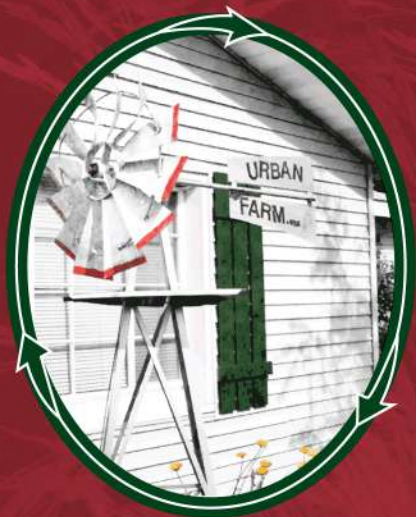


THE URBAN FARM'S
Simple Sustainability Series

My Ordinary **EXTRAORDINARY** Yard



An Exploration of the Place I Call Home
Greg Peterson

My Ordinary
Extraordinary Yard

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I Call Home

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Urban Farm Press
Phoenix, Arizona

My Ordinary Extraordinary Yard

An Exploration of the Place I Call Home

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Preface

We are in the midst of a revolution...a food revolution that will bring the growing of our food closer to home. As we look at the current food systems and consider all the intricacies of how we grow our food and the great length that it travels to land on our plates, the need arises to create a significant shift in the process. One great solution - urban farming - is literally transforming our back and even front yards into food forests; landscapes that not only are aesthetically pleasing to look at but also produce food for our plates and our communities.

Our current industrial system requires that we ship food long distances, called food miles, with the average edible traveling 1500 miles in the United States. This creates significant issues. First there is the environmental impact of shipping in the form of labor, containers, fuel, and handling costs.

Then in order to get food to market it is picked days or even weeks before it is ripe. This negatively impacts the flavor and nutrient values of the food, as much of the nutrition and flavor arrives as it ripens on the vine. Many of these issues can very effectively be addressed by building local

urban systems for growing our own food.

This is where you come in. Start exploring your yard, your surrounding neighborhood, schools, churches, nearby medians in your streets, co-op garden plots and even windowsill herb gardens. Look for food that is already growing and discover where you could plant more.

Start small; grow an herb because they are the most expensive to buy and the easiest to grow. Taking the first step is always the hardest, but you'll soon see how easy it is to start growing your own. Then as you have successes you will be comfortable experimenting and expanding from there. Just remember that no effort is too small and you are the one who benefits most.

Then the transition from gardener to farmer is an easy one...simply share what you have grown with others; both the fruits of your labor and the knowledge about how you did it. This can be as simple as giving a zucchini to the neighbor, hosting a small community dinner for your friends or giving a class in your living room on gardening or in your kitchen on canning.

Then you can take your efforts to the next level by growing products to sell in your local market. I specifically chose the word 'products'

as not only can we grow food, but products that fall into the categories of botanicals and medicinals that are increasingly in demand in our marketplaces. Many of these products offer exceptional business and financial opportunities.

Then the icing on the cake is the naming of your farm, even if it is simply for the few pots on your front porch. Creating your name helps to build a sense of place within your neighborhood as well as pride in your accomplishments. By naming your farm you give it a life of its own. Be creative and come up with a name that inspires and makes people smile, like my friend Laura's "Wish We Had Acres," the Fairy Tale inspired "Jack's Bean Stalk" or my "Urban Farm."

My mission in life is to "inspire people into their own level of greenness" and I feel blessed to be able to do this every day. Through research, writing, blogging, speaking, teaching and media appearances I am able to share knowledge about urban farming and living a green lifestyle. I cover topics that run the gamut, from edible landscaping, rainwater collection and the use of reclaimed materials, to solar power and the intricacies of greener decision making.

After earning my masters degree in Urban and Environmental Planning in December 2006,

I was able to merge academic planning with more than 34 years of real-world self study into a cohesive green living life path. In the process I have established an innovative, holistic home site called the Urban Farm, where I reside and literally walk the talk, as this MiniBük explains.

In concert with the Urban Farm I created a unique method of education that draws literally thousands of people who are eager to learn. Based on this work, I now offer training for other cities to build their own educational programs.

