How To Build a Cordwood Cabin For $6000

Off Grid News
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AN OFF GRID LIVING INTERVIEW:

If you could start out, give me a summary of your journey off-grid so I can have a starting point for the interview, starting from when you (your family) made the decision to move off-grid, why and how you started planning, saving, etc. The drive, the motivation, the dream.

I had always wanted a farm for as long as I can remember. I used to drag my husband all over the place looking at small hobby farms for sale. But it was never the right time. So we did what everyone does, saved up a pretty large deposit and took out a 30 year fixed mortgage on a house. Then one day out of the blue after 15 or 16 years of dreaming of a farm my hubby wakes up and says “Hey hun I think we should do a farm!” I of course replied hunny that’s such a great idea! After that you couldn’t stop me.

I put us on a budget and started paying off as much debt as possible. Edward my husband has a landscaping company and he was making great money before the economy slowed down. Even then it didn’t really affect our business because we kept it debt free. I also at the time started reading about alternative energies and organic/sustainable farming. It took us about 3 years to get to the point where we figured we had enough taken care of that we were ready to take the plunge, so we put our 4 bedroom 2 bath home up for sale and started looking for land. We came across 15 acres tucked away in the middle of 200 acres of nothing but woods.

An old tree farm in South Carolina. Hubby fell in love with it instantly and even though it was more land than what we planned on and more money, we had to have it.
What started it all? Did you always dream to live off-grid or did you find out about living off-grid and think you wanted to try it?

We didn’t plan on off-grid at first, but with no retirement and us getting older and older we figured by this time we had two options. One would be to keep working landscaping and maintenance till we die just to pay bills for stuff we bought when we were trying to keep up with the Jones’s or two: get rid of as many bills as possible.

Get rid of utilities, mortgage, credit cards, loans. Hopefully this way we won’t have to work so much and maybe we can actually enjoy our money doing things we love instead of just spending it on bills.
How long have you lived off-grid?

We have been off-grid for just over 3 yrs now.

Do you live off-grid with your whole family? Kids, spouse, etc…?

It’s Edward my husband, Dominick my son and Myself.

What do they think of living off-grid? Do you like it?

I absolutely love being off-grid and wouldn’t go back for anything.

Tell us about some of the realities of living off-grid. Not just the good things, but everything. Is it hard to do? Do you ever find yourself wishing you lived in the city?

I love this question. Many times online off-grid comes off as little house on the prairie or Swiss family Robinson and while it is sometimes it is definitely not easy by any means. What I love about off-grid is that once we took away all the stuff (xbox, satellite tv, constantly going and going, buying stuff) it immediately brought us closer together as a family. I swear I seen my son’s imagination and curiosity click on like a light switch. while living in town he was completely addicted to xbox or youtube. Anything that had a screen and he could bury his face in it. Now ??? Oh boy !! He has plans on a forge he’s going to build and really wants to become a blacksmith or iron worker when he grows up. He even forged his two favorite teachers pendants last year by hand. He makes his own homemade paper and loves helping take care of our ducks and chickens. His other hobby is metal detecting and history. He loves stories about the old days and how things were back then. The hardest thing in my opinion about off-grid is the weather. Here it is extremely hot and humid all summer long. It’s very hard to cool anything on solar. Unless you have a huge system. We are trying to get there, so we spend about 7 months out of the year sweating, running fans and downing loads of water. We’ve also found that nothing ever seems to go right or smoothly the first time. Things that should be a simple easy fix take forever. A huge misconception about being off-grid is that you won’t have any bills. You will have bills. You will need steady money coming in. Things break or need maintenance, there is always something that needs to be built or repaired.

What made you want to do it?

Many things really. Money first but then we really wanted to know if we could actually pull it off and succeed. We always say the first years being off-grid will either make you or break you and I think we want to see what we are made of.

How did you find your land to build your cabin?

We drove around for months on end. Writing down every number with a sign that said for sale by owner. We knew in the beginning we didn’t want land that was listed with a realtor because it would be ridiculously expensive.

So you built your own cabin by hand?

We did with our own two hands from the ground up. We felled all of our trees, barked them, split them, hauled them. Edward even bought a portable saw mill so we could mill all of our own 4x4s and such. We milled our counters and used a lot of pallets and recycled
materials to build the cabin. We also got very lucky and received a lot of windows, doors, flooring, outdoor solar lights and other things from family and friends.

