

Heirloom Seed, Heritage Breed, and Organic Feed: The Quest for a Simple Life in Portland, Oregon

Michelle Tynan
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What is Urban Homesteading?

Urban homesteading refers to actions that attempt to increase self-sufficiency through re-skilling and DIY culture, as well as urban farming.

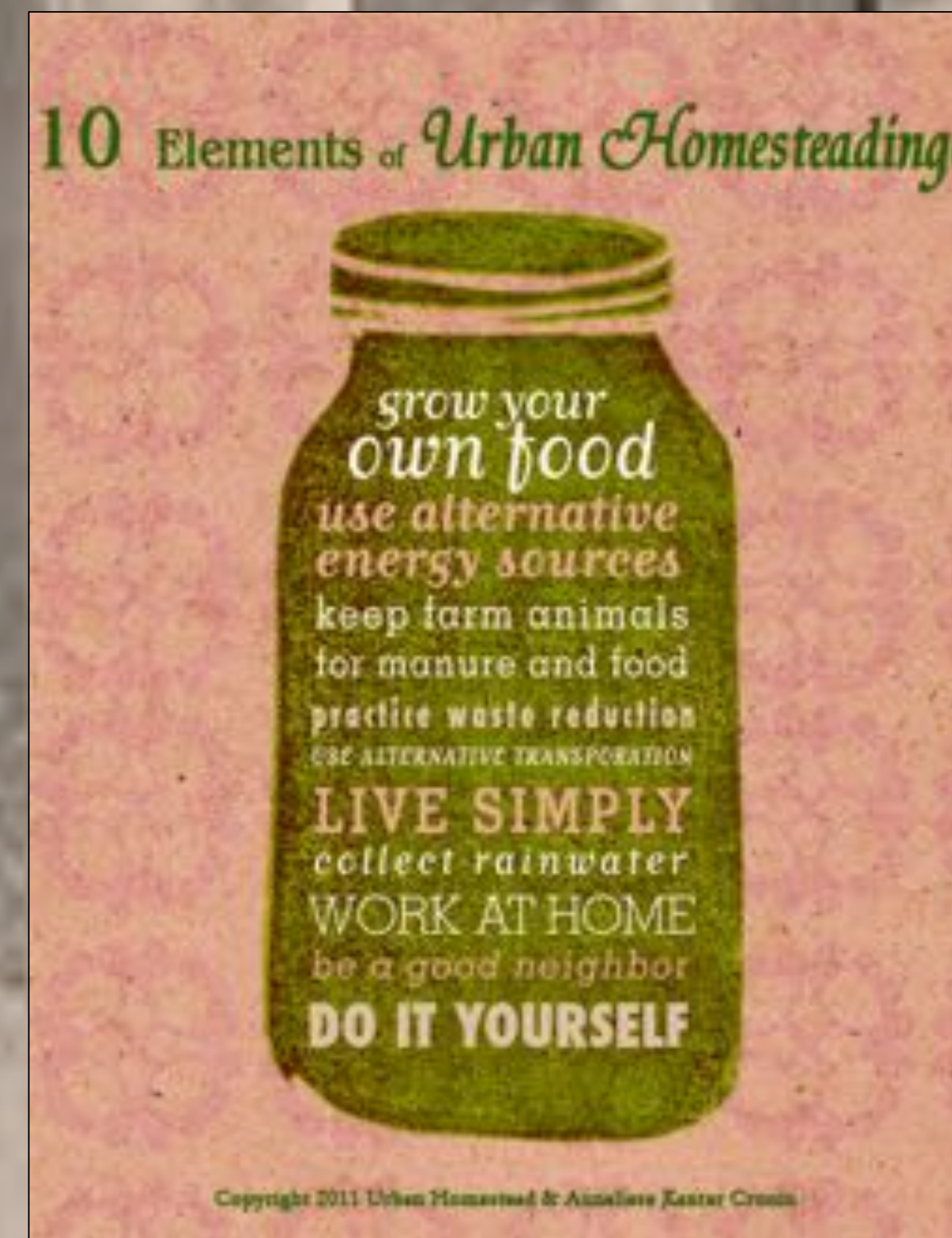
Activities associated with urban homesteading:

- Chicken keeping for eggs and fertilizer
- Goats for milk and mowing
- Preserving food via fermenting, canning, and pickling
- Permaculture, focus on edible crops
- Making everyday supplies at home, like soap, candles, detergent
- Focus is on old-fashioned products, like heirloom vegetables and poultry breeds



An exploration of practices and motives of urban homesteaders in Portland, contextualized historically in American land-based simplicity movements.

“I believe that self-sufficiency is unrealistic. It’s better to build communities in which people trade, help each other out, and share tools. This is more convenient for everybody.” -Kristl Bridges, Portland Homestead Supply Co.



