Urban homesteading

Why you can DIY and why you would want to

By VANESSA SALVIA
BOOMER & SENIOR NEWS

When husband and wife Kevin Prier and Christina Steffy treated themselves to a dinner of chestnut soup and duck confit at an expensive restaurant in Portland, the food was so good they wanted to be able to make it at home for themselves.

Once they got back to their home in the River Road area of Eugene, Steffy began planning to acquire a couple of ducks so they could raise them, butcher them and turn them into confit (which involves cooking the bird in its own fat until it gets meltingly tender). She also has a neighbor down the street with a chestnut tree that lets her collect chestnuts in the fall.

"I was all set to do this," says Steffy, "and I was telling my friend about how excited I was to have duck confit again." The friend, perhaps a bit perplexed, said, "Huh, most people would just go to the store to buy a duck."

Going to the store to buy something is not the default option for Steffy and Prier. The couple and their two children are "urban homesteaders," and they teach classes to

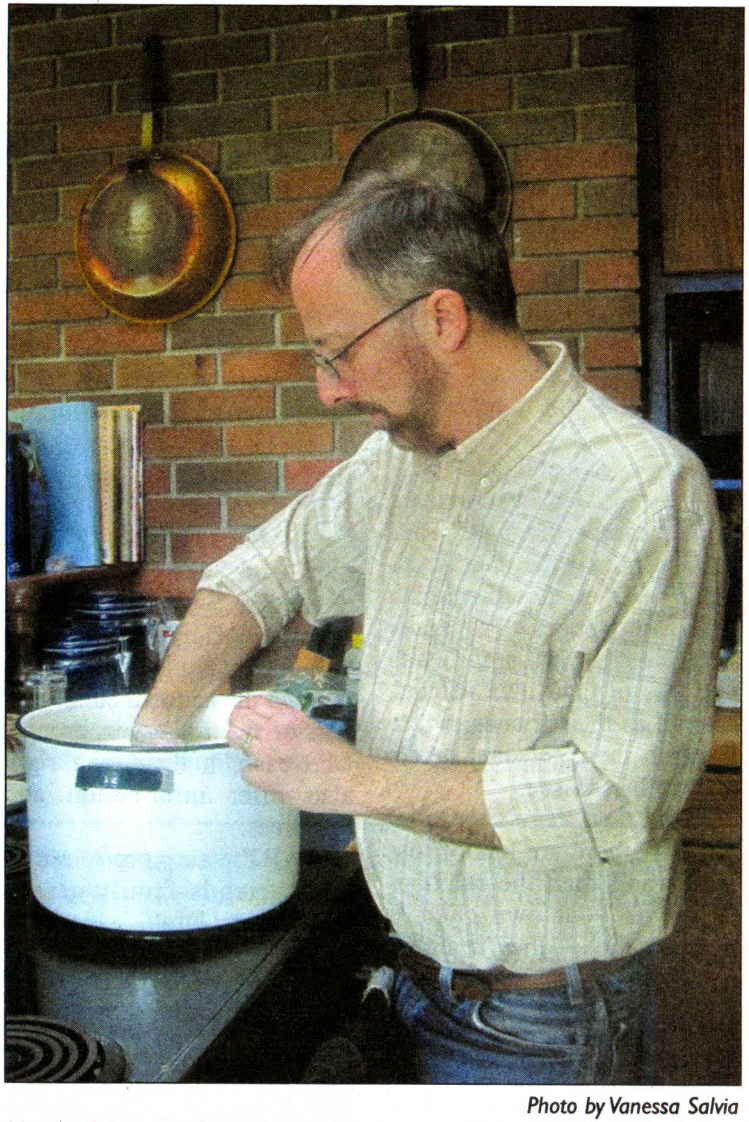

Photo by Vanessa Salvia

Kevin Prier teaches classes in cheesemaking and regularly makes cheese at home. Here, he has heated the milk, added the rennet, and is using his hands to gently stir the curds.

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help others be urban homesteaders too. It's more rewarding, they say, as well as affordable, to do or make things yourself. And in the case of the duck confit, more flavorful as well.

"There's this idea that if you're going to eat local and eat seasonally it's expensive," she says. "We eat well and it's not expensive. You just have to be prepared to spend the extra time in the kitchen."

