



Live Farm Fresh, Without the Farm

## **Living Homegrown Podcast Episode #14 Growing and Restoring Heirloom Fruit Trees**

**Show Notes: [www.LivingHomegrown.com/14](http://www.LivingHomegrown.com/14)**

[Bird Sounds] You're listening to the Living Homegrown Podcast, episode #14. And as you can probably tell I'm recording this one a little bit differently. I'm actually out in the field. [Rooster Sounds] I mean I'm literally standing out in the middle of a field at my family farmstead. And I'm recording this in the early, early morning. And it's going to be a little bit of a different episode. You're going to get a tour, you're going to learn about heirloom fruit trees. It should be really fun! So I'm kind of taking you along as I'm working my family farmstead this week. I hope you enjoy it!

**Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast, where it's all about how to live farm fresh, without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host, national PBS TV producer and canning expert Theresa Loe.**

**Theresa:** Hi there everybody and welcome to another episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. I'm your host, Theresa Loe. And if you're a regular listener you can already tell that this episode is being done a little bit differently. I'm on the road and so I am not recording this in my home studio.

I'm using our portable recorder that we use when we're out in the field filming Growing a Greener World, our show on PBS. I'm using our portable recorder that normally I use when we are pre-interviewing people. And I am actually up north. I am not in Los Angeles, I'm up at our family farmstead up in the Sierra Nevada mountains. This podcast is normally about living farm fresh without the farm.

So [laughs] I am recording this on our farmstead but it's still covering the same topics. It's about making your own artisan food crafts. About growing



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your own produce no matter how small of a space. And just about living closer to your food.

When I realized that I actually have to record while away from my studio I realized this will be kind of fun because I can give you guys sort of an audio tour of what I'm working on here at the farmstead. We have an 1892 farm and there's a whole backstory to this place and an heirloom tree restoration project that I'm working on here.

I want you to remember that even though I'm standing here at the farmstead and talking about a larger piece of property and what we're doing here, it doesn't mean that you have to have a large piece of property in order to grow fruit trees. At home in Los Angeles, I'm homesteading on 1/10th of an acre. And yet even though it's a postage sized stamp piece of property compared to what most people have I have 10 fruit trees on that property in Los Angeles. And I do that by growing my fruit trees either espaliered around the perimeter of my property or in containers. Most of my fruit trees are in containers. So they're small, small trees, but I can still get pretty good production out of those small trees.

So as I'm talking about things here I don't want you to think oh man, this doesn't relate to me because she's talking about a farmstead. It actually does because I'm going to be talking about a whole philosophy here that I've recently learned and taken on by working this property and I am applying what I am doing here, I am also applying this at home with my little containers and my little homestead back in Los Angeles.

So my plan here is to give you the tour and show you exactly what I am growing here and what I'm trying to do here at the farmstead and then I'm going to go into some of the philosophies and tips that I've used to start restoring these old trees. And those ideas you can use in your own backyard at home. And I'm going to start that tour by walking you out here to the orchard which to me is the heart and soul of this property.

[Walking in Grass Sounds] I guess the best way for me to describe this place to you is to explain to you how it makes me feel. I'm coming from Los

Angeles where we have the hustle and the bustle and the fast pace and there's a lot of noise. But when I get here to this family farmstead [deep exhale] I just feel like my shoulders relax and I can start to decompress and I feel more like myself here than I do back at home. This place just relaxes me.

[Music Transition] I purchased this property with some other family members and it is a family project to restore this property back to its former glory. We were trying to save it from being completely demolished. It has a lot of history here. It has 65+ fruit trees that were planted over a hundred years ago. Many of them were planted over a hundred years ago. And there's a lot of heritage in these trees. Every tree is completely different. There are not two fruit trees alike anywhere on the property.

And some of these fruit trees I have never tasted anything like it. Incredible depths of flavor, incredible layers of sweet and tart and tanic. Just fantastic fruit that you just can't find in the grocery stores. And I just felt it was so important to not let this property be completely demolished and all the trees cut down in order to make it a subdivision. I wanted to save it. I wanted to save the trees and the land. And I wanted to restore it.