I enjoy being “your urban farmer” and welcome opportunities to help educate and inspire people about the joys and advantages of living in concert with the environment and growing your own food right in your back and front yards. In essence, my conversation centers on educating the greater community about “how to fish” in a farming sense. Communicating a positive, guilt-free message about how easy it is to live green is an essential piece of the framework. I am available for lectures and trainings at Sprout@urban-farm.org.

This book is written to share my story about how the Urban Farm came to be and to inspire you to create your own story. Many of the con-

cepts that I talk about will be expanded upon greatly in subsequent Urban Farm Simple Sustainability Series books. As you read this book watch for an asterisk (*) next to a topic. These indicate the subjects about which you can expect to see future MiniBük's.

By reducing our food miles to 'food feet', growing our own food, and supporting the local food economy we can significantly lighten the ecological footprint of our meals. There is nothing like plucking a fresh peach directly from your own tree and having it drip down your chin. Now I invite you to travel with me into My Ordinary Extraordinary Yard.

Greg Peterson
Your Urban Farmer
June 2011

"One would not expect to find such a sanctuary growing in the heart of urban Phoenix, but why not? Transforming residential landscape into an edible delight is the inspiration behind the Urban Farm. Sink your teeth into a juicy pear, add some fresh basil to your favorite dish or sauté some seasonal vegetables; all found within your arm's reach right in your own backyard. The Urban Farm not only awakens the possibility to reconnect with the earth and agriculture in simple, practical ways but it also nourishes the promise of a future that will sustain life for years to come."

Kaylie Nykai

Introduction

At first glance my yard may appear to be ordinary, but once you step into it you experience something extraordinary... My Urban Farm. The process of creating it is a living process, one that ebbs and flows as I learn from my successes and mistakes. Most of what I have accomplished has been done over 20 years through thoughtful observation and small steps (many of them experiments) to see the impact.

There are so many things that you can do to create your own urban farm, even if you live in an apartment. Start by picking one item that inspires you, then do it, improve with the feedback of your results, then move on and try the next thing.

Slow incremental change is what we are after. That is what fuels our lives and makes a significant difference in the quality of our life, health and pocketbooks.

My Urban Farm

The Urban Farm* is my home, plus a whole lot more. In many ways, The Urban Farm represents a return to a simpler life, one where we are more connected with the impact that we have on the earth. It's a place to discover our ability to make a significant impact on our environmental footprint* AND to see how this impact is woven into our choices.

My Urban Farm is located in the middle of Phoenix, Ariz., and sits on a typical Phoenix urban lot, 80 feet wide and 160 feet deep. Though the house was built in 1949, both my yard and home have been redesigned to emulate as green a lifestyle as possible. When asked, I generally define the space as an environmental showcase home. Boasting a primarily edible landscape*, 70+ fruit trees, rainwater* and grey-water* harvesting, two kinds of solar panels*, and a patio, that includes an outdoor shower and kitchen made from reclaimed materials.

One of the true pleasures I derive from my yard is that I get to eat heartily from it most every day. A favorite is what I like to call Urban Farm soup. In reality it is a nice selection of herbs and vegetables that grow year around in my front and back yards. On any given day in the late fall I grab a colander and a knife to collect carrots, parsnips, collard greens, snow peas and herbs to create a meal primarily grown in my garden. The preparation process is simple and the left-over veggie scraps are fed to the chickens, completing the circle and further contributing to the greenness of my life.

Although my yard and home may seem extreme, and in some ways they are, I have spent a considerable amount of time during the past ten years designing the space to look normal. And THAT is precisely the point...creating systems that people can see, understand and then replicate themselves, inspiring an Urban Farm visitor to try something in their own living space.

A few years back a young lady was on a

tour and I pointed out my apple hedge that actually sits by permission in the neighbor's yard by about 6 inches. It creates the southern fence of the front yard and does a nice job of producing apples every year. The tour visitor looked at it and I saw a light bulb go on. She inquired about the process and a few months later came back to me and proudly shared that she had planted her own apple hedge.

Urban Farm Beginnings

In 1974, when I was thirteen, my family moved into a new home in north central Phoenix. When we arrived and got everything unpacked my mom said to me, "Greg, see the right half of our backyard, that's our garden. Start digging."

Later in life a friend wrote this about me: "I was only a boy the first time the earth breathed into me and left an invitation. I accepted." In many ways this explains the unexplainable for me — why I do what I do. I am driven by a force to create a model of living green that I just cannot explain, and it lives within me every moment.

