

## HOMEGARDEN

## Modern Homesteading: Families Seek Simple Lifestyles

BY VIRGINIA A. SMITH

© 2010, The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — On this hot summer morning in suburban Collegeville, Pa., the Fraser children bounce out of bed and race downstairs. They're not running for the TV — they don't have one. Instead, 10-year-old twins Eliza and Carolina and their brother, Perry, 6, head for the barn, where the hens are cooing and a baby rooster practices his wake-up call. They're already old hands at egg-hunting.

"I found one!" Perry shrieks. In no time at all, he and his sisters collect five of these sublimely fresh eggs, soon to be scrambled into a delicious pile for breakfast.

Megan and Scott Fraser and their children live in an 18th-century house with a barn on two Pennsylvania acres, about halfway between the King of Prussia and Plymouth Meeting malls, in a keep-to-yourself neighborhood of long-time, working-class folks and newer residents.

The Frasers aren't pioneers or homesteaders, as those terms are commonly understood: They haven't abandoned city for country, or turned their backs on technology.

The family is fully wired, with iPhone, GPS, Kindle, and iPad, and the children trade chores for computer time. But in their own way, as generations before had, the Frasers have gone back to the land.

People all across the country are keeping bees and raising chickens, gardening and canning. Though statistics are hard to come by in this diffuse movement, there are indicators of the trend:

Up to 200,000 hobbyists keep bees in the United States, compared with 75,000 in the mid-1990s, according to Kim Flottum, editor of Bee Culture magazine. (There are an estimated 5,400 in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.)

"It's the greatest positive change I've seen since I started in this job two years ago," Flottum says.

About 100 new members a day sign up for [www.backyardchickens.com](http://www.backyardchickens.com), which has 55,000 total. The numbers started taking off two years ago.

"It's really a trend across all demographics," says founder Rob Ludlow.

And 43 million American households planted vegetable gardens in 2009, a jump of 19 percent over 2008, which was 10 percent higher than 2007, the National Gardening Association says.

The Frasers do it all. They grow organic vegetables and fruit. They raise bees, chickens, ducks, and pigs, for honey, eggs, and meat. They spin yarn from rabbit fur and put up enough tomato soup, applesauce, and berries to last the winter.

They aren't purists, to be sure. Though without a TV — whose sole purpose, Megan believes, is "to sell you stuff" — the family watches movies on a computer screen. Cars and air-conditioners put them squarely on the grid, and unlike diehard homesteaders, they don't home-school their children, who go to Penn View Christian School near Souderton, Pa.

Still, Megan, 37, and Scott, 42, who met at Eastern University in St. Davids and married in 1996, want to live a self-sufficient life, as best they can.

By midday, despite intense heat, Eliza and her parents don netted hats and beekeeping suits for a walk to their one-acre meadow, where Italian honeybees fill two hives. One is weakened by beetles that eat the honey and eggs.

"They spoil everything," Scott says. Such disasters, including a mysterious disorder that has wiped out 40 percent of bee colonies in the last decade, can discourage new beekeepers, says David Mendes, president of the American Beekeeping Federation, but interest keeps growing.

"It's people wanting more control over where their food comes from," he says, "and once you get started, it's addictive."

In the steamy meadow, Megan, Scott, and Eliza appear transfixed by their bees, made docile by smoke blown into the hives with a bellows. In their protective white suits, parents and child look like moon-walkers.

Truth is, they're pretty down to earth.

The earth is where the Frasers started their homesteading adventure. After the girls were born in 2000, they decided to grow their own food.

Megan's thoughts were informed by food activist Michael Pollan. Scott, chief technical officer for Portico Systems, a software company in Blue Bell, Pa., was a devotee of Wendell Berry, a passionate believer in small-scale farming, who once declared, "When going back makes sense, you are going ahead."

Together, the couple watched "Food, Inc.," the documentary about industrial agriculture, with a mixture of horror and resolve.

"I looked around and thought, 'We have two acres! I should be



Scott Fraser inspects beehives with his wife, Megan, right, and daughter, Eliza, on their family farm in Collegeville, Pennsylvania. The family grows and raises some of its foods.



Megan Fraser spins yard at the family farm in Collegeville, Pennsylvania.



Fresh berries are picked at the Fraser family farm in Collegeville, Pennsylvania.

doing something more," Megan recalls.

Four years ago, after consulting the Montgomery County, Pa., 4-H, poultry-raising neighbors, and newfound pals on homesteading Web sites, Megan decided on "pastured" or free-range chickens in the backyard. She ordered a dozen rare-breed egg-layers from the Murray McMurray Hatchery in Webster City, Iowa.

President Bud Wood says orders have soared in the last three years, to the point where his incubators are at capacity, and the waiting list can be six weeks long.

