



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 26 Interview with Erica Strauss of NW Edible Life

Show Notes: www.LivingHomegrown.com/26

This is the Living Homegrown Podcast, episode #26.

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: Hey there everybody and welcome to the Living Homegrown podcast. I'm your host Theresa Loe. This is the podcast where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm. And that's through artisan food crafts, like canning, preserving and fermenting, small space food growing, backyard critter keeping — everything from chickens to goats — and just living a more sustainable lifestyle.

If you want to learn more about any of these topics or my online canning courses, just visit my website LivingHomegrown.com.

Before I dive into this week's topic, I just want to welcome all of the new listeners I have who are just joining me for the first time. Apparently one of my podcasts, #2, became very popular and had a lot of sharing this past week. That's the one where I talk about using a special heirloom yogurt culture so that you can make yogurt on your countertop without any special equipment. And it was shared a lot recently which was great. So a lot of you just signed up for my newsletter and you're new listeners because of that. So welcome to all of you, I'm really excited to have you.



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On this week's podcast I'm interviewing a really good friend of my mine, Erica Strauss. She's a blogger at her website NW Edible Life where she writes about homesteading and gardening and she also shares a lot of really great recipes. And that's because she's a professionally trained chef and she has a fun, punchy perspective on garden to table and eating and living.

Erica and I met many years ago and we really hit it off because we both live very similar lifestyles and we both teach and share with other people how to do what we do. So we instantly had a lot to talk about. She has a great garden with chickens and ducks that she keeps with her family of four just outside of Seattle, WA. And she's been featured in Best Food Writing 2013 and regularly writes for natural cooking and gardening magazines.

I featured Erica on an episode we filmed for our PBS TV show and I will be sure to link to that in the show notes for this podcast. After all of our PBS episode air nationally on most PBS stations, we post them so that people can watch the replays in their entirety in high definition. So I will be sure to link to that in the show notes and then you can see her garden and everything.

If you're a regular listener you know that all of my podcast episodes have show notes with any of the links mentioned within the show plus a full transcript of the episode. So for this one you would go to LivingHomegrown.com/26. And I will be sure to give that link at the end of the show.

Now one of the reasons that I wanted to have Erica on today's podcast is because she has a brand new book coming out. This week actually! And the book is called "The Hands-On Home: A Seasonal Guide to Cooking, Preserving & Natural Homekeeping". It has got wonderful recipes and DIY projects. Everything from household cleaners that you make yourself to even personal care products like lip balm and things like that.



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But what I'm going to have Erica talk to us about today is more what she covers in the book that is in relation to food. Most of you either listen to my podcast because you are either growing your own food or you are interested in locally sourced food. And you listen to this podcast to learn about capturing seasonal flavors and also about capturing those flavors for later. Well I want Erica to come on and discuss using up all of that food that we work so hard to get and make sure that nothing goes to waste. She's got some great tips in the book that she learned from being a professional chef and I think you will like her suggestions for keeping a more productive kitchen.

Also, you will definitely want to wait until the end because I'm going to do a giveaway of a copy of her new book *The Hands-On Home*. I'll give you all the details at the end of this episode so stay tuned for that. So without further ado, let me share with you my interview with Erica Strauss of NW Edible Life.

Theresa: Erica, thank you so much for coming on the show today.

Erica: Oh Theresa, thanks so much for having me.

Theresa: Sure! We've been friends for several years and before that we were virtual friends - that always sounds so weird. But we were we were virtual friends first before we became friends in real life as they say.

Erica: Mmmhmm.

Theresa: And that's probably because we live very similar lifestyles. So before we dive into your book which I'm dying to talk about I'd love for you to describe for everyone how you live. What's your lifestyle?

Erica: Sure, well like you I consider myself an urban homesteader. So I live in a suburban town just north of Seattle and I have limited space. But on that limited acreage I try to do as much as I can kind of with a DIY mentality for myself and for my family with stuff I can grow and raise and make. You know various people who listen to your podcast they know what



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your lifestyle is all about and mine is very similar it's just a little up the coast in Seattle instead of down in LA.

Theresa: So how did you come to get into this lifestyle?

