

Summertime Primetime

And the livin's easy...actually far from it! Especially if you know us and our ridiculous determination.

My 35th birthday was amazing! Thank you everyone for your thoughtful wishes and splendid gifts of joy and blessings! I received a wonderful turquoise garden gnome from our great friends Will & Megan which we will add to our herb garden. Our beautiful friend Nikki gave us a great birdhouse handcrafted by her friend Harris. The birds will love it just as much as we do I'm sure! We had a marvelous evening among friends and the homemade mason jar tiki torches Davin made kept the mosquitoes away too!

I wish I could've posted in June but I've been trying to balance life and swat all the flies! We had a gathering to celebrate our spring progress at our Suburban Homestead. It's been a very busy spring indeed! I started teaching at Green Gate Farms, New Farm Institute in June and I'm trying to transfer to Green Mountain College in Vermont in the fall.

They have an innovative and empowering Master of Science Degree in Sustainable Food Systems that I would love to get! Although I have excelled during my Masters program at Texas State University I would love to have the opportunity to have a greater impact on the food movement through sustainability and Green Mountain's program is cutting edge and in a league of its own! Plus it's in one of the best states in America! One that we've even considered moving to. Plus we even have family there and throughout New England!

Davin's added 3 fences to our backyard homestead to keep the lovely ladies(our hens) out of the beds. They have however enjoyed feasting on many heirloom tomatoes, both green and red, a number of times, thanks to Davin forgetting to check the gates before he's let them out. He did a lot of research in the best fencing methods and went with some old school approaches. His overalls have found many uses most weekends spring and summer.

ANIMALS in General

While at Green Gate I've learned a little bit more about Guinea Hogs, Pigs, Chickens, Bunnies, and Goats. During Farm Camp I have had the opportunity to feed them daily, help improve some of their habitats, and ring them back into the pen. Last week the Guinea Hens and Bunnies froliced freely and I assisted in coralling them back in. The kids loved it even though it was a bit of a nuisance in the pouring rain and heat. None the less it still taught a lesson in proper livestock framework.

Yesterday a volunteer brought a baby bunny to the farm. Although he was going to feed it to the hogs, I tried to rescue it to release back in the wild. Although I did my best, little bunny didn't make it and passed on to greener pastures this afternoon. If anything it was an experiment in the hopes that one day I'll be more successful in rescuing such adorable creatures. I was told the success rate would be slim. I did learn what and how to feed it and the raw milk from a local farm as well as a liquid vitamin blend and water administered rather well in a dropper. It was pretty neat and cute watching it suckle the food. It was about two weeks old we think. Last night we came home from the movie and it had actually jumped out of the shoe box on the counter, with a lid on, and scattered into the next room to hide under the piano. The fact that it surpassed two of our stealthiest cats won it the title of 'Lucky' bunny by Davin. It's unfortunate that Lucky didn't live another day but we learned a little bit more about raising Rabbits in the process.

CHICKEN Challenges: CROP in Trouble & Other News

We have also had to recently cull 2 of our hens at home, :(. Davin did make Chicken Noodle soup out of Elsa; one of our Golden Naked Neck Hens that had an Impacted crop for a week. After endless hours of feeding with olive oil, coconut oil, honey in probiotic yoghurt, and a little cooked egg after periods of no food because of the impacted crop (which later turned into Pendulous Crop), my husband threw in the towel; even though he wasn't the one taking care of her the whole

time! She continued to drink the probiotic and electrolyte water on her own and we noticed if we tapped the waterer with our finger it prompted her to drink fluids on her own. Staying hydrated was not an issue. She did turn a little green from the excessive amounts of olive oil we administered which could only be seen because here skin is so visible due to her breed.

We did a great deal of research individually online. I stumbled upon a very helpful website worth recommending if you have chickens; The Chicken Chick wrote a useful article; [Answers from The Chicken Vet on Impacted, Sour & Pendulous Crops](#) by Kathy Shea Mormino. Definitely worth reading and adding to your favorites. I tend to prefer finding answers in books but unfortunately my only chicken book on hand, Raising Chickens by Storey, didn't have the answers I was searching for, even though it is a good book for a beginning chicken owner. The local bookstore I went to, Half Price Books, had one book about chickens and it was of funny looking breeds; not very useful. We are still looking for a Chicken Veterinary Book so if you have any recommendations that would be wonderful!

