[5]

Becoming More Self-Sufficient

The greatest fine art of the future
will be the making of a comfortable living
from a small piece of land.

— Abraham Lincoln

Generally, people who visit comment on how we live in the middle of nowhere. Down "Snake Road" as locals call it affectionately. Off a dead-end side road off of Snake Road. Off a fifteen-hundred-foot-long, twenty-five-degree pitch gravel extension off of the dead end road. Off a heavily shaded gravel driveway off the gravel extension. Our mailbox is a third of a mile or so from our house. The gravel extension is a long hill that turns to black ice during the winter and becomes impassable for days on end, depending on the weather. The closest Walmart is 30 some minutes away. We don't see a McDonalds until 20 miles or more from the house. (We consider neither of these bad things!) Most everyone who lives near us commutes 30 minutes or more to work each day, to one of the larger or smaller towns or cities where the jobs are, because out here, they aren't.

Yeah, we are in the "middle of nowhere." If power goes out, nobody's coming to check on us or put it back together until most everyone else is good to go again. If the hot water heater breaks, it is a hundred or more dollars and a few days to a week before we can get a basic service

call. If things go bad, it is on us and our neighbors—along with the skills and stuff we have on hand—to stay well and safe and see us through to the other side of things. Thankfully, we have many good neighbors just a few minutes' walk away. This is a pretty big part of homesteading—the ability to prepare and provide for yourself and those in your community come what may.

And trust me, come it will. We have had temperatures so cold they froze our water *and septic* systems solid (minus 30° for three straight nights in central Kentucky!). We have had snow so deep that helicopter was the only way to get off our property (24 inches in eight hours—so much snow that it even closed the Interstate in our area for over a full day and stranded countless motorists). We have had windstorms so bad that they took out the *entire region's* power grid (over a million or more homes and businesses, with some people not getting their power restored for over a month). We live in a region that isn't prone to earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, and so many other things that you may have to deal with on top of the possibilities mentioned above. The world is not always a welcoming place.

How will you prepare for all these possible problems you may face as a homesteader? What can you do about them, other than take precautions and make preparations? Or neglect to do so and become a part of the problem when things like the above take place?

You may not be that far out, but everyone can benefit from being more self-sufficient and resilient, even if you are more urban or suburban than rural as a homesteader. Big cities lose food, power, and water quite often, sometimes even more than more-isolated country folk. The past decade of hurricanes and other calamities has shown just how quickly and surprisingly such events can unfold, and just how much suffering and disruption they can unleash on those unwilling to take steps to prepare.

Self-sufficiency also helps protect you against other types of problems that might pop up. If you are in debt, have to buy all your food, and have no other income options, a lost job is a big deal. But what if you have a large garden, food put up in the pantry, animals out grazing in the grass, plants around the farmstead where you can forage, and a

low-cost or debt-free homestead? Well, that takes a bit of the bite off the bad news. It buys you some space and time to make good decisions moving forward, instead of having to panic to make ends meet and keep food on the table. Indeed, for us, this degree of self-sufficiency has time and time again allowed us to weather the storms that a family of seven surviving on one income faces fairly regularly.

So in this section let's look at low-hanging fruit in the field of self sufficiency and resilience. We will look at food, water, heat, and other basic needs on the homestead, things that can get you through a bad few days or even a bad few months if you do them right.

Food

An old saying goes, you can survive three minutes without air, three days without water, and three weeks without food. While that may be true of food, it isn't really good advice. Yes, you may survive. But you won't be happy doing it! Especially if you have kids—they are even less happy with insufficient provisions than adults, and a lot of adults I know don't do well when calorie restricted even voluntarily. I can't imagine what they would be like when forced to forgo food, coffee, and other goodies under duress. I think I would rather be trapped with a couple of wild boars.

So let's talk about how you put food on the table affordably and put those foods up—plant, animal, and otherwise.

Deciding What to Plant

How do you know what to plant in your garden? This question came up a few weeks ago in conversation with a good friend, himself a very successful homesteader with many years experience. He was asking how much space did I think it would take to grow all the vegetables for a single person for a year. I pointed out that I thought it was the wrong question. Instead, I said a person should grow based on three rules:

1. What they will eat.
2. What is most valuable to grow given their space and time constraints (either dollar or calorie wise).
3. What does well in their space (based on soil, pests, and the like).

For instance, while potatoes may be easy to grow, organic potatoes are inexpensive to buy, even locally, compared to fresh greens. Also, fresh greens lose much of their nutritional value during transit. Fresh greens from the garden are a bigger cost savings and bigger nutritional benefit. So, I would prioritize what would save our family the most money and provide the most nutrition first.

Sweet potatoes are a staple crop at our homestead, producing both green and root to feed our large family, along with extras for our animals to enjoy.