Steffy grew up Mennonite, so perhaps thrift is in her DNA, but she recalls a moment during college when she was trying to live on $500 a month when the "do-it-yourself" philosophy not only made sense but was a necessity. "In my 20s in grad school I was dirt poor," Steffy says. "I wanted to eat better than I could afford to eat. Good bread is expensive but flour is cheap."

Steffy spent a lot of time as a child with her mother, cooking, canning and freezing food. Then, something shifted in her mother. That life began to feel too stifling, and the family began eating from boxes and cans. Steffy understands that perhaps an uncomfortable twinge of oppressive patriarchy kept her mother from continuing the do-it-yourself lifestyle, but for her

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DIY

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and her husband, it's just not the same.

Steffy and Prier spend hours shopping for farmers market deals, caring for their chickens and ducks, tending their bees and homeschooling their children, Jocelyn, 11, and Isaac, 14. "It doesn't feel disempowering," Steffy says, "because we work on everything together."

Prier grew up preserving the bounty of chickens, rabbits and a one-third-acre garden. He's a neuroscientist by training, studying in Switzerland at one point, where he discovered the traditional German shredding cabbage — it's green and sharply pointed, like a gnome's cap — that is used to make sauerkraut. Studying insects led to a love of bees, and he now has three hives in his backyard that net three to 10 gallons of honey per year. A friend who worked at a local goat dairy helped to supply him with fresh milk for cheese making. After studying in Switzerland in 1996, Prier moved to an apartment that happened to be right next door to Steffy, and that's how they met and began formulating their do-it-yourself lifestyle. After moving into their River Road home 11 years ago, the couple added cherry trees, a nectarine tree and an apple tree grafted with several different varieties to the apple, pear and plum trees that were already established on the

doing it they just don't remember how."

And according to Steffy, the other half of their students are those that never learned how to do this type of thing and want to learn. "They are 20- or 30-somethings who may have just had children

> *"Most of the students are in their late 50s or early 60s. They used to do this kind of thing as kids with their parents ... They remember doing it they just don't remember how."*
>
> **~ Kevin Prier,**
> *talking about urban homesteading classes*

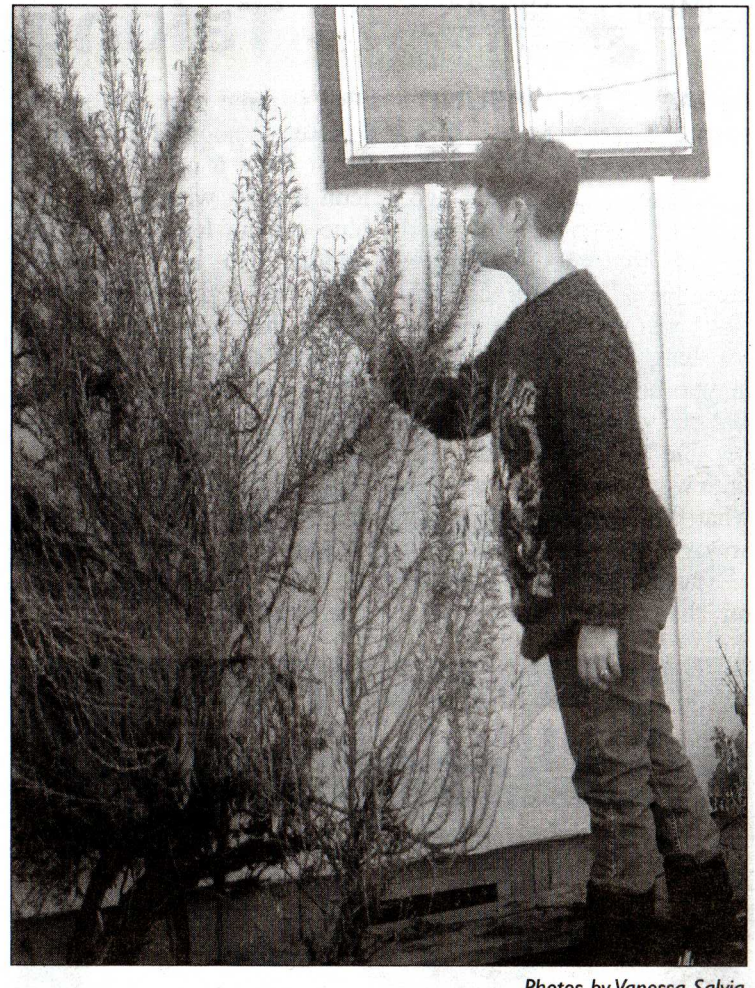
and want to feed them well, or they have some small experience with preserving. They want someone to show them how it's done."