We also contacted several people in search of a quick and inexpensive fix even though those who raise birds for their meat or eggs in large quantities advised just to cull the hen. I was able to speak with a Veterinary Assistant on behalf of a Chicken Vet at Bastrop Veterinary Clinic who discussed other options of using antibiotics to help reduce the swelling in the crop area and that had provided success for some. Other options they suggested that I had also researched on my own was cutting the skin and removing the material myself from the crop. We heard that the surgery was risky and that we'd have to be transferred to a different doctor. We heard of a miraculous woman who has done it on her own for years using a straight edge razor blade and some craft glue (or medical grade suture glue) to stick the wound back up; from one of the Elders at Calahans. Apparently she has had reliable unended success and it works everytime. I am in search of meeting this woman and learning her trade. The other option we researched a bit was helping the bird purge the matter back through the esophagus but we also discovered that he usually resulted in

fatal incidents. We did however watch a video on Youtube of a gentlemen who did this with a parrot and the video provided great detail. My husband the makeshift medic that he is, decided against both of those surgical or medical procedures because the probability of survival was so low.

By the following Monday and much nursing from myself and our blessed neighbor Amber and family; whose youngest daughter named her, Davin bid her ado. The other naked neck I had named from the start, Frankie was a tough bird and obstinate, always going her own way while free ranging, ruthless and fearless. On Sunday night she was culled because she was shaking and listless. Not sure if it was from getting injured in the coop the day before because she was startled and injured herself or from coming down with an illness in less than 24 hours. We spray the coop daily and add probiotics to their water which has proven to be very successful and highly recommended as a daily regimine by the owner of Blue Star Ranch, where we bought our organic pullets from. My husband put her out of her misery in the field using similar techniques that we learned while harvesting ducks at Munkebo Farm. He buried her in the field. All of the other birds seem to be fine and we continue to spray and administer with electrolytes and probiotics every day.

HENS in the HEAT

The heat has been a bit of a drag on our chickens but the cool clay and cement from our house allows the birds to cool down through conduction. Drinking cool water also allows the birds body to cool down too. We also have a fan located in this area and three different water sources to drink from. Vinegar has helped them continue to drink water in the heat. Our hens haven't laid yet and we've never had chickens before so everything is a new experience. We haven't had a hot summer compared to the years prior but none the less it's warmer than they'd like for production. We've also read that using oats as scratch help birds eat and stay hydrated during hotter temperatures. Having birds like Naked Necks in your flock also provides more heat tolerant options. Another way to cool the birds down has been to spray them with a mist of cool water.

We have the perfect mister on our hose attachment or you can purchase a misting fan. They love the breeze and the mist once they get used to it. As you may have seen in our pictures of the Hen Heat Hut for free ranging in the yard, as well as our Rainwater Chicken Waterer, we also use drip nozzles for efficiency and ease. They provide less waste and if introduced to your flock while still young (we started using them after a few months old) then they will adjust readily. We have seen them used by chicks and in large livestock establishments. We are very happy with their capabilities and the hens use them often and they work well. We additionally offer cool fruit, veges, healthy food scraps, organic whole milk and greek yogurt which the chickens enjoy. I think it helps cool them down too and they make a mess of a shower with the milk and yoghurt. Make sure your chickens have a cool habitat, fresh water, plenty of shade and safety from the sun and predators when they free range. If you need to build a Hen Heat Hut, your birds will thank you later, as well as your other pets who enjoy climbing on their new tower.

PROGRESS in the Garden

I'm happy to announce that our Eggplant, Grapes, Gold Wax Beans, Boar Heirloom Tomatoes, Marigolds, Basil, Thyme, Marjoram, Oregano, Sage, Rosemary, Lemon balm, Cilantro, Dill, Fennel, Pok Choy, Sunflowers, Quinoa, Hot Peppers, Onions, Leeks, Carrots, Romaine Lettuce, Strawberries, Chocolate Mint, Spearmint, Catmint, Catnip, Raspberries, Lavender, Chives and a large variety of other herbs, have all had a successful season. Many of them continue to bear fruit, flower, and provide sustenance and growth. We have had our most successful year since living here in the gardens. I finally feel like I'm grasping gardening a whole lot better and that everything that we've learned along the way has allowed us to come thus far. It's amazingly empowering to be able to have successful gardens finally after so much effort, research and experimentation using a variety of methods. This spring I tried my hand at gardening biointensively and it has definitely shown great results especially with the size and production of many of the plants grown in small gardening spaces. Red, orange, and pink zinnias line our garden terrace.

