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Vision of Self-Sufficiency Comes Alive

By Madeleine Charney, Granby

When Alice Armen graduated from Antioch University New England less than two years ago, in 2007, her self-designed major of sustainable agriculture was considered an anomaly. These days, she says, the concept is flourishing at the college. This seems a sign of the times as more of us attempt to make wiser choices, governed by systems found in nature. Take for instance, Armen's nearly 2-acre backyard "mini farm."



Alice Armen

A tour begins inside their mid-19th century farmhouse in the village of Montague, Mass., a designated historic district. A vented root cellar replete with built-in bins and shelves hosts the family's abundant food stores. Alice and her husband, Ted Armen, a machinist who works at home, and their three children were fortunate to purchase a property unaltered since the 1950's.

Ted takes machining work in the neat, well-equipped shop he created at the back of the house while also contributing to the farm work. The care and attention the Armens have bestowed on their place are an investment that now provides them with the perfect groundwork on which to manifest a family homestead economy.

From the house we traveled out back to the long, narrow garden area beginning with the chicken pens containing 20 or so Dominique hens and tiny Rosecomb Bantams. Dominiques, known as the classic speckled hen, are the oldest North American breed that was developed in dooryards and dungpiles from a mixture of breeds brought here by Europeans more than 250 years ago. Because the Armens value the sustaining of this special breed, they order new rooster chicks every three or four years so as not to "run down the gene pool," Alice explains. She orders the chicks (as well as their heirloom seeds) from Sandhill Preservation Center in Calamus, Iowa.

Just past the chickens are the grapevines and blueberries, followed by a shady area where more unusual fruits such as paw paws, gooseberries, currants, elderberries, cranberries, arctic kiwis, and sandraberries grow. The decision to plant these lesser-known fruits was inspired by the book, *Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention: A Gardener's Guide*, by Lee Reich. This was one of many books mentioned during our interview as the Armens constantly bolster their food production techniques with food for thought.

Next come the dairy goats, the newest niche to be added to the system. These Swiss breeds, called Toggenburg and Saanen, frequently graze on brambles during foraging walks through the neighborhood (with locals getting a real kick from this modern-day shepherding scene). Armen notes that milk production is actually increased by this diet, as opposed to overfeeding on too-rich grain. They'll soon be making cheese and yogurt from their fresh milk as well. A 1979

Rodale book called *Practical Guide to Small-scale Goat Keeping* by Billie Luisi helped jumpstart and guide their approach to goat tending. A book which inspired Luisi, the *1957 Goat Husbandry* by David Mackenzie, documents how goats produced more milk during WWII when feed for goat kids was sharply rationed than in the relative prosperity of 1950's. In other words, goats prosper in times of austerity! These two books balance science, ecology and economy—not unlike the way the Armens thoughtfully live their lives today.

Beyond the goats is a hedgerow of raspberries, on the other side of which are six honeybee hives. Armen finds that the bees, although the smallest member of the family menagerie, teach them the biggest lesson in terms of niches and how they interact inside the systems of their project. Armed with a microscope, Armen delights in analyzing the nectar she extracts with a centrifuge from the different honey types. The pollen she can see in the nectar of different honey types brings her greater appreciation and understanding of the bees' role in the local landscape.

Apple trees come just after the honeybees, creating a natural boundary at the Armens' property and the adjoining acre they share with neighbors. Rented from the town of Montague for \$10/year, this land is where the more traditional crops are sown: tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, broccoli, lettuce, squash, corn, beans, onions, carrots, and sunflowers, zinnias and calendula, raspberries and strawberries to name a few. Their teenage boys also tend a row of herbs. This piece of land represents the Armens' bridge to their community through agriculture.

Not only do they farm for themselves but they trade and sell their honey, eggs, fruit and vegetables too. Armen jubilantly describes how “people in the village are so excited to stop by and see what's happening.” She witnesses how their small operation helps neighbors attune to the rhythms of the seasons, the animals, and the land. As 2008 draws to a close, the Armens have a winter's supply of root vegetables and squash awaiting them in bins and dozens of cans of salsa, tomatoes, pickles, sauerkraut, jams and jellies neatly lined up on the shelves of the root cellar. Honey is packed away in jars in boxes waiting to be sold or used in tea. Herbs have been dried on the sun porch and are stored in jars, in tinctures, or infused in oil to make beeswax products.

Aside from raising food for her family and community, Armen is equally energized around educating youth about agriculture. She has been involved with various projects such as teaching young gardeners through a partnership between UMass Extension and Nuestras Raices, a Puerto Rican community development organization in Holyoke and running 4-H workshops about embryology. She remarked how the children are rapt when they hold a light up to an egg and see the movement of the chicks inside. Suddenly the biology they grudgingly learn in school has practical, real-life implications. “Light bulbs go off in those moments!”

Alice Armen is a weaver of webs, creating connections between her family, land, animals, plants, neighbors, and the greater community. The lessons learned along the way are myriad. But perhaps the most vital message I received from this conversation is to keep our ears, eyes and hearts open to the wonders of the Earth that sustains us all. Thank you to the Armens for showing us how to restore a lifestyle