

Housing

City homesteaders seek healthier lifestyle

By Maria Longley
The News Leader

STAUNTON, Va. (AP) — When Michael Reeps and his wife, Heather Smith-Reeps, broke ground on a garden at the Staunton home they moved into five years ago, their intentions were simple enough they wanted to enjoy some fresh salad greens in the summer.

To save money and to be more eco-friendly, they added barrels to collect rainwater and active composting. They built a cold frame, which allows plants to grow in cold weather without artificial heat. They doubled the size of their original 10-foot-by-20-foot garden and planted some berry bushes and fruit trees. They bought a dehydrator and make their own jellies and jams. They even make their own yogurt.

Reeps and his family are crossing into urban homesteading, a lifestyle rooted in the idea that it's healthier for people and the planet to produce your own food.

"I would say we are straddling the two," said Reeps, a website designer who works from home. "We're still in the hobby category, but we would love to cross that divide where we could say X-percent of our seasonal produce we grew ourselves."

It's not just edible landscaping. Some homesteaders also raise small animals such

as chickens, rabbits, goats and bees. They preserve foods by canning, freezing, drying and fermenting. Eco-conscious homesteaders also might install solar panels, use grey water and engage in re-using and repairing wherever they can, and make their own clothes or household products.

The movement is growing in popularity around the country. In Staunton, parks and recreation will offer an entire urban homesteading section of classes called Urban and Rural Survival. They will include urban vegetable gardening; milk, chickens, cooking, preservation and canning; homestead livestock; water resources; and a ham radio tech class.

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Holly Parker is about as self-sufficient as a homesteader can get. The 50-year-old, part-time nurse recently planted a variety of

trees on a section of her 20-acre property in Augusta County, just north of Staunton. The grove, paid for with a conservation grant, is also intended for soil rehabilitation and habitat for wildlife.

In addition to her substantial garden, Parker keeps chickens and a hog. Her home

is solar-powered, and she heats it by burning wood.

Parker works the land to be a good steward of the environment and to not have to rely on corporations to put food on her table.

She is also a lifelong gardener and outdoor enthusiast.

"I love my job, but I don't want to do it 40 hours a week," she said. "That's why I do this.

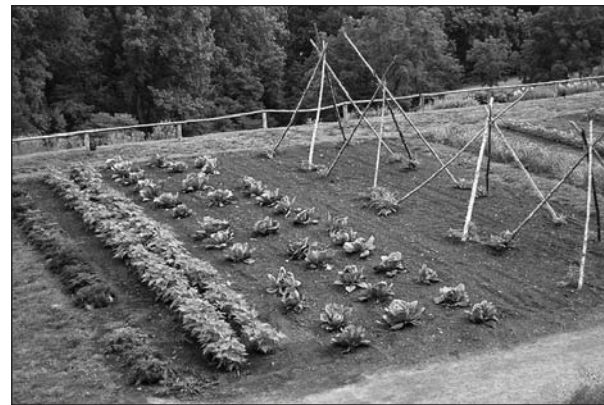
The operating theory is if you don't spend it at the store, then you don't have to make it (money)."

Not all homesteaders are environmentalists like Reeps and Parker, but many eventually end up on the more natural, organic side of food growing, says Jennifer Grassler, 41. A classically trained pastry chef, Grassler spends most of her time homesteading with her sister and mom on their Bedford farm, as well as teaching classes on a variety of skills.

"The reasons people do it are two-fold. On one side, you have the pragmatic. If I keep my own hens, I have fresh-tasting eggs and I know how my chickens are taken care of," she said.

"But then there is this emotional, empowering feeling you get as you progress. You're not reliant on outside sources for the things you need. You start feeling connected to nature, and you find your place in all of it."

Grassler, who will teach several introductory classes for Staunton, said it's easy to start if you pick something you're curious



cutline

about.

"You don't have to go 100 percent," she said. "You can start small, maybe plant some beans and tomatoes with your kids. Or maybe you can make your own bread."

Homesteaders here say a community of like-minded people already exists in the Central Valley; many barter with each other or just share.

Some homesteaders see their acquiring of old skills as preparation for an inevitable environmental apocalypse.

"There certainly are doomers. I'm somewhere in the middle," Reeps said. "I think there is something useful about re-acquiring these older skills that have been replaced by industrial mass-produced solutions."

Reeps said he doesn't have enough room on his property to add animals - he did check and learned that Staunton allows three chickens per property. But he and his wife do plan to start canning tomatoes.

Their intensive gardening is teaching their 6-year-old daughter, Ella, some important lessons about food - and not just the nutrition aspect, he said.

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