Fat sunflowers grow along side the green beans, and Morning Glory vines up along side our [cucurbitaceae](#) family bed.

Our grapes are the best, sweetest, and biggest so far and we added 2 Concord trees this spring to our wilderness. I also planted 2 Elderberry bushes and they are finally taking off. I potted 3 more blueberry bushes because my love for them is too great to quit and we tried using just peat moss this time instead since a local grower raved about the success she has seen trying just that. We added some humus, microflora and pine bark compost to the top of it too. They seem to be doing well.

We have had more rain this spring and summer than any other year that I've lived in Texas since 2006. I actually saw that the Barton Creek Aquifer status was no longer registering drought! We haven't had to water much and have been very reliant on the rain. Our filtered watering system in the backyard has done wonders in maintaining the health and growth of our plants! We even planted native seed in our front yard to be more water wise. We laid down straw afterwards to help during the growing period. It continues to be a work in progress. We amended the clay soil slightly by adding 1 yard of Triple Compost and 1 yard of screened sand to the front lawn. We also used Thunder Turf, purchased from [Native American Seed Company](#) in Junction, Texas!

Our latest permaculture experiment has been gardening with straw bales. So far so good. I'll keep you posted on that one. I planted them on the east side of the house so they get afternoon shade.

BUGS that are Back

We have been spraying every week or every other week all of the gardens with a mixture of homemade compost tea that I make in a 5 gallon bucket. We have also sprayed with sulfur to minimize the chiggers in our gardens/yard. We've never had a problem with them in the past but the flies, mosquitoes, and chiggers are very bad this year. We do have a great deal of beneficial insects and hummingbirds in our gardens. We don't have any problems with birds eating our tomatoes but have

heard many complaints from other gardeners that it's a problem. We think that our permaculture set up has helped prevent this from happening. We do monitor the grapes and strawberries though because we have seen that become a problem in the past. A plastic livestock netting that you can get inexpensively at a local hardware store or garden center works fine as a covering. We have aphids on our grapes but we constantly squish them or pinch off the young growth that they've attached to every 2-3 days. Our Maximilian Sunflowers have been a marvelous host plant and lady bugs and other insects continue to thrive on them, reducing the destruction on other plants. Leaf hoppers are very bad this year, and we've had a Tomato Hornworm take out an entire bell pepper but it recovered and the hens were pleased to devour it. We continue to have many flowering herbs as hosts for the beneficial insects; herbs like basil, fennel, dill, oregano, horehound, mints, etc. have been a huge help. We leave them to flower in the gardens and they help boost pollination counts although we haven't seen many bees this summer and more so in early spring. We have a few new citrus plants that I've introduced to the container garden mix but they continue to challenge me. I'm determined to get better at growing them however even though my recent research has taught me that they are more work than I initially thought. Why can't everything grow as easy as grapes, strawberries, and raspberries do here? Just kidding. Nothing is really easy in Texas to grow, but I have figured out a lot of things that do. If you are a laid back gardener in need of good landscaping plants, stick to the natives. You won't have to water much if at all.

RECOMMENDATIONS for your Garden

Marigolds and Basil should be replenished everywhere! I have the largest Marigold plant I've ever seen in my entire life simply from popping the dead heads and spreading them throughout my garden. This plant actually came from a random head I beseeded in the fall. Although I should relocate it in another area since it is taking up space and vital nutrients from our largest garden bed, I simply can't because I want to see how big it can get! Marigolds and Basil are both essential to deterring pests in your gardens. If you aren't a large

organic farmer you can surely pop the tops and spread the seed everywhere! The bugs and your gardens will love it and they both make wonderful bouquets and are great edible landscapes, especially with so many varieties! I have 15 different basil plants after ordering seeds from seedsavers. Botanical Interests has also allowed me to introduce new edible culinary varieties of Marigold to our diet.

