

AGING GRACEFULLY on the Homestead

Our readers have worked hard to build homesteads, so why retire to the city? Here are some ways they've been able to stay on the farm.

From stiff joints and mild inflammation to full-blown debilitation, life can take its toll. In my case, I'm reminded every morning as I hobble out of bed of the brake drum that fell on my ankle, while still attached to the vehicle it belonged to, roughly more than 40 years ago. In my 60 years, I've found some smart—and some less-smart—ways to keep on keeping on, but one thing's for sure; I look for ways to work smarter so I can still do what needs to be done. Several issues ago, we heard from folks looking for tips on how to keep on keeping on, even with a serious hitch in our get-along, and we've compiled many of the fantastic tips you-all submitted, right here!

—Hank Will, Editor-in-Chief

Ways to Cope

Homesteading presents more challenges each year. Here are some ways I cope:

Gardening. Because I have trouble bending to harvest, I use “salad bars.” Yes, they're small, but they provide plenty of greens for two or three people. (I use three: two shallow “bars” and one that is 15 inches deep. While mine are purchased



Using small wagons and carts to move heavy items around the property helps readers spare their joints and backs.

from www.Gardeners.com (pictured at right) and Costco, they could easily be constructed from scrap lumber.

I use raised beds for most vegetables so I don't have to till. I weed only at the beginning of the season and apply some compost. I've tracked my garden produce for three years, and the yields haven't decreased enough to warrant constant weeding. (I'd like to see actual statistics on the value of a weed-free garden. I mean, I know mine is *ugly*, but the food seems just as good.)

Deep digging is a challenge, even in my raised beds. For the past two years, I've been using grow bags for potatoes. While I can't raise a huge crop this way, I get some delicious potatoes with no pain at harvest time. (With a heavy-duty sewing machine, you can make your own grow bags from water-permeable weed barrier fabric.)

Food preservation. Lifting heavy objects is getting more difficult, so I use a child's little red wagon to bring in bushels of produce. After the produce is inside the house,



I transfer it to a 3-shelved wire utility cart and roll that over to the sink for processing. My cart holds hundreds of pounds of apples, squash, and the like. I can wheel it into the pantry and out of sight if company drops by unexpectedly.

Handling lots of quart jars while canning is more difficult, too, so I often process just

a few pint or half-pint jars at a time in a silicone canning rack. I have fewer people to feed at each meal anyway.

I use a high-quality, anti-fatigue mat in front of the sink where I stand to prepare produce for canning, freezing, and dehydrating. Mine was made for professional chefs and is worth every dollar.

For days when my joints won't cooperate, I have a bar-height stool with a back that I can sit on to clean produce at the sink or to tend the canner on the stove.

Animals. I've downsized my poultry flock to only three hens. For two people, they provide plenty of eggs for most of the year. In winter, I use YakTrax on my boots to ensure I don't

slip and kill myself on the ice that accumulates in front of doorways to the barn and chicken coop.

Heavy lifting. My balance has become a bit of an issue, so I now store canned goods at a height of 5 feet or less. I put lightweight non-breakable items higher than 5 feet (such as my water bath canner and

Change Your Priorities

My husband and I homestead on 5 acres in southwestern Michigan. We face the challenges of aging body parts, slowing minds, and occasional surgeries.

As our energies flagged, we decided to:

- close the small businesses we operated on our property (an art gallery, furniture studio, and blacksmithing shop)
- stop keeping large animals—but we still have chickens
- focus on growing our own food and maintaining our home and property

One benefit to scaling back is that it gives us more time to spend with our granddaughters!

We're also more cautious about our health. We bartered with an energetic younger friend to cut down a tree in trade for the wood, and we hire out roofing projects because falling off a roof is too great a risk for my 71-year-old husband. To get some help around the house when I was having some health problems, I posted on www.Craigslist.org and found a local girl who lives just two miles away. I like a clean and tidy home, so this may be the best money I ever spent.

Other aging acquaintances solved their problems by selling their labor-intensive organic farm with its older home heated with firewood to an energetic young couple and built a newer, smaller, and more energy-efficient home on a far corner of their property that they subdivided out.

I've written about this subject quite a bit on my blog at www.SmallHouseBigSkyHomestead.Wordpress.com.

*Donna Allgaier-Lamberti
Pullman, Michigan*



Scaling back has given Donna Allgaier-Lamberti and her husband Gene more time to spend with the grandkids.

canning rings).

I use pulleys and levers to make really heavy lifting possible. My levers are often improvised from a metal fence post and a concrete block.

