

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 loose 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.

Has it really been that long?! Catching Up with New Year Recommendations

MISS YOU! As an overachiever by nature, I didn't realize that my needing to post an update to our blog was so outdated! It's been on my neverending list of to dos. I actually have piles of topics to discuss as they come up in newspapers, online articles, books, magazines, and networking discussions, and yet they slowly make their way on our site, and in stacks in my art room. As **you may have already read**, this site is an ongoing project and passion of mine that has developed from my passion for food, gardening and sustainable living. It has become something bigger. Or perhaps I'm branding so keep your eyes open.

WHAT'S BREWING?

We've also been brewing a variety of brews. Our, **'You Gourda Be Kidding Me' Porter** was titled as a contest on facebook, of which my cousin Jake, the beer connoisseur, landed it the special comical title. We made this Porter late fall and used 7 lbs of various squash and pumpkin for the blend. I baked the squash in quarter pieces with the whole spices laid on top. Then we added them throughout the brewing boil in 15 min. increments, in addition to adding 1/3 vanilla bean every 20 min over the course of 1 hour. Our seasonal brew we bottled, and mighty spendy indeed but we were able to produce about 33 bottles of a unique, spicy, sweet, robust medium dark craft beer with a 7.3% ABV. This was also the first recipe that we created and brewed together. Usually I have assisted with the process as minimally as possible but this one was the first batch my husband and I brewed 100% together. We were rather impressed at how well we work together during the process. It

went quite a bit smoother than the Friendly Neighbor Brewing nights at home. But we are a good pair in the kitchen too so I'm not surprised. This was also rewarding since their last batch became part of the lost souls of beer explosions. And a whole batch was ruined from excessive carbonation which could have been caused from fluctuating temperature changes where they were stored, apparently a common mishap for Texas according to AHS(Austin Homebrew Supply). We have a Honey Kolsch on tap that should be ready by next weekend. I got Davin an awesome thermal growler with my dividend check from REI for Christmas. Great way to give a green gift! It's insulated and will keep beverages hot/cold for at least 24 hrs it says.

GREEN GARAGE SALE? REI-buy a lifetime membership for \$20, get great deals and a dividend check of 10% back from your purchases throughout the year to spend at REI on anything you want. Another green way to take advantage of REI, check out their free programs, classes offered, and volunteering opportunities in your location. Also great company with wonderful benefits to work in a healthy and fun environment. One of our favorite REI regular events includes their garage sales, great deals on returned items from customers; shoes, bags, watches, bikes, racks, etc. Check different store locations to find out when their garage sales are happening. We've attended one in Portland, Oregon and several in Austin, Texas that had fantastic deals!

COMPOST TEA YOU SAY?

Since the fall I have also attended an invaluable Compost Tea Class at Third Coast Horticulture Supply in Austin that offered alternative methods of gardening by moderating garden techniques by monitoring, analyzing, and hosting the ideal amounts of fungus and bacteria within our backyard ecosystem. The perfect balance of the two prevents disease, pests, freezing, and heat stress among other things and also allows the plants to be incredibly resilient, strong, and much more efficient in their production abilities. No need to feed plants on a regular basis with various plant foods when the growing medium is in complete harmony by the perfect balance

of bacteria and fungus, the system feeds itself. Creating compost tea can be done a number of ways but with proper aeration(using a pump) in a five gallon bucket and a fine mesh cloth, a tea can be made while mixing medium materials and soaking them in water. There are several different formulas that one can use to create their own compost tea and you can also buy the product already made and ready to use. One may also take the compost tea mixture and apply it in undiluted measurements like an extract which can have a larger impact on the overall effect, especially on a commercial farm scale.