Let the good insects live on and relocate them if you have too. Most spiders are a huge plus to your gardens. Our favorite is the "banana spider" and wolf spiders. Have you ever seen glowing eyes in the grass at night? Take out a flash light when it's dark and shine them into the yard. The little sparkles that you see are actually from arachnids! Pretty neat or pretty scary for those who are arachnophobic. Get your hand on an insect book for bugs in your state so that you can decide on your own if they are harming or helping your garden. Every day is a new adventure in your own backyard! Especially when a bug hunt is involved! I forgot to mention that I actually saw a lightning bug a couple nights in a row while gardening by the light of the moon. That was amazing. I've never seen one here and something that I'm reminiscent about.

Other bugs to watch out for? Kissing bugs are very bad and we have seen them this year, they can make you very sick and leave a huge welt so be weary and squish when you can. The best organic method is your fingers, but a dilution of neem oil, citrus oil or tomato leaves, onions, garlic and hot peppers, also work wonders too! Compost tea, diluted dish soap, and milk also are other great aides. Jerry Baker has some great books out with tons of recipes for your lawn and garden. Add one to your collection. Make sure your measurements are accurate and that you aren't spraying your plants to late or early in the day. You don't want to burn your plants so do your research first if you haven't tried using them before.

Praying mantis and walking sticks are great to have around, even though some have said that they can be invasive. If they eat the bad bugs they are good in my book, as long as they stay away from my precious hummingbirds! Have you ever seen a

picture of a praying mantis eating a hummingbird? It's crazy!

Toads are a good sign that your backyard oasis is in balance within the ecosystem. Make sure not to use pesticides in your lawn and garden and you can count yourself an avid organic gardener, no certification needed to grow local, fresh, inexpensive food in your own garden. Another way you can help your family flourish, by choosing to live and eat better.

Don't forget to pick blueberries at Moorhead Blueberry Farm in Conroe, Texas! We picked 16 pounds in May with some of our Vear family members and made some new friends too! I've made blueberry cobbler and blueberry ice cream and have eaten plenty by the handful! I plan to can the rest. Come to the Manor Farmers Market on Wednesdays in Texas and buy one of my yummy homemade treats!

Happy Fourth of July! Thank you to everyone who has served our country in one way or another, especially the men and women in uniform. Our blessings and prayers go out to you and your families every day! We wouldn't be here without you keeping us safe. Thank you!

Enjoy the summer trails, and for the record, Davin says I'm the scientist and he's the engineer. What a miser.

Laughing joyfully, Kristin & Davin

Spring Projects

Happy Spring!

For us spring=crazy projects outdoors. This

is because it's simply too hot in the summer to be motivated outside and if we are working on projects when it's hot out, you'll find the shop lights on in the dark because it's relatively cooler. This year we aren't building any new garden beds for the first time ever however we are tweaking our current systems and have even converted a couple of our existing garden beds which reduces our radius for gardening. To make up for the loss we have relocated one of our raised garden beds to one that I had made out of pavers which gives us a little more height. But, our 1st garden bed became the Greenhouse Chicken Coop, and the other is going to be for rainwater collection.

So I've relocated the canas into more native land outback and near the compost pile. Those things spread like crazy and were taking over the herb garden. I'll be planting potatoes in their place and have also planted an artichoke and two raspberry bushes late winter. Texas weather has been strange as you can imagine; cold, warm, hot, cold, warm, spring weather with frosts still in February-March. I was able to clean up all of the beds, transplant existing plants to new locations to make space for other arrivals and such. I planted frost hardy perennials in the new bed I did by the street. I always try to perfect our landscaped native areas, which I don't think is one of my strong suits at all. None the less, I try. Maybe one day I'll be more skilled at it. Davin leaves this work to me. He does more of the

building projects. Although I have to do my share of digging of which I'm not a fan.