“It has often struck me that homesteaders tend to produce as many texts as they do vegetables”
- Rebecca Neale Gould, *At Home in Nature*

Commodity Fetishism and Authenticity

-Trademark of term “Urban Homesteading” causes controversy on blogosphere.

-Williams Sonoma: Agrarian line is blatantly co-opting homesteading lifestyle, selling \$1,000 chicken coops, \$300 hand-forged copper garden tools, and \$70 watering cans.

-Irony of mass produced objects that look hand-made, what is authentic? This commodification loses the essence of smaller efforts to re-skill and create localized markets in Portland.

-“The concept of making and struggling over meanings is not primarily based on an understanding of the commodity form. It assumes the commodity as an unavoidable fact of mass culture, but it does not question the consequences of fetishism on the meanings made” (Willis 1991:13).



Roots of Urban Homesteading

-Pioneer life and rural homesteading:

- The Homestead Act of 1867 and manifest destiny
- about 10% of the area of the United States was settled under this act
- Remained in effect until 1976 (1986 in Alaska)

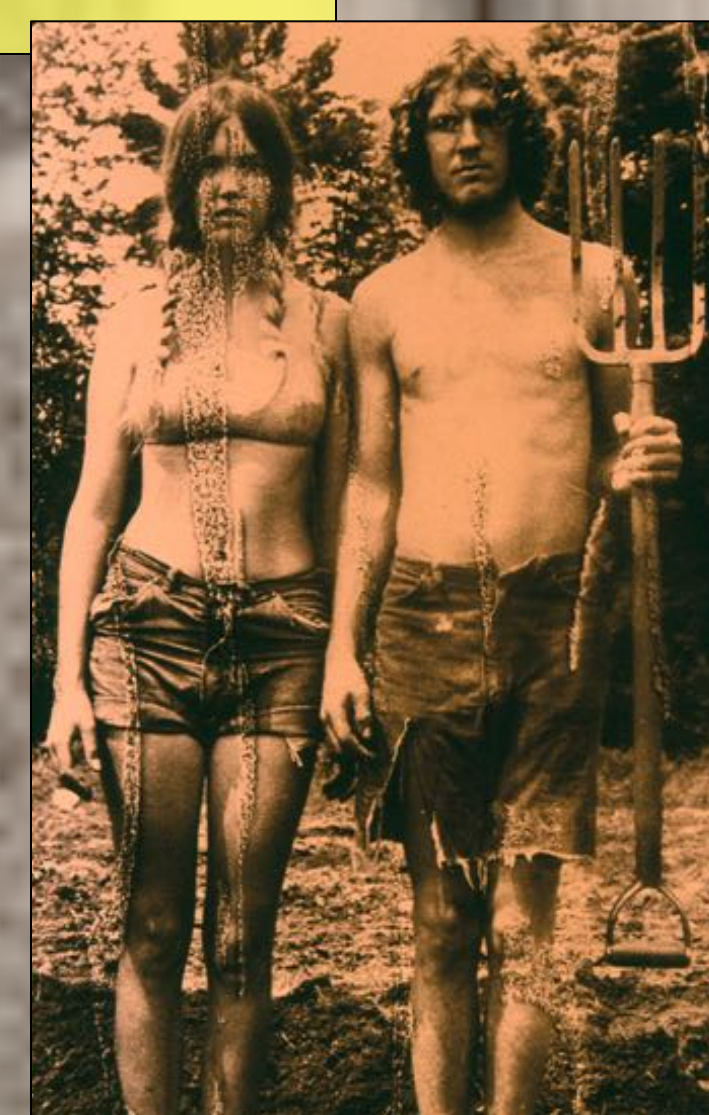
-**Voluntary Simplicity** encourages living with less, but who has the privilege to make that decision?

“Voluntary simplicity is thus a choice a successful corporate lawyer, not a homeless person, faces” (Huneke 2005:530).

-**The Back to the Land** Movement of 1970’s: Young urban dwellers adopted a genteel poverty and aimed for *complete* self-sufficiency. “Many of us had clearly romanticized the idea of low-income living because of our lack of exposure to it” (Agnew 2004:117).

-History of intentional communities as well as a legacy of **eco-spirituality** in Oregon (Kopp, 2009) (Todd, 2008).

“The same features of the land and the environment that drew early pioneers and homesteaders also were factors for those seeking to create their own Eden within the broader Eden of the natural beauty and regeneration quality that Oregon provided” (Kopp 2009:5).



Homesteading in Portland

Methods

- Interviews with homesteaders, both in person and online
- Analyzed self-help books, blogs, websites, and forums
- Data gathered in homesteading stores about products

Stores

- Portland Homestead Supply Co. in Sellwood: Focuses more on processing of food, and everyday house supplies. Classes are popular.
- The Urban Farm Store on SE Belmont: Sells chickens, feed, gardening supplies. Store owners co-authored *A Chicken in Every Yard* (Litt and Litt, 2011), a guide to urban chicken keeping.
- Naomi’s Organics in SE Portland: Specializes in soil amendments, feed, and plants. Supplies backyard gardeners as well as larger farms in Oregon.
- Pistil’s Nursery in NE Portland: Plant nursery and backyard chicken experts. “Portland has become a hotbed for urban chicken farmers, as more and more people realize the inherent value of city chicken keeping” (pistilsnursery.com).

