

Hobby Homesteaders: Get closer to the land with a backyard farm

by Lauren Parker | 9/28/2019

Not all North Forkers are content just to hit up the amazing farm-to-table restaurants and farm stands that dot the area. Many want to get back to basics and do (some of) the farming themselves. Personal micro-farms — aka homesteads — are serving up freshly laid eggs from the chicken coop, honey from the hive, veggies from the ground, jam from the orchard or berry patch, even wine from the grapevines.

Wikipedia defines homesteading as a “lifestyle of self-sufficiency, characterized by subsistence agriculture, home preservation of foodstuffs and craftwork for household use or sale,” but there’s no need to take that literally. You can have a fulfilling homestead without acres of farmland or going off the grid.



Barbara and Dean Di Maggio's home garden. (Credit: David Benthall)

Families cite homesteading as a bonding experience, and despite the learning curve and some hard work, every harvest comes with serious bragging rights. “People who come out here seeking homes are definitely talking about it,” said Century 21 Albertson Realty’s Jerry Cibulski, who grew up on the North Fork as a “farmer’s kid” and loves to encourage home growing. “Do you want to go to the farm stands or do you want to grow some of the items yourself?”



Designer Connie Cross with the chickens on her property. (Credit: David Benthall)

So where to begin?

While yelling “Alexa! How do I raise backyard chickens?” will definitely yield an informative response (try it), DIY homesteaders are better off heading directly to the source for local farm knowledge — or even embarking on an apprenticeship.

“We get calls every week from people who want to start a flock,” said poultry farmer Holly Browder of Browder’s Birds, who has given lectures on chicken farming at various North Fork libraries.

Browder’s Birds doesn’t sell its chickens, but Long Island Poultry in Calverton does — and current or would-be chicken farmers can select from newborn chicks to pullets (hens closer to laying age). Chickens only lay for a few years, so even established chicken

homesteads must constantly replenish. “We sell about 4,000 to 5,000 baby chicks a year, including to those who visit the farm and then buy on impulse either as pets or for eggs,” said founder Wayne Meyer. Long Island Poultry raises and sells 30 to 40 different breeds of chickens and 10 to 12 breeds of duck.

You might want to skip the roosters, however. The hens don't need them to lay eggs, and they'll wake you and your neighbors up each day at the crack of dawn. Case in point: Browder's Birds named its rooster Reveille.



The Di Maggios' apple orchard. (Credit: David Benthall)

Acclaimed garden designer Conni Cross has been raising chickens on her beautifully landscaped property for 50 years, and now has a couple of hundred chickens as well as peacocks, finches, doves, bunnies and a goat. With so many chickens laying eggs almost every day, she tried an honor system farm stand but got frustrated when people took eggs without paying. Now she gives eggs to friends or sells them to a local farm. Mostly she just enjoys having the chickens around.

"We used to have a pet shop back in Brooklyn, so these are all pets," she said. The animals add personality to the extensive landscaping, which is frequently featured on garden tours.

Part-time residents Dean and Barbara Di Maggio, however, "drew the line at chickens," opting instead for a fruit and vegetable homestead in Southold. The couple, who split their time between the North Fork and Roslyn, purchased 2.5 acres of the former Stepnowski farm 21 years ago and now have a 600-square-foot berry patch, eight raised vegetable beds, plus a 1,000-square-foot orchard with three peach, three pear and three apple trees.

"I received my certificate degree in landscape design from the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, which included advance knowledge of plants, planting, soil, amendments, et cetera, then simply transferred that information to edible farming," said Dean Di Maggio. "I also received help from friends, neighbors and local farmers when visiting their roadside stands. I've also collected a library of reference books on gardening and food planting that were helpful."

Since their homestead produces more than the Di Maggios can ever eat, they share most of the food with friends and recently donated more than 100 pounds of fruit to Community Action Southold Town for locals in need. "When the kids were little, we tried a little herb farm stand in our driveway, but there was just too much competition from the professional farm stands," said Di Maggio. "Now we just give away or trade what we can't eat ourselves."