CHICKENS

We have received our 10 pullet organically raised chickens from [Blue Star Ranch](#). We are pleased to tell you we have:

- 2 Ameraucanas(Easter egg layers-blue)
- 4 Naked Neck(2 black, 2 golden-large brown eggs)
- 2 Australorps(brown eggs)
- 2 Plymouth Barred Rocks(brown eggs)

We choose these varieties based on a few reasons. They are great foragers, dual breeds(great for egg laying and meat production), some are more heat tolerant and more resistant to disease(Naked Neck), relatively quiet, produce well, friendly. That being said, I know that each bird is unique. We had some pecking order issues after the first few days with one of the Naked Necks getting pecked in the tail but got right on it and used Peck-Me-Not that we got from TSC which helped right away. They are 9 weeks old; we got them at 8 weeks. They shouldn't start laying for at least a couple more months. We also got some of the chicken compost with the chicken to transport into

their current habitat to reduce environmental concerns, and promote health. We also will continue to spray the coop with probiotics daily for another month at least and on a weekly basis thereafter. The use of probiotics encourages a healthier life for the chickens and the environment they live in.

Davin finished the pin just in time and has recently built a tractor for them while they free range in the yard. We've been able to feed them yellow clover which they love, btw, from our front lawn. Our non certified organic chickens diet consists of:

- local organic pullet developer from Coyote Creek Farms
- rainwater with vinegar and probiotics
- fresh greens from our gardens
- bugs
- oyster shells
- yellow clover from our yard
- cleavers from our yard
- free range

I go out every day in search for bugs for them for

protein when they aren't free ranging. They play football with Junebugs, love the aphids on my brussel sprouts, fight over the grubs and pill bugs are like popcorn. I can't fathom sharing the earthworms with them unless they get them while foraging, and I hope they do. Unless we start our vermiculture farm and then there will be plenty for them to eat.

We hope to sell a few dozen eggs a week at the local Manor Farmers Market to offset the cost of raising them. Currently there is only one other member selling organic eggs and his are all Ameraucana (blue) so we would have the organic brown egg market. The other farmers sell blue, white, and duck eggs, some of which are free range. A 50lb bag of organic feed is about \$32 at the Bastrop Feed Store on Hwy 95.

RAINWATER HARVESTING

This is what my husband is talking about. While doing more research in what's in our local water and trying a new approach to gardening this year with compost tea we are also furthering our research on other problems that may be impacting our food production. Word on the street is that if we continue having the drought issues like we've been having the past few years in Texas, then we will be short on water; meaning running out of it in just a couple years. We have had a couple 55 gallon rain barrels for a few years now but find

ourselves collecting water in various other containers. Davin's bound and determined to transform what was once a raised garden bed, into our new location for harvesting rainwater. The area is right behind the garage, next to the vertical chicken coop side of the greenhouse. I've been removing the remarkable dirt and placing it in new beds in the front yard for native plants. His goal is to get 4-275 gallon tanks, which would put us at 1100 gallons of water when full. That still isn't nearly enough because it will fill up relatively quickly during our spring and fall monsoons. According to the farmers almanac we are scheduled to get some rains until June and then it's supposed to be pretty dry, may not rain in July and August. So there is a demand to get it in now. I'm not entirely sure that we will have enough room and part of me is concerned that the birds will be looking at water bins but we plan to build a deck just over it which will also allow us to have easier access to the eggs(I currently have to stand on a step stool to get them since I'm so tall).

Davin has already set up eaves and a downspout, with another covered water bin to harvest rainwater for the chickens, on west side of our Greenhouse Chicken Coop. We currently have goldfish in the one by the house to help with mosquito prevention. The 2 goldfish in there survived the winter and several freezes.

We may also create a diversion from the front downspout to harvest in the back since we lose a lot of water there and we can't have any rain barrels in sight per HOA regulations. I've been advised that the HOA laws have recently changed and Texas is supporting no turf lawns like they have out west. The downspout would run across the shower fence and adjoin to the garage.

HIGH TECH SPRINKLER SYSTEM (For Us)

Yes, this is my husbands latest endeavor. Last weekend he spent a few days trenching more clay in the yard, ripping out our outdoor faucet, and some of our past sprinkler systems. He jacked up his back and by the time he went back to work he couldn't get dressed without excruciating pain and moans. He is better now thank goodness. So, I really need to have him talk about what he ordered since I don't know exactly the specifics. What the goal is basically is that we have added a water filtration system and additional tank that we can add our compost tea, fish emulsion, seaweed extract, etc. too on a regular basis so that it'll be distributed throughout the drip system which we are also reinstalling in all of our garden beds, except for our herb garden.

