveals the following resilience factors: the ability to help someone else during the trauma (taking action, rather than fleeing or freezing); the ability to make meaning and purpose out of the experience, to understand its history and context; and the ability to stay connected to at least one other person.<sup>9</sup> Recent studies of resilient people reveal some additional working strategies for recovery, including optimism, a sense of playfulness and generosity, the ability to "pick your battle," and the ability to focus on things over which you have some influence. Staying healthy is important, as is the skill of finding a silver lining. In a recent article on resilience, Beth Howard writes, "Resilient people convert misfortune into good luck and gain strength from adversity. They see negative events as opportunities for change and growth."<sup>10</sup>

These strategies mirror basic homesteading practices as steps toward healing and change: our renewed relationship to animals and the earth; our sense of meaning and purpose in the work we do; our connections to one another in community; and a spiritual understanding of our actions. A sense of creativity, play, generosity, and optimism are all activated as well. Urban homesteading is a battle that can be picked—actions bearing on our local economies and our homes have real influence, and are a wonderful example of converting adversity into possibility.

## Grow It Local

Restructuring local economies to protect the earth and evolve our culture is central to the homesteading path. We are currently enmeshed in what has been called the extractive economy, where corporate wealth is regarded as the foundation for economic health; where mining our earth's resources and exploiting our citizens and international neighbors is accepted as the cost of doing business. The urban homesteading way seeks a local life-serving economy that creates, as David Korten artfully said, "a living for all, rather than a killing for a few." These practices protect our common inheritance of clean water, breathable air, and a life of joy and meaning for our families.<sup>11</sup>



Gleaning for apples in a neighbor's backyard.

*Photo by Petaluma Bounty*

## BIOREGIONAL QUIZ: WHERE ARE YOU?

Urban homesteading is grounded in place. How familiar are you with the place you call home? Get curious. If you don't have all the answers, take some time to find them. Knowing these things is fundamental to everything that follows. It will help you become a better steward of the place where you live.

1. Can you trace the water you drink from precipitation to tap?
2. How many days from today until the moon is full and/or new?
3. Describe the soil around your house.
4. What were the primary subsistence techniques of the cultures(s) that lived in your area before you?
5. Name five edible plants in your bioregion and their seasons of availability.
6. From what direction do winter storms generally come?
7. Where does your garbage go?
8. Where does your sewage go?
9. How long is your growing season?
10. Name five resident and migratory birds in your area.
11. Name five resident and migratory human beings in your area.
12. What is the land use history by humans in your bioregion in the past century?
13. What primary geological events and processes influenced the landforms of your bioregion?
14. What animal or plant species have become extinct in your region?
15. From where you are, point to the north.
16. Name one of the first spring wildflowers to bloom in your area.
17. What kinds of rocks and minerals are found in your area?
18. Were the stars out last night?
19. Name some non-human being with whom you share your space.
20. Do you celebrate the turning of the winter and summer solstice?
21. How many people live next door to you? What are their names?
22. How much gasoline do you use, on average, in a week?
23. What form of energy costs you the most money?
24. What is the largest wilderness area in your bioregion?
25. What are the greatest threats to the integrity of the ecosystem in your bioregion?
26. What is the name of the creek or river that defines your watershed?
27. What geographic and/or biotic features define your bioregion?
28. What particular place or places have special meaning for you?

The best way to participate in changing the world is to change our own personal practices, including how we live, how we eat, how we travel, and how we relate to others. Re-inventing our relationship to the places we call home can significantly impact change. The home has been moved from the center of culture by the force of the marketplace. This devolutionary move has robbed us of the means of production, and the ability to care in simple, basic ways for ourselves, our families, our communities, and the earth. Bringing the home back to the center of culture where it belongs will create a meaningful path toward a regenerative future.

One of the central ethics of homesteading is a sense of bioregionalism, our awareness of, and commitment to, the place where we live. Bioregionalism teaches us about the specific ecological and cultural relationships happening around us, engaging a process of asking simple questions about moonrise and moonset, about soil, about air and wind, about where our water comes from and where our waste goes. This way of becoming native to place, of living within nature's limits and gifts, is a way of creating a life that can be shared by all and passed on to future generations. As Paul Hawken said, "We must know our place in a biological and cultural sense, and reclaim our role as engaged agents of our continued existence... Concern for the well-being of others is bred in the bone. We became human by working together and helping one another, and what it takes to arrest our descent into chaos is one person after another remembering who and where they really are."<sup>12</sup>

Bioregionalism values home above all else because home is where values and behaviors are learned before they move out into the world. In the home, alternatives can root and flourish and become deeply embedded in our way of being. The word *ecology* points us in this direction: *oikos*, the Greek root of "eco," means home. Hearth and home provide the theater of our human ecology, the place where we can relearn how to think with our hearts, to embody what we know to be true: that tending to our environment is the same as tending to ourselves, and we ignore this true work at our peril.