How to make compost tea? Yes, more on this later. If I can upload documents then I will upload the free pamphlet we received at the class titled, 'Soil Simplified: An Introduction to Your Garden's Microbial Life.' The definition of Compost Tea in this piece of literature states, "Compost tea is a brew of oxygen rich water, high quality compost, and some foods to help microbes bloom in population. " The article goes onto discuss the goal of a good tea is to "substantially increase the amount of beneficial organisms. " Compost Tea(CT) may then be used to coat leaf surfaces, inoculate compost, and restore and improve soil health through a bio-film protection barrier that keeps pathogens from feeding on the plant. "The microbes also respire CO₂ that helps fuel the plants metabolism and through usage of tea in compost or soil the biomass of healthy life is stored and converts into energy. As you may already know compost is already organic matter that has broken down over time by microbes and may be used as food aka energy, later. Adding compost to your garden adds diversity to your soil and compost varieties vary by different compositions used; essentially compost is composed of sunlight, water, oxygen, nitrogen-green and brown earth matter(leafy plants,greens, grass, etc. for green, and wood, leaves, paper, etc. for brown-just a few examples).Many people use mushroom compost-obviously excellent for contributing a mycorrhizal relationship with fungi symbiosis. Some use chicken manure, and cow manure, but a good rule of thumb is to know EXACTLY WHERE YOUR COMPOST MATERIALS CAME FROM if you don't make your own. A lot of people are easily misled by garden products that are labeled as "Organic" because they

don't understand the science of the matter at hand, for instance, Miracle Grow-Scott's, Monsanto product, advertises, "Organic Gardening Soil"-well duh, anything living is organic-here's the definition I referenced from biology-online.org below but don't believe what you see if you haven't done the research yourself. Miracle Grow-Scott's-Monsanto, the bane of our existence globally, and is far from toting the organic emblem of health. Just because your dirt says it's organic, doesn't mean that it's nontoxic, chemical-free, etc. Do your homework, I'm just scraping the surface of the subject. Research your seeds, your plants you buy at the store, seed-starts, etc. GMO vs. Non GMO to help get your head in the game. Mother Earth News is a great online resource, digital publication, or magazine to subscribe to if you're a newbie and want to put forth more effort in transforming your garden, home, lawn, life, food sources, and lifestyle. Also, the LIBRARY, I must reference it again, next to online used books and swapping good resources with your friends.

Word origin: Latin *organicus*, Greek *organikós*, *órgan(on)*.

Related forms: organically (adverb)

Organic~Definition: *noun, plural: organics*(Chemistry) An organic compound; or any substance containing carbon-based compounds, especially produced by or derived from living organisms.(Agriculture) An organic food; or any food that is *organically grown* (i.e. grown without using or applying synthetic pesticides, fungicides, inorganic fertilizers, or preservatives. *Adjective*(biology) Of, pertaining to, derived from, or similar to an organ of the body. <http://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Organic>

Inorganic~Definition:*adjective*(1) Of or pertaining to substances that are not of organic origin.(2) Relating to a substance that does not contain carbon.(3) Of mineral, rather than of biological, origin. <http://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Inorganic>

THAT'S RIGHT, CHEMICAL FREE 2014-I know you wanted to accomplish that goal this year! :}

Furthermore, funny thing is, once you get into the matter of

what's in your dirt, where your dirt came from, what dirt your food grew from, what the dirt and plants were sprayed with to keep things growing, it'll make you sick to your stomach so just make sure to do your research if you are really interested in becoming an "Organic Gardener." In order to slap on the label you need at least 7 years of chemical free gardening under your belt on your land in addition to all the other legislative hoops you must jump through the FDA and USDA for Organic certification. You can do just as good of a job as a chemical free, "organic" gardener by making sure that everything that goes onto your lawn, garden beds, water, etc. is eco-friendly, non-toxic, and natural based. That's right, no more crap sprayed on your garden beds AND LAWN that kills fish, birds, livestock, children, pets, and adults-don't worry, there's enough studies to prove that, it does make a difference. Just because you don't feed your edible plants and herbs toxins doesn't mean they won't get what you sprayed or fertilized your grass with, NOT Dillo dirt(Travis county human waste with pharmaceuticals in it)-Organics By Gosh sells this misleading product too, ironic, don't ya think? NOT Roundup-our poor ecosystem! NOTHING TOXIC ON YOUR HOMESTEAD PERIOD, EVER! Did I sound a bit concerned on the topic? Do you really want that in your drinking water? Didn't think so, oh, well, it definitely depends on where you live but heads up folks if you're in Austin, part of your water may come from the Colorado River, and guess where those tire rims, styrofoam and non recycled water bottles, and kid toys go to die-in the lakes, streams, rivers, and oceans, if not in landfills, and natural habitats already. If it's not petroleum based ingredients in your body, home and garden products, then it's chemicals that you don't know how to pronounce, and toxins that you don't want in your body or the environment that you live in. Do ya think our ancestors had all that garbage hundreds of years ago to live sustainably? Heck no, did they survive, hell yeah they did. And without all the pills to boot, don't even get me started, jk. Get over the illusion that chemicals are not bad for you and you'll be a lot better off. Promise. Trust the millions of people who have died on behalf of the multitude of discussions that have spawned on behalf of our exposure to man made ingredients, not derived