Sharna and John Nicholson, who moved from Rochester to Mattituck seven years ago, opted to try their hand at a hobby vineyard. "The one-acre property we bought was a former Catapano goat farm, and the next owners had a small vineyard. We love projects and they said it had 'magic dirt' so we were up for it, especially coming from upstate wine country," said Sharna, a retired educator, who, along with her husband, is a student in the Cornell Master Gardener Program. "When we first moved in, we watched lots of YouTube videos, and Steve Mudd from Mudds Vineyard mentored my husband ... showing him what to read and where to send the soil to test it. Everyone was really helpful and supportive. Joe Macari [of Macari Vineyards] sent his vineyard manager over to show us how to prune."



Conni Cross's landscaped backyard. (Credit: David Benthall)

The Nicholsons have 99 grapevines, so they created a 99 Vines Kitchen logo that they affix to wine bottles, jellies and jams. "Everyone always asks us to bring over wine, and sometimes I do a little pop-up in the barn selling my items," said Sharna. "But we don't want to have a business, we're retired!"

While the aforementioned are great examples of hobby homesteads, Shared Table Farmhouse in Southold truly embodies the self-sufficient homestead definition.

Owned and run by Sarah and Anthony Nappa (who also produces Anthony Nappa Wines at Raphael Vineyard), the three-acre homestead's goats, chickens, bees, fruit trees/bushes and numerous vegetable beds provide sustenance for the family of four. The couple's sons, ages 3 and 6, are growing up with less consumerism, more "Little House on the Prairie."

"The idea is to eat mainly what we produce and go to the supermarket as little as possible," said Sarah, who holds a Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences degree in animal and equine science from Colorado State University. "We make goat cheese, jam and bread from scratch, sweeten food with our bees' honey instead of sugar, and trade with other farmers for meat. We try to eat 100% locally grown North Fork food."

Shared Table Farmhouse food is also served to Anthony Nappa Wine Club members, who gather for gourmet club dinners at Bruce & Sons. Sarah, a former chef, cooks the club dinners herself. "Giving our members, many of whom live in the city, our farm-to-table food experience is part of our homesteading," she said

Back on the farm, the Nappas rotate the crops for variety and soil replenishment, freezing, canning and pickling produce to get through the winter. "We were harvesting 25 pounds of strawberries every two days, so we made lots of jam," she said. "I'll also blanch kale and vacuum seal it for the winter. We have successive plantings, meaning things grow and ripen through the seasons. This not only prolongs the bounty but helps us manage the harvesting and winter prep."



The animals at Shared Table Farmhouse. (Credit: David Benthall)

Leftover foodstuffs are either fed to the chickens or composted and recycled into fertilizer. "We practice permaculture, which is more harmonious with nature. We also practice 'regenerative agriculture', which improves the soil and the health of the land. It's a circular system. Everyone talks about being sustainable, but what are we trying to sustain? The current system is broken," she said. "Regenerative agriculture is the future."

The rewards of homestead farming are great, but those who go into it should do so with their eyes wide open. It can be hard, dirty and smelly work, especially when livestock are involved, and there are pests and predators to contend with. Yes, chickens eat ticks, but hawks, foxes and raccoons eat chickens.

"We fence in our garden but the varmints find ways to get in," Di Maggio said. "Sometimes we joke that we're doing all this work to feed the local wildlife!"

One way to tiptoe into farming without the homestead commitment is to secure a plot at a community garden, where you'll make like-minded friends who can also pitch in when necessary. There's even a way to rent chickens for the season, coop included, from Sister Reds Farm in Wading River.

"I think many people romanticize the farming life, especially first-time homeowners from the city who always dreamed of a piece of land to call their own," said Nicholas Planamento of Town and Country Real Estate. "It looks great on Instagram but it's hard work, plus you need someone to take care of things when you travel or head back to your primary residence during the week."