## The Homegrown Guild

One of the great losses to culture in the last sixty years has been the ability of people to be even modestly self-sufficient at home. Homesteading in the city is a land-based, action-oriented *YES!* to the possibility of remaking culture with people and planet in mind, bringing back some of this lost power of doing it ourselves. We make no claims toward self-sufficiency: we can bake our own bread, but we cannot grow the wheat. But self-sufficiency, like independence, isn't a true goal. Our greatest need at this time is to learn to work together, to form guilds of differently abled farmers, blacksmiths, renegade plumbers, solar installers, beekeepers, mycologists, fermenting fetishists, somatic healers, technology wizards, performance artists, alternative educators, and herbal potion-brewers to remake our cities.

A guild is an alliance of craftspeople or artisans from a more traditional time. An early form of the union, its primary benefit was camaraderie and support for best practices, as well as a source for learning more skills and expanding support for the profession. Guilds also had the conservative function of slowing down the processes of innovation generated by industrialization that often resulted in a loss of quality and right livelihood. We need homegrown guilds today, as we relearn skills we have forgotten and redesign our cities toward sustainability.

Here's an example of what that can look like. In 2009, six households in Daily Acts' Homegrown Guild produced more than 3,000 pounds of food; foraged another ton of local fruit; harvested more than 4,000 pounds of urban waste to be composted and mulched; planted more than 185 fruit trees and hundreds of varieties of edible and habitat plants; installed five greywater and rainwater catchment systems that saved and recycled tens of thousands of gallons of water; tended to bees, chickens, quail, ducks, and rabbits; and worked toward reducing energy use and

Grow it local: bounty from the birds. Chicken, duck, and quail eggs.





Fused glass art by K. Ruby Blume.

enhancing commuting and transportation goals. All this from *six* households! Imagine a city where a majority of people tended to many of their daily needs in this way—the amount of food and water and energy and waste that could be managed sustainably is incredible.

Our small daily actions toward the things that nourish us have an enormous impact. We have to shake off the trance that tells us this is not so. Now is the time to experiment, maybe fail, but always learn some more. We cannot remake the world in whole, only in part. We have at hand old and new technologies we can harness in remaking the world. Resourceful participation in the big work of repositioning ourselves in a swiftly changing world, learning skills we can use at home, is the way of the future. We offer these technologies as spiritual practices in an incredibly challenging time and are here to report that in many ways that are good for planet and people, they work.

Urban farming is nothing new; in many parts of the world, it's a way of life. Cuba has an active urban farming movement, initiated when the USSR collapsed

and precipitously stopped oil exports to the country. In Shanghai, residents produce 85 percent of their vegetables within city limits. The government of Tanzania encourages the cultivation of every piece of land in Dar es Salaam. Homesteaders around this country are engaged with the differing realities that their watersheds, climates, and history demand. Austin, Philadelphia, Newark, Brooklyn, Oakland, Portland, Los Angeles, and Detroit are all centers of rapid agricultural growth and production, each with their own place-based expression and local, evolving economies.

Some of the central urban homesteading practices are the same as homesteading practices everywhere—growing and preserving food, caring for and harvesting animals, foraging, making medicine, tending to the resources of water and waste and energy. But a city's unique and abundant resource is human energy—the intelligence, creativity, needs, hurts, history, and future of a city's people converging in exciting and sometimes destructive ways. Learning to harvest this energy and direct it toward community projects is a central survival strategy of the twenty-first century. The land frontiers have been conquered. The final frontier is learning how to live in harmony with one another and the world around us. Rebuilding a network of relationships between the earth and its inhabitants will be key to human evolution and survival.

## Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Culture

DIY is an alternative culture strategy that helps us thrive outside the confines of the capitalist machine. It is an ethic of curiosity, exploration, and empowerment that can be applied to many aspects of our lives—growing food, sewing clothes, creating homegrown entertainment, writing books, fermenting vegetables, educating chil-

dren. It feels good to do it yourself. This is a sane way to reorient our living toward a more just and equitable distribution of limited natural resources, and it supports the goal of sustainability through a maximum reduction in consumption and an expansion of creativity, and personal and community empowerment.