[Music Transition] So this section of the farmstead is 14 acres. Seven of it is forested, untouched land. And the other half, the other seven are open fields and orchards. And the fruit trees are kind of sprinkled not only in the orchard, but sprinkled throughout the property. And I'm still discovering trees that had been completely overgrown. I'm pulling brambles off of them and discovering these incredible fruit trees, buried, that no one has taken care of for twenty plus years and yet they're still alive and still producing fruit.

And that's been part of the really interesting thing here. When we got this property, it had been neglected for at least 20 years. Although most of the trees had been watered they had all been topped numerous, numerous times. And they were in really, really bad shape. However, when they did start to fruit and I started to taste some of these incredible flavors, I was even more determined that we were going to save this place.

Of the 65 trees I have here peaches, plums, apples, an incredible number of apples, figs, cherries, and then as I've been working on the property and I fill in some of the blank spots in the orchard, I've added in some trees that we didn't have previously. I added persimmon, quince. I've added several different pluot trees. A pluot is a cross between an apricot and a plum. It's mostly plum but it is the size of an apricot. Incredible flavor for jams and jellies. Awesome, awesome flavor. And I'm going to do, have to do a whole podcast episode on hybrids because some of the newer ones that are out these days are just really awesome. And they are a lot of fun. They are different. People are completely shocked when they bite into them and the colors and flavors that you get from those. But that's a whole other topic we'll cover at another time!

For now, I'm mostly concentrating on restoring these heirloom trees. And it wasn't until I started tasting the fruit and going around and documenting the different trees. I gave every tree a number, had to start following what it was, what kind of fruit it had, although I don't know the names of most of these trees, I've been able to narrow down what they're similar to. So for instance, there's a tree here that most people probably would have chopped down. It's in pretty bad shape. But when I tasted the apple off of this tree, to me, it was like a fine wine. It's almost a black, dark, dark apple. And it's very, very similar to an Arkansas Black. And in fact it may very well be that. But I'll never know unless I have it genetically tested if it is that. But it has these layers that are just so incredible. And I don't get a lot of fruit from that tree because it's so old and in such bad shape. Even having one apple off of this tree makes it worthwhile. And we have enough space to keep some of these trees that are not very productive and yet they are still offering up some fruit.

And next year, I'm going to be taking grafts from some of these trees and grafting them onto some of the other trees in order to preserve its heritage so that the trees that were planted here originally are still here and being passed on to the next generations.

The history of the place I'm still researching and it's actually very interesting. I'll be writing some blog posts about that and we're going to be telling part of that story in an episode on PBS. So I don't want to go too deeply into the history because I'm still gathering all of the information on that. But let me introduce you to the farmhouse that's on the property.

[Music Transition]

**Theresa's Dad:** It's an old farmhouse built in 1892. Six bedroom two-story old typical farmhouse.

**Theresa:** That's my dad, George Neff. He's 86 years young. And he and my mom are in charge of restoring the farmhouse here on the property.

**Theresa's Dad:** It's overlooking the orchard very nicely. Its being its own age the windows are all 1800 glass so they have rippled glass in there which is kind of antique. And from there you can look out into the orchard and see at least 30-40 of the trees.

**Theresa:** Now about that glass. I think it's one of coolest features about this farmhouse. And if you ever have to design a garden at your house it is always best to design from standing inside of the house looking out the window. And I learned that from Margaret Roach. And I will link to an episode we did on her for Growing A Greener World where she talks exactly about doing this technique. But you have to think about it. When you are designing a garden, you're going to enjoy it the most when you're standing inside your house looking out. You know, maybe it's where you eat your breakfast or you brush your teeth. Or you're washing the dishes. Whatever window you spend the most time, stand inside your house looking out that window, and design the garden for yourself. Don't design it for when you're standing out in the garden, design it for where you will enjoy it the most. Anyway, when you're looking through that glass from inside the farmhouse, that rippled antique glass makes the orchard on the other side all ripply and kind of mysterious. And I just, I find it so charming. It's one of my most favourite features about the house.

