

Spring Chicks, The Natural Way



Chicks A Few Days Old







Chicks are 3-4 weeks old

This marks the start of our sixth flock to date and the fifth spring that we enter raising chooks as chicks. What's different about this year however is that for the first time we hatched our own. The natural way. We must tell you that it has been extremely exciting and rewarding to watch the transformative process. From the time our broody Australorp plucked out all of the feathers from under her belly to the dawn we found the first chick chirping in the nesting box along her side.

In the past we have always purchased our chickens from other breeders. Throughout the process we have experienced both joy and pain. We have learned to become very resilient flock shepherds through the multitude of casualties we've experienced and for a number of reasons which we suspect. Chook owners know more over time, but even after we have

conducted a necropsy, sometimes you just never know why your little feather friend died. Then we remember natural selection and survival of the fittest doesn't always make sense. Nature has a way of showing you tiny details and intricacies of life that may have gone unnoticed before, when everything appeared to be perfect. It is under the ruffled feathers that you find many questions left unanswered. And yet somehow you have the urge to try again.

So, this season it is extremely rewarding for us to watch mama hen take ownership of 11 brown, white, and blue eggs in her nest. We watched as a few more eggs were laid each day in the same space by the Leghorns, Barnevelders, and Ameraucanas. Only 7 hatched and we buried the others in the garden. Each one of them is unique in their own way by the day of the week they were born which earned them names of which to keep.

The first egg that hatched was blue and an Ameraucana. It had been at least twenty-one days when we noticed a fracture in the shell. Over a period of more than six hours she pecked her way out of her shell. Chicks can live for four days after they've hatched on the nutrients supplied from the inside of their shell. Remarkable the way that nature works eh?

One by one they hatched and we brought them into their temporary brooder. The goal was to

reintroduce mama hen
to her chicks after they'd all hatched, but she was so
stressed out from the
extensive incubation period that when she left the nesting box
we could tell
she was relieved. So we let her find her zen again to sow and
scratch in peace.

The youngest chick is nearly two weeks behind the oldest and
Thursday, the only Australorp that hatched was born January
7th. She took a couple of days to get out of the eggshell. She
was exhausted and we were not sure that she'd pull through but
shorty is hanging with the best of them today. Sunday,
Ameraucana the first was born January 27th, then Wednesday
Ameraucana the 2nd (30th), Sunday the first Leghorn (3rd), and
two Leghorns hatched on Monday (Jan 4th). One Barnevelder
hatched on Tuesday (5th). By now a few of them are about a
month old.

For more information on raising your own flock we highly
recommend:

Harvey Ussery *The Small-Scale Poultry Flock*

Gail Damerow Storey's *Guide to Raising Chickens, and The
Chicken Health Handbook*

Mid Summer Garden

Well I don't think I can ever get caught up in the
backyard these days! My gardens have become so large

that I'm constantly cultivating the soil! It seems as if just as I've finished one thing, another bed needs redone!

It has been a very successful tomato season for us even though many farmers have said the complete opposite due to all of the rain! Plenty of heirloom tomatoes here! At this time I have planted about 102 in my small space. The reason for that is a greenhouse lesson learned. In the years prior I seed started in the house where the environment wasn't ideal for sprouting. Davin was able to finish the greenhouse coop last fall and I was able to start my favorite varieties successfully for the first time. I put 3 seeds in each pod, and guess what, they all came up! So, I was able to sell a few at the farmer's market, and donated about 40 to a few local families. Lesson learned! We will be expanding our greenhouse coop into a full greenhouse with aquaponics in one section and a chicken care station below, in addition to our seed starting stations. That will be our next big project after Davin remodels the new coop again. I swear, how many times can you rebuild something until you are satisfied with the end result?

Our chickens are 20 weeks old on Wednesday! One of our Campines has been laying for almost 2 weeks straight now but none of the other ladies have begun yet. The campine eggs are tiny, a little smaller than a guinea egg actually. The new flock is having a hard time adjusting to the heat I think because we had so much rain in the spring that it was actually pretty cool for much longer than it usually is. Since it's dried up for the past month or so it's been pretty hot and they are struggling, even though it hasn't reached 100 degrees yet. Luckily we have multiple fans in both the new coop

and the old coop so all of our hens are getting some relief. It does help them to lay in the summer if they have places to cool off. We have multiple locations for water and I like to give them refreshing frozen or chilled afternoon fruit treats.