Fast-forward fifteen years and I was searching for my first home. Not surprisingly the seeds of my past played a large part in my decision. The property needed to be a place where I could garden, plant fruit trees and get my hands deep into the earth. In 1989, I found and purchased the Urban Farm,

or at least the beginnings of the Urban Farm, as it did not earn that distinction for many years.

Then two years later, while standing in my front yard, magic happened. Somehow a brochure that introduced me to the concept of permaculture* landed in my mailbox with an offer of a four-weekend course on the topic. I was so moved that I ran into the house and registered. Little did I know that this one act of post office providence would change my life forever.

The word 'permaculture' was created in the 1970's by Bill Mollison and one of his students David Holmgren and is a contraction of "permanent agriculture" or "permanent culture." Once you start studying permaculture you quickly learn that every person has their own definition. I like to say that it is the "art and science of working with nature." In any case, it is the study that fused all the logic of sustainability and everything that I had learned into one cohesive structure, giving me many of the tools that I was looking for.

Those who know me know that I have had farmer blood in my veins for as long as my forty-plus years can remember. I always assumed that I would find a small farm 'out there' somewhere, in a rural Arizona town such as Cottonwood, Verde Valley, or maybe even in Delores, Colorado, where I would raise food and transport it to Phoenix, thus fulfilling my destiny.

That was until sometime in the mid 1990's when two unlikely incidences collided. The first was a conversation I had with a long-time friend about the status of his property. You see, he had almost two acres in central Phoenix that came with water rights and he had been doing a great job of growing a nice crop of Bermuda grass. I proposed to him that we work together and plant a fruit tree orchard. I would provide and care for the trees, he would water them and we would share the benefit of the harvest.

The second incident happened at the age of 37 when I decided to go back to

school and get my bachelors degree. During one of my classes at Arizona State University I discovered that I am more interested in teaching about urban farming and living green than actually growing and selling the food. In that moment, I realized that I was already accomplishing much of this in the space where I lived and in 2001, the Urban Farm was born.

At the Urban Farm I have the luxury of harvesting a fresh apricot in May, while at the same time changing someone's perspective about where their food comes from. I have blended my vision of edible landscapes and learning, which has led me down a path of being a farmer as well as an educator.

My tenure at ASU lasted seven years and netted me a Bachelors Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a Masters Degree in Urban and Environmental Planning. Both degrees were well grounded in the study of sustainability. During that time however, the scope of my vision expanded from edible

landscaping to a holistic view of just how we can design our homes and the land around our homes to help fuel our lives. This process started with evaluating the energy efficiency* of the space where I live, as well as reviewing the best use of the resources already on the property.

My big discovery through all this was that I really wanted to share with others just how easily they can do this for themselves. Then on March 22, 2002 my life changed once again. That was the first day that I opened the Urban Farm to the public and people turned out by the hundreds. Since then the Urban Farm has regularly been opened for tours and classes. The intent of these events is to share with visitors the different green lifestyle choices available.

Urban Farming for Everyone

A significant piece of My Urban Farm is dedicated to actually growing food, not however in the traditional farm manner. Rather than having the entire yard planted in one crop (often called monocropping), I have nicely landscaped my yard with dozens of different kinds of food so that I always have many things to harvest. Concepts such as permaculture and food-forest design have been integrated slowly during the past 20 years to create a holistic system that takes the entire space into consideration.

The notion that the Urban Farm is a FARM, with bad smells, chemical cocktails, rows of corn and beans and all the ickies that come with a farm is quickly dispelled when people arrive. In fact, a recent visitor said "So Greg, Where IS the Urban Farm?" I just smiled and pointed. In that moment she realized that THIS Urban Farm did not look any different from the other houses on the street.

This type of farming is much more integrated into the landscape than most. My flowerbeds, although they do sport some flowers, are primarily populated with edibles while I keep the center of the back and front yards planted in grass. Plus, I have used the edges of the yard to plant fruit trees. This is farming on a much smaller basis than what people normally expect. The good news is that each and every one of us can do all or even a small part of it. In many ways this is a green lifestyle that adds abundance to our lives, nurtures our connection back to the earth, supplies us the energy that we need to heat, cool and power our lives and provides the opportunity to reuse resources such as rainwater and greywater. This is the Urban Farm way of life.