"We can't do any more chickens than we're doing," he says.

Wood notes that the typical order has gone from 100 in the 1940s to 40 in 2006 to 25, McMurray's minimum, today. "That tells me there are more and more of the backyard flocks," he says.

Like the Frasers'.

Some observers think people like the Frasers represent a fundamental societal change — one that doesn't require complete dependence on the land, but does reclaim domesticity as a valued career.

These folks are different from the dropout hippies. They're way different from the ultimate 20th-century homesteaders, the late Helen and Scott Nearing. These vegetarian pacifists ate their homegrown food raw, shunned electricity and indoor plumbing, and spent a half-century building a life of "monastic simplicity" on farms in Vermont and Maine.

Modern homesteaders aspire to a simple, low-impact lifestyle, and believe in frugality and hard work. But they aren't extreme. Just the opposite: They're mainstream.

Cheryl Long, editor of Mother Earth News, founded in 1970 during the counterculture's heyday, sees it this way:

"I think there's been a shift in focus for Americans today — away from their jobs and their toys, their consumer goods, and back to paying a little more attention to ... day-to-day living."

This shift may feel new, but is actually part of a "large and basic impulse to return to nature," says John Pettegrew, an associate history professor at Lehigh University who studies 20th-century American thought and culture.

Throughout our history, he says, "model communities," utopian experiments, and communes have been stoked by "isms," such as socialism, feminism, fundamentalism, environmentalism.

For all their differences, Pettegrew says, past and present adventurers share "a sense of mindfulness, as in, 'We're not going to just mindlessly follow social conventions. We're going to rethink these things.'"

Megan picked up her box of McMurray chicks, less than 72 hours old, from the Oley Valley Feed store in Berks County, Pa., and her experiment was literally off and running.

"I wanted chickens eating out in the grass and taking dust baths in the sunlight," she says. "If you're going to raise your own chickens, why do it like Perdue?"

Megan also bought some Indian runner ducks, a popular heritage breed, to control garden slugs and provide large, super-healthy eggs.

The ducks are long gone — too messy and hard to control — but the family has 37 egg-laying chickens and four guinea hens for tick control, and plans to get two dozen more meat birds this month. The Frasers are still working their way through the frozen legs, thighs, breasts, and soup bones from 23 chickens butchered more than a year ago.

They'd like more pigs, too, as soon as they finish off the bounty from two pigs slaughtered in November.

The 28-pound piglets arrived the previous May, all curiosity and wet noses. They ate store-bought pig food, supplemented by hickory nuts and walnuts the children gathered in the woods, and marshmallow treats.

"I know this sounds crazy," Megan says, "but pigs really live in the moment. They're very Zen."

They also grew very big — 270 and 290 pounds.

One rainy morning, while the children were at school, the butcher came to the house with a helper and quickly slit the hogs' throats. It was hard to watch, but Megan felt she had to.

"It's part of this process," she says.

A few weeks later, she picked up 200 pounds of carefully wrapped hams, chops, roasts, loins, sausage, bacon, bones, and ribs, filling three freezers.

From the beginning, the Frasers told the children the animals were being raised for food.

"I don't have a problem knowing my food," Megan says. "I think animals are there for that purpose."

Though her parents discouraged it, Eliza named the pigs Firefly and Daisy.

One day not long after Firefly and Daisy were butchered, Carolina — who, like her sister, had been thinking of becoming a vegetarian — asked what Mom was cooking.

"Bacon and sausage from our pigs," Megan explained.

"Ewww!" Carolina protested. "I felt really sad about the pigs," Eliza recalls earnestly, "but the bacon smelled really good."

So it went for Scott, whose coworkers asked how he could possibly kill those cute little pigs. One day he gave away samples of fresh bacon, and in the time it took to fry it up, the questions stopped.

"Never underestimate the power of bacon," he says. Or homesteading, as a kind of family glue.

The Frasers are all involved in growing a long list of vegetables and herbs in 10 raised beds, as

well as blueberries and apples. When it's time to put up the harvest, it's an hours-long, assembly-line affair.

In these ventures, too, the family is the face of a growing enterprise.

Chris Scherzinger, general manager of Jarden Home Brands, maker of Ball and Kerr home-canning supplies, reports a 60 percent increase in sales from 2007 to 2009, the biggest hike since the 1970s. "The economy is certainly a factor," he says, "but so is the growing interest in gardening and fresh food."

Meeting that demand, and citing "the uncertainty of life today," John D. Martin, horticulture professor at Delaware Valley College in Doylestown, Pa., will teach the school's first homesteading course this fall.

"What would happen if the power grid fails, or those trucks didn't come over from Mexico anymore?" asks Martin, who gardens extensively on two acres in Hilltown, Pa., and plans to raise chickens, rabbits, and pygmy goats.

