



Learning to Feed Ourselves

By Jeff Gammage, Quotes Roger Doiron

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Joe Heckman is going off the grid.

The food grid, that is.

Imagine, fewer dispiriting trips to the grocery store, with its endless aisles, too-bright lights, long check-out lines, and, these days, ridiculously high prices.

He's growing all the food he needs for his family on his two-acre micro-farm in Monroe Township, N.J. - or at least, he's trying to.

"I'm moving in that direction," Heckman says. "I haven't gotten there yet."

These days, a lot of people, blanching at \$4-a-gallon gasoline, have rolled the car into the garage and oiled up the bicycle. Or they're taking the train to work. Some are buying motorcycles.

So you might think Heckman stands at the forefront of a huge social movement, the lead of a rebellious legion of consumers who balk at paying \$2 a pound for apples and cry out, "No more! I'm growing my own food!"

And if so, you would be wrong. The grow-all-your-own-food frontier is a lonely outpost. The problem is, it's hard to get the math to work.

All those people on bikes and trains are essentially trading one energy cost for another, by shifting their mode of transportation. But to grow your own food requires the creation of a whole new, individual infrastructure. And once created, it needs supervision. Gardens don't weed themselves.

That's one reason more people don't do it. That and the fact that, in this country, people tend to be absorbed by activities that limit their time for farming. Like, say, working at jobs, so they can pay the mortgage.

That doesn't mean more people aren't growing some of their food. W. Atlee Burpee Co. reported that sales of vegetable seed are up by more than 30 percent over last year. Anecdotal evidence from gardeners and vendors suggests many believe that tending even a small plot will take pressure off their household budget.

This year, according to the Garden Writers Association of America, 39 percent of people who have gardens or yards plan to grow vegetables - up 11 percent from two years ago. Food safety issues, like the



latest problem with tainted tomatoes, may also be fueling the growth.

“People are paying attention to things my friends and I have been doing all along,” says David Siller, an educator at Weavers Way Farm in Philadelphia.

Roger Doiron, founding director of Kitchen Gardeners International, a Maine group that promotes food self-reliance, says: “It does involve a longer-term commitment than simply saying, ‘Today I’m going to take my bike.’”

But, he says, the savings can be dramatic: Seeds for 10 tomato plants cost about 20 cents. The starter mix is \$2. Each plant will produce about eight pounds of tomatoes. At the grocery store, those 80 pounds of tomatoes, at \$3 a pound, would cost \$240.

Of course, that calculation doesn’t include the cost of other gardening supplies. Or the cost of labor, which the home farmer provides for free.

Can it be done? Can you, the typical consumer, go completely off the food grid? Sure you can! How are you with a rifle? It’ll help if you know how to hunt. If you want to eat meat, that is. You’ll also need to learn to preserve veggies and fruits. Otherwise the winter supplies can get kind of thin.

Setting up that canning or jarring operation is going to cost a few bucks. As will the seed, fertilizer, stakes, string, water and tools needed to get your own personal supermarket off the ground in the first place. Which is, again, why all the people standing on train platforms are not standing in gardens instead.

The Manalapan Brook flows past Heckman’s house, but the waterway isn’t what defines his Middlesex County property. Carved into his backyard is plot after plot of crops, an off-kilter, green-and-brown chessboard.

Corn to one side, wheat to the other. A rectangle of dark earth where he’s going to build a barn.

Heckman has a big advantage over most backyard farmers: He’s obsessed with dirt. With what’s in it, and how that affects crop growth. He’s a soil scientist at Rutgers University, part of the Plant Biology and Pathology Department, where he studies, among other things, the impact of manganese deficiencies.

He’s a reader of *Backyard Poultry* magazine, a devotee of books like *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *The Family Cow* - and just flat-out loves to farm and innovate.

He’s been farming his own land for about 10 years, moving toward self-sufficiency over time. What does he grow? Everything. Apples, peaches, pears, mulberries, blackberries, strawberries, pawpaw, persimmons, peaches and plums, walnuts, pecans and hazelnuts. He grows peas, lettuce, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes and sweet potatoes, onions, radishes, corn, and a heck of a lot of asparagus. He buys as many other products as he can from other local farmers, even milk and beef. They do venture to the grocery store for things they can’t grow, like coffee, olive oil and bananas.



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“He likes to farm, and I like to cook,” says wife Joyce. They have a daughter, Amanda, who loves black walnuts.

Heckman grows a few Christmas trees. And he’s begun keeping chickens. He uses a chicken tractor - which is not a vehicle piloted by a chicken. It’s a mobile coop, a kind of chicken house on wheels, and as it’s moved around the yard the birds can eat grass, bugs and worms. That provides 11 percent of their food - for free.

Each week the chickens produce about four dozen eggs, the kind with the healthy deep-orange yolk. Heckman keeps half and sells half - to egg connoisseurs willing to pay \$5 a dozen.

“Basically,” he says, “what I tried to design is an edible landscape.”

It seems people who aren’t quite ready to raise nut trees or barns are still growing food for their dinner table.

At the Burpee company in Warminster, president George Ball describes the 30 percent increase in vegetable seed sales as “phenomenal.”

Is it all because of high supermarket prices?

Well, Ball says, there are many reasons.

Sure, prices are a factor. But a big reason is that the great whale of American demographics, the baby boomer generation, is getting older, retiring from work - and spending more time and money in gardens. Another is that news reports of tainted spinach and strawberries drive people toward the safety of home-grown crops.

“You can go off the grid,” he says, adding, “It’s a challenge.”

Heckman is determined to become self-sufficient, or mostly sufficient. He’s thinking about buying a cow. That would provide two to four gallons of milk a day. He’s a big raw-milk fan. He could use the excess to make butter and ice cream. And recycle the cow’s waste as fertilizer.

He hasn’t done the math on whether he actually saves money through his farm. He knows his grocery bill plummets in summer. But his countless hours in the field are love, not labor.

“It may not be for everybody,” he says, “but it potentially can be.”