At the same time, though, if you are tight on money or have a big family, potatoes represent an immense amount of *calories* compared to greens. It would take ten pounds of greens to give you the same amount of calories found in a pound or so of potatoes. The potatoes are also easier to store and save for later, something the greens have going against them. You won't be snacking on spring lettuce in the dark days of winter, but you may be making stews with your root crop stores.

You could do sweet potatoes, which not only give a great yield calorie and space wise but also give you greens. The young, small leaves of sweet potatoes are an excellent green even during the hottest parts of the growing season when most others bolt or bow out under the long, hot days of summer.

Why Do We Grow What We Grow?

You may find yourself asking, "Well, what *do* you grow then?" We grow a lot of things! We grow potatoes and sweet potatoes. Why? They grow easily for us and produce reliable, bumper crops of a high-calorie filler food for the entire family. We also grow lettuces because these are expensive and our family of

seven can eat 30 dollars worth in a week if given the opportunity. Some expensive crops in the store—like fennel and leeks—grow easily and don't take up much space, so we grow these to add variety to our diet and reduce our food costs.

Onions are inexpensive from other good farmers in our area, so while we grow some, we don't worry too much about this high-labor crop anymore. We have significant squash vine borer issues in our area, so we try to grow summer and winter squashes but enjoy only limited success because it's hard to control this pest organically. Peppers and tomatoes take up space every year, and lots of peppers end up diced and frozen for winter use. A few specialty crops that now dot our growing season, such as ginger and turmeric, have great nutritional and medicinal value and easily fetch a fair market price for the extras. Green beans are another staple that produces reliably and often ends up with extras to sell or store. But given their labor requirements and the low cost of organic frozen green beans, we don't worry about putting up too much extra.

We also have a lot of perennials—blackberries and raspberries, strawberries and serviceberries. Overall, we grow what works best for us, given our soil, preferences, and time investment. A big factor with everything we grow is that it is *efficient* to grow in terms of time, calories, and cost. We also grow only things we know our family will eat—no eggplant and few hot peppers here!

Every year, we grow a few new vegetables, both to expand our family's palate and our options for what to produce. Fennel was one of my favorite 2017 plantings, along with ginger and turmeric.

The quintessential homestead animal. Low cost, easy to keep, and hard to keep alive!

My daughters' second favorite homestead animal. Highly productive but almost completely dependent on store-bought feed.

You will need to experiment and figure out what you and your family like to eat, figure out what grows well given your soil and location, and figure out what makes the most sense financially and food security wise.

What is the Best Animal?

Oh boy, I know. I am opening a can of worms, and not the kind you eat. The best animal on a homestead is a hard call. Honestly, there is no such thing as a "best" animal. Every animal has pluses and minuses, benefits and drawbacks.

Chickens are relatively easy to keep but something everything under the sun likes to eat, and they generally require supplemental purchased feed. Some will breed easily, many will not, requiring annual flock replacements. They are also easy to butcher.

Rabbits? Well, they breed like rabbits. But most require special store-bought feed because they are so different from their wild cousins that they can no longer survive on pasture and forage alone. They are also pretty high on the predator "What's for dinner?" pecking order. Like chickens, they are another easy animal to turn from dancing around to dinner plate.

Pigs are fantastic at turning discarded and expired stuff into delicious meat—and also require an approach to fencing that makes places like Fort Knox jealous. Cows turn grasses and other green material into grass-fed beef, a true miracle. But they take a lot of time to do it, and require fencing only slightly below what pigs need. Also, cows require hay and other supple-

ments to stay healthy, along with shelter of substantial size, especially over winter.

Cows present far more risk as well. A dead chicken is an annoyance. A sick or dead cow is a sizeable economic loss and a hard thing to dispose of without big equipment. While you may be able to butcher a lamb or goat on your farm, large pigs and cows generally require the use of a butcher. This requires the ability to both load and transport your animals to the butcher—a truck and livestock-hauling trailer. So while they yield more meat than chickens, rabbits, and other smaller animals, cows and pigs require more complicated infrastructure to get them from field to fork, and they may end up costing far more per pound even with their lower feed and other costs.

We have kept almost every common homestead animal—chickens, ducks, rabbits, pigs, and cows so far. (We have also helped tend and care for goats on a few different friends' places and learned that goats are not for us; if you think pigs test your fencing and your patience, you don't want goats in your life.) They all have benefits and drawbacks. If you are new to homesteading, it is best to start small, even if you go with a large animal. Don't jump into a bunch of cows. Get at most a pair to start. Don't start with a hundred chickens. Try out a dozen or so first. Raise a pair of pigs. Get your feet wet instead of risking drowning. Remember, what is easy in spring and summer—when most people get their first animals—is a challenge or, worse, a catastrophe in winter.

Pigs and compost make a good pairing—the pigs turn the compost while the compost provides food and warmth for the pigs.

Our kids' favorite and a wonder of nature, turning inedible biomass into delicious dinner options.