My Urban Farm lifestyle started innocently enough in the late 1990's when I started ramping up the amount of food that I grew in my yard. I didn't start by plowing everything under and putting in long rows of vegetables. Taking a completely different

tack, I slowly re-landscaped my yard, adding edibles to the already existing garden beds, changing some of the grass areas into gardens and over the next twenty years replacing my two dozen non-fruit-bearing trees with every kind of fruit tree I could imagine. As of the writing of this book I have planted over 80 fruit trees inside the space of my 1/3 acre using a concept called urban orcharding*. This is accomplished by keeping the trees small and putting them in hedgerows along the edge of my property. The selection of food and fruit-bearing trees includes apple, pear, peach, loquat, orange, lemon, lime, limequat, fig, cherry, apricot, mulberry and mesquite. My goal is to have some kind of harvestable fruit every month of the year. Currently I'm picking fresh fruit about eight months a year.

Extreme...perhaps, but the good news is that I eat quite heartily from my yard and a few years back I was making over \$1000 per month growing food and flowers to take to the local farmers' market. Since then how-

ever, I have reevaluated my goals and primarily grow enough food for myself and to share with the people who visit.

You don't have a 1/3 acre of land? If you listen to the square-foot gardener you can grow more food than you can eat in 100 square feet - that's only a 10 foot by 10 foot space. So with a teeny plot in your front or backyard you can raise a lot of food. It can be as simple as converting your existing pots or your flower garden into an edible delight. Whatever you choose to do will make a difference by providing fresh food, reducing your grocery bill and lightening your carbon footprint.

Ask yourself, "Just where can I plant some food?"

My friend Margaret lives in an upstairs condo in central Phoenix. Her dilemma was to figure out how she could create her own garden. She looked throughout the complex where she lives to no avail. Then one day she was on a walk in her neighborhood and found an overgrown garden plot in a neighbor's yard. She knocked, made a new friend and acquired

a garden space all at the same time.

Another friend turned the flowerbeds in front of her town home into her garden and now raises tomatoes, squash, peppers and a whole lot more.

Imagine a community where you walked down the street and found food for the harvesting...where you could grab a bag and collect whatever caught your eye. Such a place, abounding with fruits and vegetables, would magically draw people together simply to harvest dinner. I have been picturing such a community for years. And while this botanical utopia may not be right around the corner, we can begin to realize this vision, simply by starting.

All the Other Places

The notion of having our homes and the space around our homes fuel our lives includes: growing food as well as generating our own electricity, reducing our need to consume, and designing a more energy efficient space - all while creating a comfortable, happy and safe place to live. Comfortable being an operative word here! I am a firm believer that there is no suffering allowed. I am living proof that you don't have to suffer to have a green lifestyle, but I always am thinking about the next step.

Over the years, I have discovered many areas where I can have a positive environmental impact in the space where I live. As I guide people on my Urban Farm tours there are many things I point out, each part having been thought out and developed in a planned and methodical way. In addition to growing plenty of food there is an even deeper level of living green apparent in my backyard and inside my home.

Solar Panels

My roof sports two kinds of solar panels, each designed to serve a particular purpose. My Photovoltaic* panels or as they are called in the industry, "PV," are an electric power plant on my roof. The system is designed to generate 40% of my power needs on a yearly basis, which my utility bills clearly reflect.

The other is a Fafco solar hot water heating system called Sungrabber. The Sungrabber does a great job of heating the water for my home. Previously, I installed a timer on the water heater so I was only heating water four hours per day. This alone saved me a significant amount on my electric bill. With the Sungrabber and the timer I am able to get away with not using any electricity to heat water for eight months of the year. The other four months, I use between one and three hours' worth of electricity per day to heat water. This results in a significant savings on my electric bill.

The added bonus is that both of these

systems qualified for government tax credits and power company rebates. Check with your local power provider to find out which systems qualify in your area.

Energy Efficiency

Reducing my electrical consumption has become a bit of an obsession for me during the past 10 years. So much so that my electric bill on a monthly basis can be as low as \$8. Yes, the solar panels help, but they only go so far. The other piece, and perhaps a more important one, is the notion of becoming really conscious of the electricity that we consume.