Making and canning salsa is a family project. "Most of the stuff we make is good," says Isaac gently. "Kimchi is horrible!" calls out Jocelyn from the other room, making

you won't be able to go back to store-bought." Jocelyn says the store-bought applesauce is "really bland" compared to their homemade version. "And, I feel like I can taste all the pesticides they put on the apples," Jocelyn says.

Chickens that Steffy and Prior butcher and freeze last all year. "It's way better than what we can buy," says Prier, "and we know it's been treated well." The family has friends who are fishers, so they trade chickens for freshly-caught tuna which ends up frozen and smoked, a delicious treat the whole family likes. The family has a small smoker, but when they have a large quantity of meat to smoke, they borrow a larger one. They also get a lamb from farmer friends.

Preserving to the extent that Prier and Steffy do may not be practical for urban apartment dwellers. Still, there are ways to increase your self-sufficiency. When it's canning season, borrow a canner rather than buy one. Freezing produce can keep you well-stocked and doesn't take up storage space. To save money, Steffy buys produce directly from the farm rather than from markets, because then the farmer doesn't have to charge more to pay for the person staffing the booth. End-of-season sales are a great way to affordably stock up. "The space issue can be a problem," says Kevin, "but canned stuff you can tuck away anywhere."



Photos by Vanessa Salvia

Christina Steffy investigates her large rosemary, which was damaged in the spate of hard freezes that our area experienced over the winter.

Steffy and Prier have two important pieces of advice for people wanting to get started with urban homesteading. "Start small," says Steffy. "And don't look at what we do and say, 'I'm going to do that." Do a dozen jars of something and when that's gone, if you like it, make more. We didn't start out at this level."

The couple also advises people to look at something that they spend a lot of money on or are most unhappy with and turn that into a project. For instance, soap. Prier says he spends about $15 on ingredients to make enough soap—40 bars — to last a whole year. "And it's really good soap!" he says.

Steffy and Prier's class offerings for adults and kids are on their website, subur-

already established on the property.

The couple eventually realized that there was a need and a desire in the community for urban homesteading skills.

Steffy works from home as a writer and editor. After Prier lost his job at a research group in Eugene last year, friends urged him to develop a plan to teach classes. The pair taught some classes on their own, spreading the word through Facebook and fliers. Then, River Road and Willamalane parks and recreation districts agreed to host their classes. Now they teach eight classes, including sourdough baking; cheesemaking and other fermented dairy products such as yogurt; sauerkraut, kimchi and kombucha making; soapmaking; garden planning and winter gardening; seed saving; edible landscapes and weed foraging; and preserving basics. They've also taught chicken butchering classes.

"Everyone that comes to the classes really loves it," says Prier. Classes are capped at 16 students, so there's plenty of time to talk and ask questions. "The classes are pretty conversational. Most of the students are in their late 50s or early 60s," he says. "They used to do this kind of thing as kids with their parents, then the food industry started packaging everything. They remember

sure she gets heard. Isaac particularly likes pickles and often helps with the canning of peaches and pears, which the whole family enjoys, as well as homemade applesauce.

"The peaches and pears that we make, they're riper," explains Isaac, "which means they're softer and more flavorful and less cloyingly sweet." Though the kids participate, they prefer the eating to the making, jokes Steffy. Especially the homemade applesauce.

"Sauce is a one-way street," she says, laughing. "Once you make your own

banhomecraft.com, or at the website of the River Road Park and Recreation District at rrpark.org. The couple is also available to teach private classes to groups. ■

Christina displays a bar of soap made by her husband Kevin Prier. She's wearing a sweater she knit herself — it depicts a tardis or time-traveling spaceship that looks like a police box — from the popular television show "Doctor Who."