Harvesting Nature: Free Food of the Four-Legged Kind

In terms of cost, the best animals on the homestead are those nature provides, if you have the tools and skills to harvest them. Deer and elk. Wild rabbit and squirrel. Pheasants and other fowl. Wild hogs and pigs. In some areas, bears are now so numerous that conservation agencies are asking hunters to help control the populations. Hunting can help feed a family affordably and also benefit the environment by helping keep various animal populations in balance and check. Hunting is a dual good, helping both the environment while providing for and protecting those who eat them and those around them.

Little Animals, Little Problems; Big Animals, Big Problems

My dad used to always say to me, "Little kids, little problems. Big kids, big problems." I can't vouch for how accurate this is as parenting advice (I swear my three-year-old is more destructive than a typhoon when unattended), but it certainly applies to animals.

Early one morning, as I approached the deadline for finishing this book, I received a desperate message on social media. It was from a dear family we have been friends with for many, many years. A few years back, they got into hobby farming. Bought a bit of land. Started keeping some backyard chickens. More recently, and the occasion for the call, they had acquired a half-dozen heritage breed cows set to calve a few months later. The half-dozen became a dozen as the calves hit the ground. Then, summer turned to winter. Winter got rough. They had to move the cows to a farm closer to their home. The cows got out. They got them back in. The cows got out again. And again. They ended up chasing the cows multiple miles in the middle of freezing weather with their entire family knocked down by the flu. They decided it was time to get out of hobby farming. They needed a hand relocating the cows as quickly as possible, which is how I got involved.

Realize, these are smart people with lots of resources who still struggled to make the jump from small backyard animals to modest hobby farming. Partly, it was just too big a jump to make starting off, and they both realize that now and say as much.

So learn from others. Start small. Don't overdo it, and don't overextend yourself. In the end, you may well end up with nothing but lost time and treasure on the endeavor.

My region is overrun by deer, who, because of their great numbers and lack of predators, cause a lot of damage to crops and cars. The damage to cars from collisions with deer sometimes also results in significant damage to the people in the cars. Other areas have problematic populations of feral hogs. Hunting them is an infinitely preferable form of population control compared to mass poisoning and other forms of removal that waste or contaminate the carcass and meat. That poison can easily impact other animals in the ecosystems, including yours and mine, and especially guard dogs. If you don't hunt yourself, remember to be supportive and appreciative of *responsible* hunters. They play a critical role in helping protect healthy ecosystems for us all.

Getting into hunting is no small thing. A good rifle and ammo will set you back a few hundred to almost a thousand dollars. If you didn't grow up learning firearm safety and skills, you are looking at investing a modest amount of time to develop them. Plan on three months of weekly practice under the supervision of a skilled hunter to get you up to speed, perhaps longer. Don't skimp on safety. Firearm accidents are all too common, even among experienced hunters and owners.

Bow hunting costs a bit less and is safer for the first-time hunter, but takes longer to achieve sufficient skill to hunt successfully. If you are going to live out in the country for the rest of your life and also have kids you want to pass such skills on to, then the investment will be more than worth it. Just keep in mind, it will take many years to recoup the cost, time, and equipment needed to learn.

So What Is the Best Animal After All?

Where does this leave us? In the end, the ideal homestead source of meat will depend on many factors. What is your land like? What is your infrastructure like? What skills and experiences do you have? What animals do you like to raise? Which ones naturally roam your land and are in need of a helping hand to keep their populations in check? Animals are an expensive investment, so start small. Choose one kind of animal at a time, gain experience, and as you learn what you like and don't like,

continue to grow and expand. Remember, the bigger the animal, the bigger the risks, both economic and otherwise. Don't underestimate the need for and cost of fencing and heavy equipment necessitated by larger animals, or the time and skills it takes to safely and successfully hunt them.

Learn Plant Propagation

Plant propagation is a lost skill for most modern Americans. Perennial plants and plant starts can be very expensive, adding hundreds of dollars to a small garden's annual cost. Did you know that many common vegetable seeds are the same price per ounce as silver?

The ability to propagate plants can turn a hundred-dollar investment into a thousand dollars of savings and a thousand dollars or more of sales in just a few seasons. Propagation involves skills that cover both perennials and annuals. Annuals involve learning to select, save, and start seeds. Perennials come back on their own, but increasing their numbers or getting them established in new spots sometimes requires a helping hand. A single comfrey plant left to its own will slowly spread a foot or so each year. In an hour of work, you can turn that single plant into two dozen more, spreading it across your homestead to dozens of new places it would have never reached otherwise.

Below are plants we regularly propagate. Many of these are also easy to sell come spring, so we often propagate a few dozen extra of each variety.

Easy-to-Propagate Perennial Plant List

1. Raspberries
2. Blackberries
3. Mints
4. Comfrey
5. Oregano
6. Thyme (Thyme is *slow* growing; as a fellow homesteader joked, "It takes a long thyme!" Once it has a well-established root system, it does slightly better, but it takes a while.)