[Music Transition] There's a kitchen garden here that well it used to be a kitchen garden where they were growing just their everyday produce that they'd be using at the farm. And I'm in charge of restoring that but my main project is trying to restore the 65 plus fruit trees that are sprinkled throughout the property and in the orchard here.

[Walking in Grass Sounds] And you can probably here from the crunching under my feet we are in the middle of a big drought here. So the soil and the ground is very dry. Except for wherever I'm watering. So I'm walking you over to a small pond we have here on the property that we use as part of our irrigation.

[Water Sounds] We're very lucky in that most of these trees are so ancient that they have a very, very deep root system. And they have lived through many droughts in the past. These trees are a hundred years old. So now they don't need that much water in order to survive. And I'm able to divert the water that would normally be going to an orchard and use some of it for either the newer trees or for other areas of the property. But no matter what we are very limited in our water and we are so, so careful with the water that we do have.

[Music Transition] You may be wondering what the heck are we doing with all of this fruit? We have all these fruit trees. Well a lot of the trees do not produce a lot of fruit. They are very old. They don't give me a ton of fruit. But I do have a lot of fruit. With 65 trees, I have a lot of fruit. We try to preserve every bit that we can. We give a lot of it away. And then of course we're eating like crazy ourselves what we have. I cellar or root cellar a ton of apples. Especially the late apples that we get in September and October. Most of those are wrapped individually. I wrap them in newsprint. And place them in bins and put them in our canning room or in our basement. And that way they are saved through winter. We make a lot of apple pie preserves. I can up the apple pie filling and then we are making apple pies all winter long. We usually run out in about February / March, we run out of our apple pie filling. But that is something I give a lot away and we make up a lot and share it among everybody in the family.

I guess we probably have about 35 apple trees here on the property. And no two apple trees are the same. We've had this property three years now. I think we're going into our fourth year. The first year was really just documenting what each tree was. Some were tart. Others were more for baking. You know like a granny smith. Some are great eating apples. Some have more firm flesh than others. We have red apples and green apples and yellow apples. Speckled. All different colors. And I would say it was a full season of watching each apple develop to try and decide what is it exactly. You know, they all come on green and then I'd have to watch and watch and test and taste to try and figure out, is it supposed to be a green apple? Or is it going to turn red? We would watch it and it was a mystery. It was kind of fun to check it out in the different stages.

And now we have a handle on it. We know which trees are which. And as I walk through the orchard every tree is completely different so my first order of business was just to number every tree I discovered. And keep a journal for that particular tree. So when I walk up to tree #6 for example, that we have right here, tree #6 is a pear tree. I didn't know until it started making pears what their normal size would be, or what they would look like.

There's one tree here on the property that is really two trees planted right next to each other. And when it is filled with fruit, half the tree is a green apple, and the other half of the tree is a red apple. It looks really cool! They kind of come on at different times so there is only maybe 3 or 4 weeks where both of the apples are on the tree at the same time. And the apples are completely different. So that particular tree, tree #15, it has 15a and 15b because I first thought it was a green apple and then all of a sudden half of it started turning red. It was so bizarre! But when you come down and look at the trunk you can see it's actually two, it's split in two.

We also have a Spitzenburg apple which was the favorite apple of Thomas Jefferson and I can totally understand why because it is one of those apples that are, it's first of all it's beautiful. It's got red and speckles on it. But when you bite into it it has this sweet and sour kind of, I can't even describe it. It's a great eating apple. It is the apple of choice for me to just eat right off the tree.

[Music Transition] You know I'm talking about all the fruit trees but I just I do have to mention that we have a lot of other fruit on this property besides the fruit trees. There are a lot of wild blackberries here on the property. And I make incredible jam but also liqueur, blackberry liqueur with those blackberries. But one of the most interesting discoveries for me here on the property was when we had this whole area of blackberry brambles. It was just this huge mound and we were walking through the field and we could see what looked like a grape vine coming up out of these brambles. So we decided to start clipping back the brambles and see what kind of grape vine was under here.