For the end of a hard day, I have a wonderful, deep cast-iron tub to soak in. I plan to have a contractor add lots of grab bars so I can get in and out of the tub safely.

*Susan Heggstad
New Virginia, Iowa*

Mobility on the Farmlet

At my “farmlet,” as my friends call my place, I have some innovations that could help someone with mobility issues, which I’ve struggled with since a back injury. My chicken coop is raised and the side of the roof is hinged. I also have a hinged roof over the nesting boxes for easy access to my chickens and eggs. It’s easy to clean—no bending or stooping, and plenty of access.

Another thing I’ve done is to downsize my tools. My shovel, rake, and hoe, are all “big kid” tools from the local hardware store. They’re smaller and lighter weight



Large livestock are often out of the picture, but chickens remain popular among older homesteaders.

than standard adult tools. I use them for all of my day-to-day chores. For power tools, I have the Ryobi 18V drill, circular saw, sander, and weed whacker. They’re also lightweight and don’t hurt my wrists or back to use. They use interchangeable batteries, so I keep four batteries and two chargers on hand and am confident that I won’t have to return to the house to recharge during a project.

I love my garden cart! It can haul over 200 pounds, has inflatable tires, removable

sides, a mesh bottom, a push-pull handle, and a crank to make it a dump body. Best of all, it cost me less than \$100 (www.GorillaCarts.com). I can load firewood, tools, building supplies, chickens, and more onto my garden cart. If it’s muddy or snowy, I use a large plastic sled to move tools and equipment. A well-made plastic toboggan is a surprisingly versatile tool for the homesteader.

My garden pathways are 3 feet wide so my garden cart will fit, and I can comfort-

Don’t Stop Gardening

I’m an aging subscriber, 74 years old and still digging in the dirt! I work in the garden every other day, and then take a hot bath, a couple of aspirins, and a nap.

I cannot imagine *not* having my garden. It’s been redesigned with my arthritis in mind. I embraced some permaculture methods, including raised Hugelkultur beds that are two concrete blocks high. I can sit on the edge and dig, weed, and harvest, and can easily pick beans without bending over. I have cart-wide paths covered in old carpet (below, left) that double as swales to catch

rainwater. No more carrying mulch into the garden! In the future—when I’m *old*—I can use a walker on the wide, level paths and rest my body on the ledges. I chronicled the garden redesign on my blog, www.Steps2Permaculture.com.

I’ve also pruned fruit trees to keep them at low heights for easy maintenance and harvesting (below, right), based on the book *Grow a Little Fruit Tree* that I read about in *MOTHER EARTH NEWS* (“Prune for Small-Space Fruit Trees,” October/November 2015).

*Laura Johnson
Fayetteville, Georgia*



ably reach into the garden beds from both sides. Don't forget about container gardening! I grow most of my lettuce, herbs, and peas in containers on the back porch, as well as a few tomatoes and peppers on the deck—only a few steps from the kitchen.

Also, I start my seeds in an inexpensive little greenhouse that is 2-by-3-feet and about 5 feet high. It has a lightweight metal frame and a zippered front vinyl cover. I bought mine from a local garden supply shop for \$30. After a storm knocked over my little greenhouse, my clever husband took a piece of plywood and four casters and attached them to the bottom. Now I can roll the greenhouse from the deck right onto my covered porch or the living room if temperatures dip below freezing.

Finally, I would advise anyone with mobility issues to analyze the order in which they do chores and what would make it easier for them. Sometimes just adding an extra railing to a walkway or a ramp instead of stairs makes a huge difference. Ramps aren't just for wheelchairs; I roll my garden cart and my portable greenhouse up and down ramps on my farmlet.

*Dorothy Swezey Hurst
Rutland, Vermont*

Try Massage

I'm a retired massage therapist and instructor with 34 years' experience. I recommend massage for joint aches, pains, and pre- and post-surgical aid. I suggest every family learn basic massage and practice. Try using the forearm as it's better than your hands, which can get tired and overworked. Take a lot of deep breaths to relax your body and mind.

Breathe deeply all the way in, using the abdomen and not the chest,

Exhale slowly, and, as you do...

Smile...

Nod your head...

Laugh, or at least giggle.

Smiling, nodding, and laughing reduce stress and promote relaxation. Try it, right now! You'll see my point.

Finally, don't focus on problems, which are negative, but think about solutions and how much better you feel.

*James Giambrone, Jr.
Brandon, Oregon*



Some homesteaders (here, Gene Lamberti with Sassy) relieve their aches with yoga and massage.

Sitting Down on the Job

In 1983 or so, my husband and I decided to go off-grid and live the good life. The years have flown by and I'm now 80. We're still trying to live the good life, with interests in gardening and doing all the things we still want to do.

I found that I had to go to 8-foot-long square-foot beds, with places built on each side where I could sit to plant and weed. Although I have many health problems, I find that this way of life helps me get by every day.

*Lillian Faubus
St. Joe, Arkansas*

Raised Beds

My husband and I have shared many enjoyable gardening and farming experiences in our nearly 50 years of marriage. I'm entering advanced years with a deep-rooted feel for the land and all good things produced organically. But arthritis is knocking at my door, so I've had to make concessions.

I built a raised bed garden with cement blocks—no boards, no hammer, no nails, just my speed! I arranged the blocks 6 wide and 12 feet long, and stacked them three high. I filled my raised bed with a layer of dry maple leaves topped by loam mixed with cow manure. This took some

Garden Systems for Seniors

I've been with MOTHER EARTH NEWS off and on since the 1970s. I read with great interest many years ago about Ruth Stout, the queen of mulching, and also Mel Bartholomew's book *Square Foot Gardening* (available on Page XX). Gardening with raised beds is a boon to seniors, and mulching heavily with hay saves on water and weeding. Both of their systems work. I get fantastic results out of a small space (see photo, below).

*Cam Pratt
Fort Nelson, British Columbia*



real work, but I found using long-handled tools save your back and reduce aches and pains. I favor my long-handled grub hook for most tasks, and I take my time.

My raised bed gives me a jump on the season because the soil warms up fast in spring. With careful planning, the bed can encompass a wide variety of produce, including space-saving types, such as bush cucumbers and bush butternut squash. To extend the growing season, the bed can easily be covered when frost

threatens. I don't have to bend very far to plant and weeding is easier, especially if you mulch. Most bending and lifting is eliminated. I'm working at a level away from the ground, reducing stress on my back, arms, and legs, and keeping my knees clean!

It's also not a bad idea to have a lawn chair nearby for convenience—whatever it takes to fulfill your gardening needs.

*Nancy Bisnette
Palmer, Massachusetts*

Be Prepared

I converted one of my bathrooms to be fully compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. My ADA-compliant bathroom has a wheelchair shower, grab bars, etc. I buy handicap-accessible items at estate sales to save money.

If anything happens to me while I'm farming, I know I'll be covered until I can get back to the job.

L. Cody


Work Smart

More than 25 years ago, my wife, Carol, and I established a cabin homestead on raw, undeveloped land through plenty of hard work. At the time, we were both healthy and agile. Now that I'm in my mid-70s, I feel all that work in my joints and muscles.

Our biggest job each year is cutting 9 to 12 cords of firewood. Initially, we cut and split it all by hand. In recent years, Carol has convinced me to use a log splitter, which is a timesaver and far easier. We've also designed a more efficient method of doing the task: Every winter, I cut a little firewood at a time to store behind the woodshed for the following winter (see photo, below). In spring, I cut the firewood to length, split it, and resupply the empty woodshed. By working so far ahead, we only have to process what is at hand.

Here are some lessons I'd like to share with other senior homesteaders. Be realistic about your age and restrictions. Work smarter, safer, and slower; don't rush through tasks. Accept that tasks will take longer than they have in the past. When you start to hurt, stop and rest until you can proceed without localized pain. Take frequent breaks. If you have persistent pain or discomfort, and

solutions that worked in the past are no longer effective, then seek professional help. Lastly, listen to your partner or spouse when they tell you not to push yourself beyond your ability.

I lifted weights for more than 50 years, but stopped a few years ago when I assumed that daily homesteading work was sufficient at my age. I now realize that I still need to strengthen and tone specific muscle groups to avoid injuries and improve my balance.

Although I sorely miss the flexibility and agility I used to enjoy, homesteading is far from impossible at our age. We're still able to do hard physical work, just at a much slower pace. When I consider all my body has been through over the years, only having to slow down is actually quite remarkable.

Seeking to be self-sustaining is tough regardless of age or physical ability, but as with many things in life, it's the hard, never-ending work that actually serves to keep us more fit and able to continue. To all those readers who may just be getting the glimmer of a thought of starting a homestead, I would encourage you to go for it. I don't have a single regret. The journey is amazing and completely fulfilling.

*Bruce McElmurray
Ft. Garland, Colorado*