It's important for each of us to have a physical skill that is satisfying as well as sustaining—knitting or sewing or blacksmithing or canning or gardening. A “can do” attitude about all the activities people mastered as a matter of course in the past is required. It's important to remember how to be resourceful and figure out how to do something yourself. Collapsing at the mere thought of failure is no longer an option. Standing up and doing it yourself is a core homesteading way, something to relearn in our buy-it-yourself culture.

Many of the solutions in this book are simple, affordable, transportable, and good to do with others. Homesteading practices are not about austerity or apocalypse; they're about living a simpler, more joyful, more effective life. Homesteading is not a replay of a Depression-era mentality. It is a series of skills and practices that lift us out of a culture of inaction and cynicism and into a culture of abundance, care, and possibility. So this isn't a book about canning or making a nice pie out of foraged apples, at least not directly. It's about shifting consciousness toward a conservation and care-based ethic, which will undoubtedly manifest in many creative ways in your own life. In the name of limiting consumption and finding ways to break our addiction to needing and buying, many of the how-tos are a bit more intangible (like finding a Sit Spot in nature, or creating a community tool shed, or planning a potluck). When we do share a how-to of a more material nature, it will almost always include instructions on how to do it yourself on the cheap.

## The Territory Ahead

This book is a map to the territory of urban homesteading. There are many awesome, time-honored practices in the art of living, which we have mostly forgotten and collectively need to remember: organic gardening, tending an orchard, beekeeping, fermenting, jamming, herbalism, self-care, community relations, and land, energy, and water stewardship. These all deserve (and have) many specific volumes dedicated to the intricacies of their art and this one book cannot do each of these arts justice. We can be definitive perhaps in only one sense—the necessity of reclaiming these heirloom skills for living in the twenty-first century. The resource list in the back of the book will point you toward other excellent books specific to the different practices highlighted here, so as you read and track your own interests, you can find your path through the woods. We also recommend, whenever possible, the practice of finding an experienced teacher to take you on the journey.

As you read, remember that one practice leads to another, and that having one skill will always lead you to someone with another. Perhaps you choose to become a beekeeper. Soon you have more honey and beeswax than you need, and something to trade with your neighbor, that fantastic tomato grower. Your fantastic tomato-growing friend trades with her greywater plumber, who trades her time for fresh goat milk. Perhaps your small beekeeping experiment grows into a cottage industry, further evolving your community network and economic center. These are all strands in a growing web of local culture happening all around the country, an alternative, restorative economy existing beyond and separate from the economic mudslide of dominant culture. It is this cultural growth—from the one to the many, from our homes to our communities—that this book and this movement is really all about.

When visiting and speaking with people about their choices for living, we noticed a few themes that may be some evolving principles of urban homesteading. Embodying these principles will take time and commitment and, for some of us, represents a big change in lifestyle. For others, they are already second nature. If they are

new to you, remember that lifestyle changes can be challenging but are reinforced over time through practice and support from others.

*Simplify.* Our lives are complex, over-consumptive, harried. Choosing a path of voluntary simplicity is possible, and feels good.

*Use Less.* We consume more than we need. Curb the habit. Break the addiction.

*Share More.* Many of us have more than we need, and some not enough. Give it away. Share it with friends, neighbors, and strangers.

*Localize.* Commit your time and energy to businesses, gardens, organizations, and people in your community to strengthen the financial, biological, and social economy of your place.

*Diversify.* Ecologically diverse systems that include multiple plants, solutions, and people create more security for all. Apply the metaphor to the ecology of the city where you live.

*Do It Yourself.* If you want it, make it happen. If you can do it yourself, do it.

*Indigenate.* Belong to your place.

*Embody.* Let your body's wisdom motivate and inform your actions.

*Relate.* Making connections between people and things in our environments makes us stronger and more effective.

*Forgive.* Clear your body of old anger and hurt so you can do your best work today. Forgiveness is an individual and communal act.

*Listen and Observe.* We are in constant conversation with life. Slow down and pay attention.

*Create and Renew.* Our planetary culture is calling for renewal. Use your creativity to find a way to participate in answering the call.

*Begin.* Start where you are. Make mistakes. Begin again.



Pump up the local economy: Biofuels Oasis in Berkeley, California sells biodiesel and urban farm supplies.