Erica: Well you know years and years ago I was professional chef. And when I had my first child I really realized that the world of professional restaurant cooking was not very compatible with being a mom to young children.

Theresa: Mmhmm.

Erica: For me. And so I transitioned from restaurant cooking to very intimate and small scale catering events. And I did a lot of cooking for families in the Seattle area who didn't have time to cook their own food. And what I really kind of learnt in that is that the very best quality, local, organic ingredients are very expensive when you're looking at it from a business perspective. And so I had this idea that I would start a garden and I would be able to grow my own beyond organic local, fresh produce and have the very best flavor and quality for family and my clients and then also save money. Now as it turns out I didn't actually save any money because the start up cost in the garden were sufficient that I probably should have just gone back to the farmer's market.

Theresa: [laughs]

Erica: But when I transitioned into that sort of grow your own philosophy I was totally hooked. And that was I guess over a decade ago now and I've been expanding my garden and kind of my urban homestead at every opportunity since.

Theresa: Well I've been to your homestead and I've tasted your cooking and it's fantastic. You have...

Erica: Thank you!



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Theresa: You have, you have totally meshed that altogether and that's why we featured you on that episode of Growing A Greener World because you've done a fabulous job of incorporating your family life into your homesteading life. And I'm assuming that might have been why you wanted to write this book . But I don't want to put words into your mouth. So tell me, what was your goal, what was your purpose in making this book The Hands-On Home?

Erica: Well, my first vision of as listeners know I'm a blogger. And in blogging you can sort of put out piecemeal chunks of things. You can put out bite-sized information about your lifestyle or what you've learned or how to do things. And I find that extremely rewarding. There's a community aspect to blogging that I find extremely powerful and I love. But it's not a really good format for putting out your whole philosophy or vision in one sort of meta explanation. Does that make sense?

Theresa: Absolutely, yes.

Erica: So my vision originally when I started playing around with the idea of writing a book was to actually have two books. And I was going to call one Inside the Productive Home and the second Outside the Productive Home. And it was going to be at sort of ways that we can make more productive urban homesteading type lifestyles work in a modern context. And so the book that I had in my mind Inside the Productive Home through various twists and turns become The Hands-On Home. So what I'm really, really passionate about is trying to help people how to figure out how to just do a little bit more for themselves in whatever capacity appeals to them.

I mean the reality is not everyone is going to be able to grow their own vegetables or even want to. Not everyone is going to want to keep chickens. But everyone can find some area of these traditional skills that appeals to them and allows them to just have that slightly more productive lifestyle. So that's what The Hands on Home is really about. It's about focusing on that productive lifestyle and figuring out the parts and pieces that people can do for themselves.



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Theresa: Well Erica, that is exactly what I love so much about your book is that you cover a lot of different areas. You're covering not only recipes and canning and DIY home products but you also have the whole philosophy of instead of buying let's try to make it. And I think the philosophy is really resonating with a lot of people today so you hit it dead on and that's why I love your book so much.

Erica: Oh thank you very much. The sort of philosophy of do it yourself it has really blown up in popularity for very good reason. I am very happy to see so many people in whatever way strikes their fancy you know embark on a more DIY lifestyle.

Theresa: Yes and the one area that I really wanted to dive into with your book was in the section on simple cooking. Because you talk about tying together tips and tricks that you borrowed not only from your professional chef background but also what old school farm grandmas know. And you had these ten tips in your book and we don't have time to cover all ten but I would love to dive into a couple of them. One of the ones that really hit home that was one of the first ones that grabbed me was "Waste not, get fired not."

Erica: Mmmhmm.

Theresa: Tell me about that one.

Erica: So yeah this section of tips is professional chef tips that I have learned that I feel like translate really well for the hands on home cook. And waste not get fired not alludes to the fact that in the restaurant the profit margins are very thin and so anyone who has worked in a professional restaurant setting knows that you just don't waste food. It's not just a moral issue of food waste, it's a financial issue. And you can literally throw away your profit margin in the little bits and scraps of things that people may not think about.



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You know I was in culinary school years ago now and we were being taught how to take fillets of salmon off of a whole salmon carcass and the chef instructor who was leading this class she described how after we got the fillets off cleanly with as much meat on the fillet and as little left on the bone as possible we were to take a spoon and we were to scrape the salmon carcass of any additional meat that might have been left behind. So that we could then take that the little remnants of salmon and use them in things like salmon patties or seafood sausages or something like that.