- SprinklerWarehouse.com
- Filtersfast.com

HOOP HOUSE

We made our first temporary hoop house for our pergola garden bed since I have this innate feeling that it's going to frost a few more times until May and I must plant some of my tomatoes and tomatillos because they've outgrown their starter containers. The peppers, new seed starts, and flowers that couldn't be directly seeded won't get planted yet. What small plants are added to the garden will get devoured by pill bugs if I plant them too soon. I periodically move the seed trays outside when it gets too cold since most of the sunlight indoors can only be achieved in the morning and that isn't the ideal temperatures for germination. I try. We'll see. Since the greenhouse walls and counters aren't finished yet I have to continue my old methods. I don't want to lose trays in the winds this year however, last year, one blew away! Bummer right?!

ORGANIZATION

One problem with our multiple projects is that they always leave a mess. It's the typical story, husband cleans up after the wife. But it gets to be a bit ridiculous since anytime Davin starts a new project he goes to an area where there's room, sometimes there isn't any and he usually only cleans up his power tools. That's what he calls, "cleaning up his mess." Needless to say, we are always short on space inside the home yet have a fairly large yard to mess up.

So last weekend I tried to clean up part of our scrap clutter; wood, pottery, old picnic table workbench, window, wheelbarrows, tires, etc. We've deduced that we need to have another covered area to store some of these things. However it needs to look tasteful since we are in a HOA that cares about such things, we also pride ourselves in our creations. We acquired what appeared to be an old animal habitat for a snake maybe from a nearby farm and will use it as a cold frame on one side of the covered area. We have 3 wheel barrels; Davin parted a couple of them out, one came with the house, and our neighbor gave us another one. We also have a heavier duty cage one that works as well for other things. They all seem to amount to not that great which is why he has to fix them up occasionally. Then there's this giant cedar log, at least 12 ft long. We are going to make benches or wooden paths with it.

I relocated most of the scrap near the shed to farther back along the fence. I created an area for small wood scraps of various kinds, and long wood scraps underneath the picnic table and on the other side too. I placed all of the nice pots on top of the table in stacks so that half of the table is still functional. I placed all of the extra pavers neatly in piles or on the ground and extra plywood/particle board on the ground to prevent grass and weed growth and to encourage dirt development.

I reorganized our garden shed and found the mouse and outside field rat habitats that were left over from winter. A tiny mouse that our cats hadn't caught made me shriek as it scurried away. We found excess pvc piping and other fencing materials that were neatly stacked among the other materials in the back yard.

Once we use the rest of the pea gravel we will try to reuse the container that it's stored in. Our recycling center is pretty well organized and should be the only thing left in front of the shed near our front gate. We still have Ford truck parts and marble slate in that area that need to go, ba-bye. Since we have a flooding problem we have also decided to get free mulch from the county and lay down around that area, also by the shed on the outside of the garden beds, to minimize lawn space for cheaper.

OTHER NEWS

Volunteering

I recently volunteered last week with Urban Roots at SXSW for the Music by the Slice event that Homeslice has done. It was a tone of fun and a great way to network with new people and meet fans throughout the world. This is the 5th year that they have done the event with Homeslice Pizza. Retail Me Not was also there.

Interviewing

A couple of weeks ago I interviewed and toured Natural Gardener with the owner John Lee Dromgoole. What we discussed was his life's work and lessons learned. Entrepreneurship tips of advice and an outstanding experience of a lifetime that I'm truly honored to have shared with the lady bug bloomer. I will post some of my interview feedback after I submit it for class.

Brewers on the Brink

Davin and I attended Circle Brewery's 3rd Anniversary Party a couple weeks ago after grabbing food at the Bque cook off at the Austin Rodeo. We attended the event for \$15 per person which gave us 3 wooden drink chips each, free stout casking samples on tap, anniversary pint glasses, sticker, coffee samples and stickers from [Briggo](#) coffee, chance to hang out in the warehouse and a tour around brewing tanks.

Read more about what they are doing in Austin at their blog <http://circlebrewing.com/blog/>

Visit our site tabs to see updates on different topics and pictures on homesteading, brewing and permaculture projects. Our next beer to brew is a mock of the Organic Dark Chocolate Stout by Samuel Smith that we'd hoped to have for St. Paddy's Day but our other projects have gotten in the way.