We started cutting and cutting and pulling away and we discovered an old, old fence that had been built around what looked like some kind of tiny garden. It had been completely overgrown for 20 years or more with these wild blackberries. And as we cut and cut we discovered gosh it must have been six different grape vines that were planted in two rows right next to each other under all these brambles. And these grape vines are ancient. They have huge six inch stems coming out of the ground. And they were obviously cultivated. They were obviously loved and cared for but over time they got completely overgrown by the wild blackberries.

So just this past winter, we spent probably a month digging out all of the brambles that were covering up these grapes and we have re-tied those grape vines up onto new wires and this year will be the first year we really get to discover what kind of grapes we have here. It's amazing that they even survived. They had no sunlight. But there were a few branches that were just popping up through the brambles and offering some sunlight to the roots down below and we're going to see what kind of grapes we get. Maybe we'll be making some grape jelly or grape wine this year. We'll see what happens. But it was so fun to discover this little secret garden that was completely overgrown and no one even knew it was there.

[Music Transition] So now that you've kind of gotten a little bit of a tour of the place and understand what I'm doing here in first assessing the situation and then trying to restore some of these fruit trees back to their

former glory... I just want to go through a few points of how you could get the most of any fruit trees you decide to have in your backyard.

There's a little bit different philosophy that I took on by doing this project that I've never, I've never had to restore a fruit tree before. I've always planted fruit trees myself. So I started with new trees. But when you are looking back on a tree that has been neglected or is overgrown, a lot of times they aren't in the best of shape. Their immune system is kind of messed up and they have bug problems and disease problems. And if you really want to save that tree you kind of have to take on this new philosophy and look at it a different way. I've since discovered that when I started doing that here I started applying these same principles at home to my containers and my little garden at home and I started having much better results. And that's what I want to share with you.

So my first tip is if you have a tree that you've just inherited or you just came onto a new piece of property my first tip is don't dive right in trying to make changes. I spent a full year assessing the property and assessing the trees and what was going on and the soil and the sunlight. And kind of getting used to the microclimates that were in different areas. I spent a full year doing that before I really started to make any major changes. So if you are inheriting something that is already growing, I do advise you to just give yourself some time to get to know the situation and to get to know the tree.

And that kind of brings me to my second point which applies whether you are inheriting something or you're planting a new tree right from the beginning. And that is that there's no hurry here. A fruit tree takes a long time to mature and start making fruit. And if you are inheriting an older tree it takes a long time to get it back into full production. So you have time and what's great about that is that it allows you to grow as a gardener while your tree grows. There is no magic pill to take where you just suddenly learn everything about that tree overnight. And you don't have to! So you don't want to let that overwhelm you when you're like oh man I've never grown peaches before I have absolutely no idea how to do this. It's okay! It's going to take years for that tree to get really, really good. And you will get

really, really good as well as you learn little bits along the way. You get to learn the tree. You get to learn about the different pruning techniques. It takes a long time and there's no hurry, there's no panic to try and learn it all at once.

The third point that I wanted to tell you about is really the most important one. And that's this whole new philosophy that I took on when I started to take care of all the trees here at the farmstead. When we got the property a friend of mine said you absolutely must read the books by Michael Phillips. Now I had never heard of Michael Phillips before but he has written some really fantastic books about apple trees and about growing fruits and berries. I will link to both of his books in the show notes but I was so enamoured with everything that he said I even had us do an episode where he's featured in one of the episodes on PBS on Growing a Greener World. So I will also link to that episode so you can learn all about him.

But the two books that I highly recommend you get if you want to grow any kind of fruit tree is *The Holistic Orchard* and if you're growing apples, I recommend *The Apple Grower*. If you're growing apples get both the books. They're really that good.

So let me see if I can explain the philosophy a little bit. I've always been an organic gardner. But what I learnt from reading these books is about how to be a holistic gardner. And growing holistically just means that you're looking at the bigger picture. So it's more than just not spraying with conventional chemicals. And it's even more than the organic gardner philosophy of feeding the soil to feed the plants and trees. It's even more than attacking a bug or a tree with an organic solution. Instead, growing hostilely is kind of similar to how many of us approach our own personal health.