And this particular instructor had been a very successful restaurateur up here in Seattle and one of my fellow culinary school students kind of looked at her and is like we've got all this salmon in the fillets why do we need to scrape the carcasses with a spoon? And the chef instructor she's very compassionate you know person not at all Hell's Kitchen-y in her demeanor or anything like that. But she her head swirled around and she snapped at this student like I had never seen her do before. She looked at him and she said "My restaurant made money." And that stuck with me! To this day I can picture that exchange because that is the difference between a profitable restaurant and one of many, many, many restaurants that go out of business in the first year of opening. Is that you care about the details and you care about the food waste and those little bits and pieces. That made the difference.

And many people don't realize that under their own roof in their own home they're probably wasting thousands of dollars of food every year. And you know times are maybe not as tough as they were in 2008 for maybe people but a lot of people are still struggling financially and economically and to think about throwing away thousands of dollars worth of food. Where could that thousands of dollars go to make that life better. Could it go to pay off debt? To college savings? To buy yourself a great vacation somewhere? Wherever it goes it's probably better than throwing food in the trash can, right?

Theresa: Yes and you had a fact in there about the average American household throws out \$2000 worth of food per year. That's the average.



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Erica: That's the average. Basically it's \$500 per person, per year based on average. And that's not the food waste that we see from agriculture. That's people buy this food and then don't eat it and then throw it away.

Theresa: Right, so one of the other tips you had where ingredients do double or triple duty you talk very specifically about using all the parts. It's kind of like nose to tail for vegetables and everything else. And you had a great tomato story. Can you tell the tomato story?

Erica: Sure! Well the first restaurant, I don't even know that I can call it a restaurant. The first place I ever served food it was this dive-y little pub and my first professional food job basically. And this place was not high cuisine. You know it was burgers and sandwiches and that kind of stuff. But one of the things that we did was we had all of these beef steak tomatoes that we were sliding for burgers and what not. And we would take the centre part of the tomato that was kind of uniformly wide and would make nice slices and we would get maybe 4-5 good tomato slices out of that tomato.

But then there would be the blossom end and the stem end of the tomato that were just sort of hanging out. And then those parts got diced for diced tomatoes we would put on the salad or that we would mix up to make bruschetta or something like that. I remember at one point one of my co-workers tried to throw away the end bits of the tomato and got thoroughly chastised. And again, for a restaurant that has very limited profit margins those little things that you might consider food waste, that's profit for a restaurant and savings for a normal American family.

Theresa: Yes and you even talked about when you are doing any kind of cooking all those little trimmings and scraps can be used for other things. And one of the tips, I kind of had one of those a-ha moments when I was reading it. You had fresh peels or fresh fruit peels and how you used those trimmings to put into your homemade vinegar. And I just did a podcast episode a couple episodes back on making homemade vinegar. Now I compost so when I have peelings it either goes to my chickens and then into the compost or it goes directly into the compost. But when I read that I thought oh my gosh, there's all the peach skins and things like that could



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go into vinegar and make some of the most incredible flavors. I had never thought of that! I had always just given it to the chickens. Which you know is still a good thing, but I thought that was a great tip.

Erica: Well thanks! And it's really true you can take your peach skins, your pear skins, that kind of stuff and you can ferment them to make your own homemade vinegar. And another thing that I've learned recently which is not in the book but I'd love to share it with your listeners. That kind of stuff is really great if you cook it down with some applesauce or something like that and puree it so it's really smooth. You can then dry that to make fruit leathers.

Theresa: Oh yum!

Erica: Yeah and it's really amazing. And I mean if you use applesauce, I think everyone knows how to make applesauce, if you use applesauce as you base, your fruit leathers tend to stay really nice and malleable so they roll up really well. But the flavoring of what you put in there comes through. So if you make the peach apple fruit leather it really does taste like peaches. Particularly if maybe you add a little bit of cinnamon to bring that flavor out. So that's another thing. There are so many ways you take things that we think of waste or compost and use them. Now that said, if you don't want to, feeding them to your chickens is still a great way to get a second life out of those things because you get your eggs!