We also have ten different breeds, within the 20 birds we own. Four of them are 16 months old and three of them are consistently laying. The Ameraucana hasn't been laying eggs but has a deformed dorsal, which I've read is how some of the original Arcaunas were shaped. She did have some very soft shelled eggs and I'm not sure if she will lay again or not. So right now she's helping to control the bad bug population, and fertilization. She is one of the original ten pullets that we bought 8-10 weeks old and lost 60% for different reasons. Davin calls her Corky. For anyone considering raising chickens, get them as chicks, not as older pullets. They'll have a much better chance of survival and be much healthier if they grow up in the same environment.

Here are a few pictures to show you what's new at our market garden-backyard homestead and some of the things we've done this spring and summer!

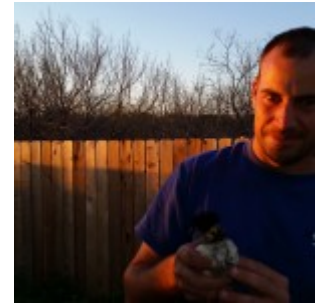


A few plants that
we got from
Sunshine
Community Gardens
annual spring
plant sale, 2015



Seed starts in
the greenhouse





Davin's favorite.



Adjusting the new system.



Drip system runs off of rainwater and is very efficient.



Drinking harvested rainwater, packed full of electrolytes!



Another compost pile located in Sustainable Garden Bed



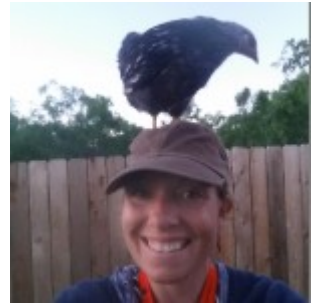
New grape bed and added garage sale decor to the gate



French Heirloom
Creme de lite
Carrot



Walking onion



Yes, early
bonding. They
like to jump on
my head!



Table grapes from
Stark bro's.



Herb garden in
the spring 2015



Citrus and
succulents



New coop



Just a little wet
from the rain



Grew buckwheat to
build the soil
with nitrogen, as
a beneficial
insect promoter,
and for chicken
scratch



Compost for the
chickens to
scratch in



Everbearing
raspberries



1015, Red, White,
Texas Sweet
Onions, were
harvested early
because of all of
the rain and
flooding.



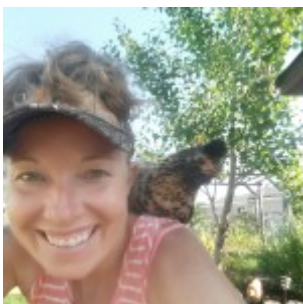
Silver Campine,
Leghorn, Heritage
Breed Hens



This was our
broody Australorp
hen this spring!
We got her back
on track after a
couple of weeks!



Buff Orpington,
Ameraucana, J

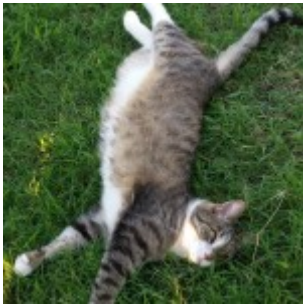


Brabanter
Heritage Breed
Hen



Norwegian
Jaerhons,

Heritage Breed Hens



Mic relaxing



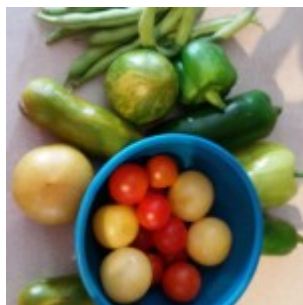
rattlesnake that
I went face to
face in while
cultivating the
corn bed



sunflower



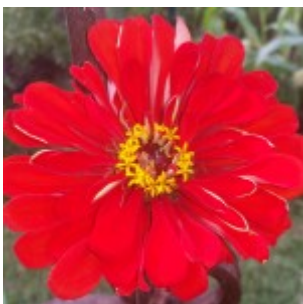
late spring/early
summer harvest



Some of the first
harvests in the
spring.



Heirloom Garlic



Giant Zinnia



A peek in the new
coop



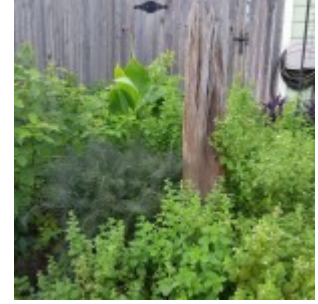
Garden in June



crimson
watermelon that
came up on its
own free will



For some reason
we have two
banana spiders
hanging above our
nesting boxes on
both coops. I'm
ok with that too!
They are well
fed!



Melissa, fennel,
raspberries,
roses, cana, and
an old log that
we turned into
garden art in the
herb garden



Cinnamon basil



Pink lemonade
blueberries

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 frolicked 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 her 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