from plants. There are always other options before using chemical agents that can end your life or blind you. Many of you already know what I'm loosely and somewhat lightly babbling about, those of you who are wanting to learn more? Get your hands on some documentaries via Netflix, library, or search for them for free online. Some titles of films to watch that might surprise you, not in any order, 'Corn, Death on a Factory Farm, Food Inc., Dirt. The Movie, Supersize Me which I've mentioned before...The Cove, there's a bunch that are easily accessible on YouTube for free too. Here's a quick link to [some reviews from about.com](http://documentaries.about.com/od/populardocsubjects/tp/Food_and_Nutrition_Docu.htm) http://documentaries.about.com/od/populardocsubjects/tp/Food_and_Nutrition_Docu.htm

On a positive note, I'd like to end my post with some uplifting insight and more positive information since I didn't foresee myself going on a last minute rampage. Also in the mean time, start your own research on ways to improve your garden and visit Third Coast Horticulture Supplies in Austin, Texas! There's also one in Muskegon, Michigan but I'm not sure if they know each other or not. The owner Shawn is a walking encyclopedia in the field and will show you how to test your samples under a microscope.

Other Must Reads for the NEW YEAR 2014!

A good start and a good read to help you grasp the concept of Compost Tea in it's entirety? Pick up a copy of Teaming with Microbes *The Organic Gardener's Guide to the Soil Food Web* Revised Edition by Jeff Lowenfels & Wayne Lewis and check out their website.

Sleeping Naked is Green by Vanessa Farquharson-got this awesome find at Half Price Books for \$4 and it's a gem of knowledge. Even a bit ahead of herself at the time, this Canadian writer vowed to green up her life in 366 days and wrote about it. Great ideas, and comical events took place in her book and is a must read for autobiography, sustainable, earth lovers, and those wanting some new green ideas, published in 2009. A lot of wonderful references, and ideas for you to take as you embark upon your new year goals, or help you make some if you haven't already.

Texas Bug Book by Garrett & Beck, yes, we often wonder what strange new insect has come to taunt us throughout the growing season, this one is pretty handy to have by your side. Got ours used at Half Price Books, but also Amazon has used copies for sale.

Beauty By Nature by Brigitte Mars-make natural products for you and your home from herbs you can grow in your garden. This is a gem of a find. Easy to follow, read, and use.

GAIA's GARDEN by Toby Hemenway-If you are looking for your foothold in the permaculture world this is the perfect book to get your feet wet and dirty.

Texas Mushrooms by Metzler, Metzler, and Miller-this is almost \$30 or so, but if you are a mushroom forager in Texas, get yourself a copy. Also the National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms is a great handbook too.

Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens by Gail Damerow-How to care, feeding, housing, health, this book covers a lot of different topics that relate to your flock, so I was pleased when I was choosing, one book to buy. Again, there is countless info online, and in magazines but we've been pleased with this reference.

Texas Home Landscaping including Oklahoma by Greg Grant and Roger Holmes, includes drought tolerant plants, and natives, etc. They have a series that includes Cali, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, and Southeast. Some of which include parts of Canada and British Columbia.

I like the local Agri-chapter free color publication of native plant species for Travis County available for more useful native plant selections, and non-native plant options that do well in the area. The last one they published was in 2009 I believe. Local Garden Centers in and around Austin still have copies available. Check out this link <http://travis-tx.tamu.edu/agriculture-natural-resources/>.

Good luck to you on your journey this year! May you encounter invigorating new moments to shine and be inspired. As I continue to study in the Graduate program at Texas State with

my Interdisciplinary Studies in Sustainability I will keep you posted. I will start adding more information to the different site topics too. Gardening and Food recipes will be of focus in the beginning of the year. Cheers, and straight ahead!