

Fall's the time for old-fashioned home economics

One of my neighbors commented this month that this might be his last year gathering and splitting his own firewood — it's just getting too grueling to lift his arms above his shoulders and bring them slamming down over and over.

I told him the annual cycle of sawing, transporting, splitting, stacking and burning firewood was as close as my dad came to having a favorite sport. (Although now I stop to think about it, prospecting for minerals in the vain hope of striking it rich might have narrowly edged out firewood for the top spot.)

Firewood is such an intrinsic part of rural and small-town life it doesn't occur to most of us that it could be any other way. How odd it must seem to someone who comes here from a city or different climate to learn of weekends devoted to harvesting wood in the surrounding hills. I

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suppose they must be reminded of English peasants sneaking into Sherwood Forest to steal fallen oak branches from the king.

But for many modern rural-dwelling Americans, including lots around here, gathering activities are a fundamental part of our lifestyle and economy. Creating your own heating fuel, while getting fresh air and exercise, is enormously gratifying. As a young man I took joy in splitting a knotty piece of pine with a single blow, or

in artfully building a woodpile. And I know for my parents and grandparents, this help was a welcome little aid in making ends meet.

We're at the time of year when gathering and harvesting reaches its traditional crescendo. In home vegetable gardens the weeds have won at last, but farmers like those we feature on this month's cover are busy raking in as much money as possible in the remaining warm and partly sunny days on the coast. Home canners are stocking pantry shelves with produce to be enjoyed in the dark, wet months ahead.

The "hunter" part of the ancient "hunting-gathering" lifestyle also is kicking into life, with fishermen stocking freezers with salmon and tuna, hunters soon going into the woods in pursuit of deer and elk, and families happily anticipating

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an abundant razor clam season. (We will have to keep our fingers crossed that warm ocean waters don't generate a bloom of domoic acid-producing algae to ruin clam digs.) In my experience, this summer's wild berry crop was disappointing — too often exposed to just enough drizzle to spoil them — but fall's proliferation of mushrooms is just about to begin, at least for those who know safe identification techniques.

It is, in some ways, a stretch to call these activities "business," but for most human existence these were the economy. It's no accident that they are now grouped under the umbrella term "home economics." These ways in which we individually act to warm and feed ourselves contribute to self-sufficiency and save money to put toward other needs. We all should seek out and be proud of the ways we fend for ourselves.

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