"What if somebody turned off the food?"

Some might ask: Are all these homesteaders just passing through, like so many "isms" and flower children?

"We're reinventing ourselves all the time," says Novella Carpenter, author of Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer, a memoir about raising crops and animals in downtown Oakland, Calif.

"Too often, we get involved, then turn around and say, 'I'm tired of this. ... This isn't cool or special anymore,'" she says.

But there's a recession on, which Juliet B. Schor, sociology professor at Boston College, believes "will make self-sufficiency more economically sensible to more people."

"I don't think I'd go so far as to say ... that it's actually going to supplant the dominant culture," says Schor, author of Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth, "but I think it's an important movement ... we're going to see more of."

Already, there's an organic vegetable garden on the White House lawn. Rose Hayden-Smith, a historian from Ventura, Calif., believes this signifies the movement's arrival in the popular consciousness.

"People in national leadership are talking about these issues," says Smith, who specializes in U.S. farming and gardening history. "I think this is going to be a very enduring feature of American cultural life."

For the Frasers, it's not about saving money.

"It's about quality of food, quality of life," Scott says. "I'm psyched about this life. I just love being at home."

Megan, who has worked as a secretary, says her new role as full-time homemaker "feels very real ... in a way that work in an office can't compare to."

Homesteading is sometimes so real, and so involved, it's hard to get away. It's tough to find a house-sitter, and restaurant food can taste terrible.

But Megan and Scott are determined to get away to Prince Edward Island for two weeks with the children.

It takes a while, but they round up a house-sitter. They order lots of books to entertain the children — even 6-year-old Perry, who reads Harry Potter on his own.

Two days before departure, Eliza is eager for the books to arrive. "I'm a little sad about not having a TV. I'm the only one at school who doesn't watch it," she says, "but I'm happy because I can read books."

Suddenly, the doorbell rings. It's UPS, delivering a big box. Carolina, Eliza, and Perry rip it open, and books tumble out.

Almost in unison, the trio drop to the floor, grabbing two or three books each. In a matter of seconds, they're reading in happy silence.

## HELP FOR NEW HOMESTEADERS

## Homesteading and self-sufficiency:

[www.sufficientself.com/forum](http://www.sufficientself.com/forum)  
[www.homestead.org](http://www.homestead.org)  
<http://coldantlerfarm.blogspot.com>

## Backyard animals:

[www.chickenowners.com](http://www.chickenowners.com)  
[www.backyardchickens.com](http://www.backyardchickens.com)  
[www.chickenwhisperer.com](http://www.chickenwhisperer.com)  
[www.backyardherds.com/forum](http://www.backyardherds.com/forum)

## Beekeeping:

[www.abnet.org/](http://www.abnet.org/)  
[www.beekeeping.com/](http://www.beekeeping.com/)  
[www.pastatebeekeeper.org/](http://www.pastatebeekeeper.org/)  
<http://www.njbeekeeper.org/>

## Gardening:

[www.organicgardening.com](http://www.organicgardening.com)  
[www.gardenweb.com](http://www.gardenweb.com)  
<http://extension.psu.edu>  
<http://njaes.rutgers.edu/extension>

**Steamway**  
CLEANING & RESTORATION



Bruce Tirrel  
Certified Master Restorer and Textile Cleaner

**"THE AREA'S LARGEST CLEANING & RESTORATION COMPANY"**

- Carpets
- Upholstery
- Duct Cleaning
- Water Restoration

- Fire Restoration
- Mold Testing & Remediation
- Tile & Grout Cleaning

**WATER • SMOKE • FIRE**  
FREE ESTIMATES  
(ask for details)

**24hr**  
Emergency  
TEAM!

**IICRC**  
CERTIFIED  
FIRM

**Satisfaction**  
Guaranteed

Mitchell 996-6921	Yankton 665-5700	Chamberlain 734-0733
Vermillion 624-4666	Huron 352-5252	Sioux Falls 334-1991

**Toll Free 1-800-529-2450**  
[www.steamwaycleaning.com](http://www.steamwaycleaning.com)



**Karastan**  
STAINMASTER  
CARPET

*Always stylish. Always beautiful.™*

**\$500** Cash Back on Stainmaster®  
up to \$500 Carpet by Karastan

Purchase any Stainmaster Carpet by Karastan and receive \$3 off per square yard or \$3.33 per square foot. Receive up to \$500 per household. See store for complete details.

**hatch**  
FURNITURE & FLOORING

109 East Third, Yankton, SD  
605-665-4416 • 800-798-4663  
MF 10-6, Sat. 10-5  
Closed Sundays, Evenings by appt.

*"Your Home's Best Friend"*