Increasing your efficiency can be as easy as: changing out your light bulbs to the LED or CFL style; changing your thermostat to the programmable type; even adding a new more energy efficient air conditioning system. The single biggest change I made a few years ago was adding ceiling fans in every room. Now, instead of running the air conditioning, I frequently flip on the fan. And

when appliances need to be replaced, I make sure the new ones have the energy star label.

Chickens

As a general rule, a standard U.S. chicken is good for two things, to eat and to provide eggs. My chickens* occupy a nice space in the southwest corner of my backyard, where they run free, get to eat lots of bugs, weeds and seeds; till the soil; and along the way do a lot of fertilizing. They provide me with a nice selection of colorful eggs and are my pets, so they live out their lives in my backyard. In general, they provide many services that otherwise would take time, money or labor to accomplish.

One of my favorite things to do is move my chickens into one of my fenced gardens and let them do all the tilling and fertilizing for a few weeks. Then I go in after they have done the work and plant. This is some of the easiest gardening that I do and really nurtures the lazy gardener in me.

Outdoor Living

My backyard faces west and for the first 15 years I lived here there was virtually no shade. In the desert southwest, six months out of the year can be brutal. So, a few years back I decided to remodel my west-facing patio into an outdoor living space and build in shade. My intent was to use 95% reclaimed or reused material while ending up with a 'normal' looking patio. Interestingly, now that it is done, most people think that the patio is made from all new materials. In reality, I ultimately was able to remodel the space with about 80% reused materials.

My new outdoor living space includes a kitchen and shower. The sink and shower water that would normally go down the drain (called greywater*) now legally goes to water my landscape trees. A simple rainwater harvesting system directs the water out into the landscape where it can be most effectively used. The floors and retaining walls are made of broken up sidewalk (called urbanite, which is free) along with reused red bricks that were

on the site. For shade, I used the structure of an old dead grapefruit tree as an arbor for an attractive and productive grapevine. Plus with this shade structure in place it helps reduce my electric bill.

Inside

Most of what I showcase about the Urban Farm lives on the outside of the structure. You can imagine though that there are many things inside that I do to live a green lifestyle. First and foremost, my priority during the past 20 years has been to make the house as energy efficient* as possible. Additionally, as I remodel, I do so with green design in mind using reclaimed materials, painting with natural paints and plasters and inviting the daylight in whenever possible.

Afterword

Now it's your turn!

One of our recent tour participants asked, "Where do I start?"

I encouraged her to simply think about the thing that really sparks her interest, then take that motivation and begin making her own small changes. You'll be amazed by the joyful rewards that manifest as a result of making small, simple changes to your living space - you, your yard, your home, and your community will never be the same.

An 85-year-old friend has a Henry Ford saying on her refrigerator, "If you think you can, or you think you can't, you're probably right."

Believe me, I know we all CAN, and thoroughly enjoy doing it. We offer this book, and our other books on various topics in the Urban Farm's Simple Sustainability Series, to help ignite your green spark and support your efforts. Remember...No Suffering Allowed. Enjoy!

Sign up today for our
educational email series
*15 Essentials to
Living a Green Lifestyle*

Living a green lifestyle comes with a lot of choices, many of them confusing. How do you trust what a company claims about a product? Author Greg Peterson has created a series of emails designed to inspire you into your own level of greenness. His number one rule is “no suffering allowed!” For more information visit:

www.UrbanFarm.info

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is available for
purchase online at
UrbanFarmPress.com

The Urban Farm's
Simple Sustainability Series
is true to its title!

This delightful little Urban Farm guide provides the kick off for a series that promises many more informational, enticing and fun-to-read mini books as the (*) asterisks throughout indicate. The series comprises a variety of simple, easy-to-do and rewarding facets of the greener living adventure.

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YOU CAN CREATE YOUR OWN URBAN FARM

Creating an urban farm is as simple as planting your flowerbeds with edibles. The payoffs can include home grown food and a deeper connection to the earth. In this unique mini-book, Greg Peterson shares how his yard went from grass and hedges to his very own Urban Farm, full of vegetables and fruit trees with plenty to share. His motto: "Food grows abundantly - let's grow it and give it away!" This insightful book about how Greg's Urban Farm came to be will inspire you to create your own urban farm.



Greg Peterson's passion is to inspire you into your own level of greenness. He does this by living his version of a green lifestyle, then sharing how easy it is. Learn about his experiences and experiments at UrbanFarm.org and YourGuideToGreen.com.



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