**Did you know how to build before you started or was it a learning process?**

I would say we were great do-it-yourselfers. Even in the old house we always had a project going on or building something. Too much Do It Yourself shows. But it really was a learning process, luckily we have a lot of friends who between all of them hold vast resources of knowledge.

**How long did it take you to build it?**

It took us a year to move in. it still needs little things but nothing major.

**How much did it cost you to build your cabin?**

As of right now it’s ran us about $6,000.

**What made you decide to build your own cabin instead of simply hiring a builder or buying a log cabin kit or modifying a retail cabin?**

I’m stingy. But we also wanted to build our own. There is a gratification in it knowing you built it with your own two hands. I wouldn’t trade it for the nicest, biggest house on the market.

**Do you grow your own food?**

We grow some of our own food. This part is a work in progress. I messed up our big garden this year. I’m not sure how but something isn’t right in the soil. So back to the drawing board.

We just recently built a raised bed garden closer to the cabin and I’m going to experiment on that. Right now I’m trying to figure out what does and doesn’t work for us. The crazy weather we get anymore makes it really hard. We’re either flooded or a dust bowl and I swear we don’t even have a spring anymore. Just winter and summer that’s it. But the end goal is to have all the food we will ever need growing or being raised out here. From fruits to nuts and veggies. I cant wait for the day when I don’t have to keep running to the grocery for food.

**How big is your garden, and what do you grow?**

It’s probably about 100 sq ft. right now I have pole beans, all kinds of peppers, herbs, tomatoes, eggplant, corn, summer squash, spinach, romaine lettuce, radishes, eggplant and onions.

**Do you can and preserve your own food?**

Not yet, but I want to. We still have to get our outdoor kitchen built for that.

**What do you do for water? Do you have a well, spring, cistern…etc?**

We have a well.

**What about power? Do you have a solar system? Wind?**

We have 7 solar panels and just upgraded our battery bank to 8 rolls batteries. Unfortunately now we need to double our solar array because we are not filling our battery bank in a timely manner. All of this came about because we were determined to have AC this year not just fans. So we ordered 2 more batteries but then found out we should probably order a pure sine wave inverter instead of the modified sine
wave we have been using. We ordered it all, hooked it up and the inverter kept beeping every time something came on. So then we had to order bigger wire. We got that ordered, and ended up going with 1 awg wire. But now we need more panels and still can’t run AC. At this point there is nothing more you can do but laugh. That’s kinda the deal in the beginning though with off-grid, there is no saying I’m just gonna do this and that and have it be done. There’s gonna be a million steps up to that point. Okay, I exaggerated a bit there but it feels like a million.

**Septic is a big issue. How do you handle waste?**

We just had a septic put in.

**Cool in the summer?**

We heat with a wood stove. Cooling is much harder. Right now it’s fans.

**Obviously you have internet… How do you manage to stay connected? Satellite, cable, cell phone?**

Satellite internet and cell phones.

**Do you suggest living off-grid to others?**

Oh yes! Everyone should atleast try it.

**Do you have any regrets or things that you wish you knew before moved off-grid?**

No regrets. I wish I would have known more about solar energy 3 to 4 years ago. I even
bought books but there just wasn't as much info back then as now.

**What advice can you give to people out there who want to make the move off-grid?**

Weather, weather, weather. I would consider it the most important factor for many reasons, the top one being: batteries do not like nor function well in extreme cold or heat. It’s always easier to heat a home than to cool it. Plus if you’re thinking of going off-grid somewhere where it’s very hot and humid cooking and sleeping can be a huge obstacle. Be prepared for many things to go wrong. I think it’s just part of the process. Realistically take what you think is going to go wrong and double it. It’s okay though because you learn from it and you also get used to it. We took our son to a movie last weekend. Decided we’re gonna take the night off and go out to eat and a movie. Came home to a flooded bathroom. In the past that would have freaked us out, now we just fixed the plumbing threw down towels and went to bed. It’s still worth every minute though. Every day of sweating or not getting much sleep. It really puts life into perspective and the things that we once thought were important just become trivial.

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