So what I mean is like when you get a headache, for example, the conventional approach would be oh well we'll just fix that by taking some aspirin or advil or something. And you're kind of just putting a bandaid on whatever the cause was right? That's the conventional approach. Another approach would be to look at the cause of the headache. Did you eat

something that maybe you gave that headache? Or did you have something else going on in your body that caused that headache that you should look at medically?

A holistic approach however takes it a step further. It looks at it like this: Could there be something in your surrounding environment that is causing that headache. Or is it stress? Or something in the air? Is your personal environment contributing to the fact that you're getting those headaches? And in most of those cases it really would be more than one cause that would cause the headache right? You know maybe it's your work environment is stressful and you have toxic people pressuring you that causes you tense up and you're holding your shoulders next to your ears all day long. And after awhile your neck muscles are tense and you get a headache. It's all of these things together, right?

Well when you take a holistic approach, you have to be really realistic about all the factors that come together. You may not be able to eliminate the toxic people that you work with. But you could reduce the impact that some of those other factors have. And that would help you better cope and reduce those headaches, right. You could cope better with the things you can't control.

Well holistic orcharding is exactly the same thing. There are a multitude of factors that are contributing to the health of your trees. And all the other plants that you have growing around your trees. And all of those factors layer on top of each other. You may not be able to eliminate some of those factors because you have no control over them. And because of that it doesn't work to just spray organic spray to fix the symptom. You need to reduce as many of the other factors as you can to give your trees the best healthy environment that you can. So you're basically improving their immune system so that they can cope. And so yes you feed the soil to feed the plant like most organic gardeners do. And that's kind of standard practice. But you also look at the surrounding environment that that tree is growing in. So just as you looked at your work environment for that headache you would look at what is growing around your tree.

And Michael talks a lot of about this in the books. He talks about the forest edge and how that has an impact on your trees. And another aspect of this holistic approach is that you look at the bigger picture when you have an issue of insect damage. So instead of just spraying an organic spray to eliminate the pest, you look at what's going on with that tree that's allowing it to be attached. Is it weakened? Or stressed from something else? And that's making it the perfect target for that pest damage? And then you look at the entire life cycle of that bug and you attack that problem at different stages of the life cycle so that when that bug is hatched and attacking your tree you have already reduced the impact that that bug has on the tree.

So you can see how this whole philosophy can be pretty involved. And it actually takes a little bit of time to learn so it's another one of those things of my mantra here— you don't have to learn all of this overnight. It takes time to learn your own garden. It takes time to learn the different trees that you may plant or introduce into your garden. And it takes time to learn the holistic approach to gardening. I would definitely start with these two books if you want to grow any kind of fruit trees and I think you will also really enjoy the episode that we did that featured Michael in one of the segments.

[Music Transition] So, that's my episode for today. It's a little bit longer than usual. It was a little bit different style. But I wanted to share with you what I'm doing here and give you a little bit of a head start if you wanted to kind of do the same thing in your backyard. I'm going to have a lot of links for the show notes in this episode, so just go to [LivingHomegrown.com/14](http://LivingHomegrown.com/14) that's slash 1-4. And I'll have everything right there for you.

And in those show notes I'm going to have things like photos of the farm so you can kind of see exactly what I'm talking about. I will have links to where you can buy some of the trees that I mentioned including pluots. I will have information on growing food in a drought. The Margaret Roach episode, the Michael Phillips episode. And I will even have some recipes for apple pie filling and a video on how you can store your apples in a cellar or a garage. So a lot of information. Be sure to check it out.



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I really hope you enjoyed this. I really enjoyed bringing you along with me as we walked through the different areas of the property and next week I'm going to be back home for a bit and I have some interviews coming up that are going to be really fun for you. So thanks so much for listening and I will see you next time. Take care!

**Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. Visit [LivingHomegrown.com](http://LivingHomegrown.com) to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh, without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown podcast.**

[Bloopers]