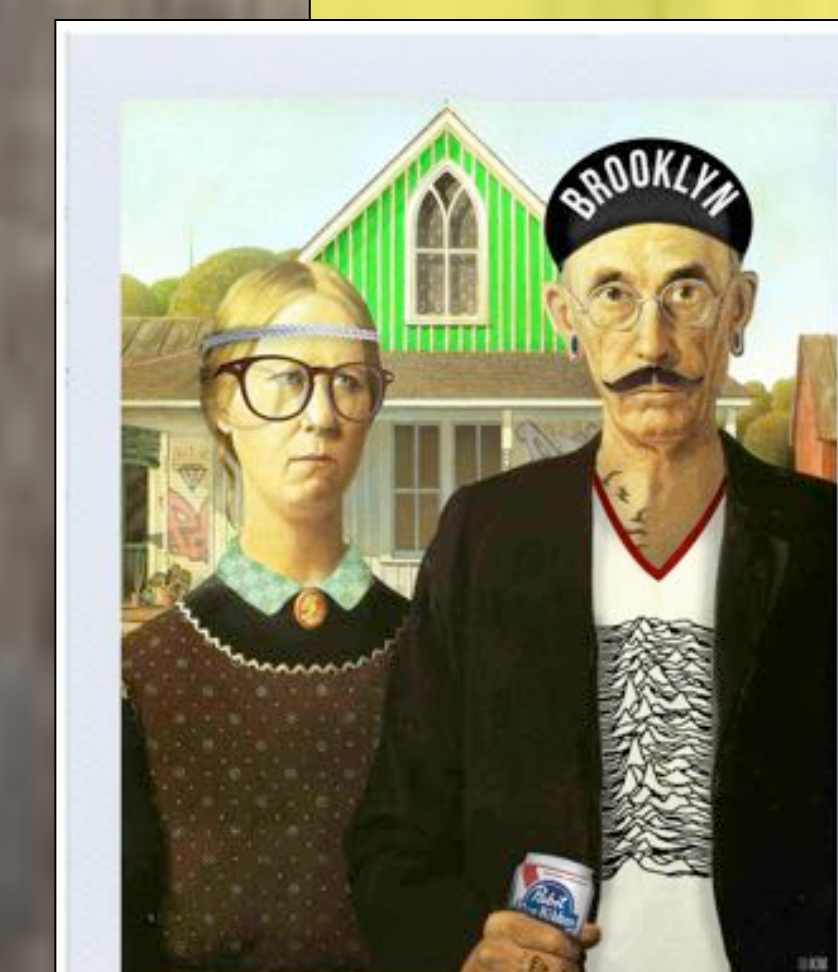
Groups:

- Portland Homesteaders Guild: A group that meets primarily to share skills. Groups is organized via Facebook and other websites.
- A young farmers group meets at Holocene, a bar and music venue, once a month to socialize and network.

Agnew, Eleanor. 2004. *Back from the land: how young Americans went to nature in the 1970s, and why they came back*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
Elgin, Duane. 2010. *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. HarperCollins, January 5.
Gould, Rebecca Kneale. 2005. *At home in nature: modern homesteading and spiritual practice in America*. University of California Press, October 24.
Huneke, Mary E. 2005. “The face of the un-consumer: An empirical examination of the practice of voluntary simplicity in the United States.” *Psychology and Marketing* 22 (7) (July 1): 527-550. doi:10.1002/mar.20072.
Kopp, James J. 2009. *Eden Within Eden: Oregon’s Utopian Heritage*. First Edition. Oregon State University Press, May 1.
Litt, Robert, and Hannah Litt. 2011. *A Chicken in Every Yard: The Urban Farm Store’s Guide to Chicken Keeping*. 1st ed. Ten Speed Press, March 22.
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Willis, Susan. 1991. “Unwrapping Use Value.” *A Primer for Daily Life*. London: Routledge Press. 1-12.

Findings

- Dialectic relationship between practicality and spirituality. Lifestyle’s rituals, symbols, and search for community is not void of religious elements. ex: Forums
- Viable as community organizer (forums, blogs, networking, classes at homesteading stores) but may be short term.
- Concerns of social and environmental justice were not addressed. Diversity was not a concern of homesteaders so much as individual and neighborhood action to produce more and consume less.
- Urban homesteading in Portland may actually be addressing de-skilling concerns as well as loss of traditions through making food and craft.
- Homesteading has been co-opted by the main stream. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? On one hand increasing public awareness of small scale food production, but forgetting the core motives of homesteaders in favor of profit.



American Hipster by Kyle Mahan



Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian