10 Things We Can Learn From Old Homesteads
These pictures are from an authentic homestead on a piece of property my family owns and tries to maintain, but it’s a losing battle against time and money. There used to be dozens of these old abandoned homesteads in my area. When I was a kid I loved to explore them, it was like walking back in time. They were places where settlers actually took advantage of the Homesteading Act to acquire a large chunk of land and live off of it.

Today most of these old beauties have been torn down for safety reasons, and because they have become an eye sore to modern society. Some have even been pillaged to feed the demand for ‘old barn wood’ that is now considered stylish. However, if you have ever had the privilege of walking around one, you will find there are still plenty things they can teach us about self-reliance, values and priorities.


Running water stays cleaner than anything that sits still, it is the last to freeze and easiest to keep open when it does freeze. Not only is there a fresh supply of water at hand but there is usually a fresh supply of fish. There were no drilled or dug wells on this property until the 1950’s.

Water is always a good draw for game animals. Cattle and livestock were not common to homesteaders in this area until the 1930’s – 40’s, most settlers lived off of large game (that is still plentiful in Eastern Washington), via hunting and trapping. This is evidenced by the importance that is still placed on hunting, fishing and ‘getting your meat in the freezer’ by lifetime residents of the area today.

2. Build Sturdy Homes with Available Materials.

This cabin is well over 100 years old, and was updated on several occasions before it was left to the hands of time. It is still very sturdy, cool in the summer and warm when it’s cold without any fire. This type log construction was fairly commonly in the area at this time, and it had to be sturdy to hold up to the winter snow load on the roof. I have seen some old pictures of this place in the winter when you could not see any of the ground level windows because the snow was so high. The metal on the roof was a recent upgrade, I can tell because it is laid over wood shingles.
I have also taken notice that the location of this structure catches the morning sun and gets a little afternoon shade from the mountains to the west. Their homes did not have to be gigantic or fancy, they didn’t have to have the best view or be perched on the side of a mountain, they only needed to provide safety from the wilderness outside, and warmth. It was the people inside who made it a home. There are many lessons here.

3. Always Keep a Good Supply of Wood on Hand, Even if it’s Summer.

This wood has been here since my family acquired this property when I was child. The eaves protect it and keep it dry. There are several significantly larger piles of old wood on the property. I was told this little one room cabin would go through four cords of wood during a typical winter up here and judging from the amount that was cut and stacked in the other piles I would guess they always had two winters worth of wood on hand.

Winter in this area can sneak up on residents and cut the fall wood collecting season short. Having a supply on hand at all times was considered commonsense. Speaking from experience, since wood heat is still prevalent in Eastern Washington, one is still generally considered ‘lazy’ if they are caught buying firewood or putting it up at the last moment as the snow is starting to fall.

4. Always Have a Way to Provide Warmth for Yourself, and Cook for Yourself.

There was no electricity for the pioneer Homesteaders – and then when most of the nation had it, electricity still wasn’t available in remote areas like this until the 1940s! Even then it was unstable and undependable until the 1990s. Outages
would happen frequently for seemingly no reason and last for weeks at a time. Having a dependable source of heat that did not require electricity was a must. Snowfall average was about four feet in depth not accumulation, and sometimes deeper. Winters in the area start in Oct/Nov and last until March with temperatures that could, and still do, dip down to -20°F.

They didn’t call it a ‘bio stove’, it was a wood-burning cookstove, and almost everyone had one. It was common practice to have also have another fireplace or wood stove in the house that was dedicated for heating purposes only. They could stay warm in their homes and they could eat, this allowed them to not just survive but thrive.

5. Plant Strawberries

A good strawberry patch, planted with a variety well suited to your climate, will last for years and years. This is a picture of a strawberry patch which has long since gone wild and has completely taken over the area outside of the main cabin. Strawberries are a dependable producer of great tasting fruit, they are perennial so will come back year after year with minimal maintenance.
when compared to a vegetable garden.

Not only do strawberries provide great flavor they also provide needed sugar and carbohydrates (when you work hard all day, everyday, you need carbs), B vitamins, vitamin C (which is important in the prevention of scurvy), and folate. Strawberries are relatively easy to preserve, they can be dried, canned and made into jellies and jams. Strawberries can also be used to make a nice fruit wine.

6. Plant Raspberries

Raspberry patch gone wild. Raspberries are a hardy plant that will return year after year without being replanted. If left completely unattended both strawberries and raspberries will revert back to their ‘wild’ state in only a couple of generations which is a testament to their resilience. This is one such patch. Raspberries like strawberries are a low maintenance source of dependable flavorful food. Low maintenance means the folks who homesteaded here didn’t have to devote a large amounts of time tending to the plants in order to get a nice harvest. The bushes survived the harsh winters, dry summers, and reproduced on their own.
Raspberries are time consuming to harvest but in return they give people needed carbohydrates, B vitamins and vitamin C. They are also easy to preserve through dehydrating, and make great preserves and syrups. They can also be combined with other fruit to make a nice fruit wine.

7. Grow Rhubarb

Every single homestead I have ever been to, has a rhubarb plant, or two, or more. The homestead on our property is no exception (as pictured above). I know this because the plants are still growing there next to the long forgotten falling down buildings. Happily doing their thing even though no one has picked from them in decades. Why did they all grow rhubarb?

Rhubarb is a hardy plant and it will outlast you. It produces long thick stocks that are tart in flavor it is usually combined with plenty of sugar to make pies, jams, and desserts. It can also be made into a nice wine with a little know how (there is a trick to it).

What most people don’t know is that Rhubarb
also contains glycosides especially rhein, glucorhein and emodin which impart cathartic and laxative activities to it. It is hence useful as a cathartic in case of constipation.

That’s right, it’s a laxative – and that was perhaps the original draw of the plant long before humans started eating the stalks for flavor. The properties are concentrated in the roots which can be dried, powered and taken orally.

The stalks can be periodically consumed as a more gentle dietary aid. Rhubarb leaves contain poisonous substances however, including oxalic acid which is a nephrotoxic and corrosive acid that is present in many plants but in higher concentrations in rhubarb, so it’s best to dispose of the leaves when the rest of the plant has been processed.

Apple Trees can and should be included on this list of fruit homesteaders always kept. Unfortunately my pictures of the old apple trees didn’t make it home with me, the memory card was damaged.

Every homestead I have ever visited has also had its own apple orchard. It is another depend-
able source of low maintenance food each fall. Apples have many uses, you can make pectin from them, and they are easy to preserve.

8. Always Build a Root Cellar

Almost every homestead I have ever explored has had a true root cellar. Root cellars, while they are a pain to build, would insure your ability to store the food you have worked so hard to grow and harvest all year long.

They keep food cool in the summer and keep it from freezing in the winter all without electricity. Lots of produce, root veggies, potatoes and squash store wonderfully all winter long in a root cellar.

9. It Doesn’t Have to be Fancy, it Just Has to Work.

One of the things I am always struck by when I spend time at old homesteads is how functional everything is. It’s rarely cute and it’s not fancy – but it works.

This doesn’t mean there was no craftsmanship, it just means that a higher priority was placed on items that were easy to use, had many uses and
that held up over the test of time. Whether it’s a wood working tool hung on the side of the house or a kitchen pan. It was simple and it worked.

This attitude carried through to everything they did, cooking, building, sewing, etc… what other people thought didn’t matter so much, what mattered is that it was done. The clothing fit, the food was stored and it was not going to make anyone sick. It was a different world where the time you spent on a task effected your chances at survival, more value was placed on getting things done than making them look nice.

10. Every Once in a While Do Something With Style.

Even if it’s just outfitting your home with a glass door knob that will turn purple with sun and time.

These settlers and homesteaders were people who took a chance and rolled the dice. They moved out into an unsettled wilderness. The didn’t go to live ‘sustainably’ or to make everything themselves – they went because the promise of making a life for themselves out in the unknown was better than what they were leaving behind.
Not only was life and death a fact they dealt with on an everyday bases while hunting and with their own animals, but it was a fact they dealt with in their own family. It was a hard life, at this particular location the original family lost one child, a son, to dysentery another child a year later, to fever. They buried their own children on the land – their graves are still marked.

I would bet that the orignal inhabitants of these old homesteads would have never believed that a future generation of Americans would look upon them with envy.

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