Theresa: Yes with your chickens you're totally not wasting it and all those nutrients go through the chickens, through the compost and back into the garden. But what I love about that fruit leather idea is that you know exactly what's in it. It doesn't have all the junk that you have in the fruit leather that you would get at the grocery store.

Erica: It's really true. Especially as a mom for me the confidence of knowing what I'm feeding my kids is a huge advantage to this lifestyle.

Theresa: Well another thing that you talk about when you talk about being thrifty. Which I say, but for me that's really about being more sustainable in



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your lifestyle, that's what you're talking about. But one of the other things that you had, one of your other tips and I thought this was really cute: Those are not leftovers, they're prep.

Erica: [laughs] You know I was chatting with a friend of mine years ago and she was complaining to me that her husband refuses to eat leftovers. And I was aghast. To me almost anything is leftovers. If you got a restaurant if you go to a buffet, if you go to someone's wedding that's catered. The chances that you're eating essentially food that's been cooked and then re-heated or something like that is very high. No restaurant, no professional restaurant makes everything from scratch to order all the time. You know.

I remember when I was cooking at this one restaurant we had risotto on the menu. And risotto takes very long time to make properly from scratch. So we would make it up until the point the rice was just starting to get tender. And then we would chill the risotto in big sheet pans and portion it out. And when a customer ordered it we would take the portion from the sheet pan and finish it to order. And now this risotto was delicious. And there was absolutely nothing inferior about it because we did some prep work. But a lot of times people they kind of get the wrong idea about leftovers. They think eating leftovers means eating the same food four days in a row.

Theresa: Which would be so boring.

Erica: Oh meat loaf again...

Theresa: Right, right.

Erica: So I want to encourage people to think about getting some prep work done in their kitchen so that it's easier to put real food on the table in a hurry in the lifestyle that we have. Which for many people is very busy. And leftovers play a huge role in that. So learning to utilize the components of your kitchen as prep instead of thinking of them as ewwww, leftovers.



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Theresa: I think that's brilliant and a lot of people don't think that way. They think when they're cooking dinner they're starting from scratch every time. But with just a little bit of planning you can have several meals from one thing. You even talk about you know with the chicken after you've picked off all the meat you can make broth. And then you can make a soup. It all ties together.

Erica: And the amazing thing is when you kind of get into this way of cooking, like everyone, you have situations where you have no idea what's for dinner. I try to menu plan but come on. This is real life. So there are plenty of times when my kids come home from school and I go oh, they're hungry, what do I do? And I open my refrigerator and see I have some already cooked pasta for example. And I have some maybe left over chicken from a roasted chicken over the weekend. And maybe I have a little bit of local cream on the top shelf. Very quickly I can throw together these "leftovers" into something new and fresh that my family is going to like. And it saves so much time. I don't cook from scratch in the sense of starting at the very beginning of a recipe very often. I use what's in my refrigerator and freezer and please my family and be sustainable and easy on me.

Theresa: You know I think a lot of people might think well that's easy for you because you're a professional trained chef. And you talk about that in your book. You just have to learn some of the basic skills and then as you do each recipe you get a little bit better. I think you had some kind of quote and I can't remember off the top of my head but it was something like the first time you do the recipe you get it and the second time you master that.

Erica: Yeah I say something like that I think when I talk about yogurt.

Theresa: Yes.

Erica: And that's true for many things. You know it's interesting because I have written what is in many ways a cookbook. I talk about things other than food in the Hands on Home but it is a cookbook with recipes. But, and I'll happily admit this, I don't really like recipes. And so I found myself when

I was writing the book very torn. Because you have to provide, there's a format for recipes and you really have to provide the instruction in that format. But as a cook, as a home cook, I look at recipes more as inspiration and guidelines than as some hard and fast rule.

Theresa: And that's one of your tips. You talk about Pirates of the Caribbean. Can you say that?

Erica: These should be more like guidelines. It's true! And people who are comfortable all treat cooking like this. Baking is a little bit different because there's more of a science to it. But people who are comfortable in the kitchen and comfortable cooking we are improvisational in our cooking. We adjust. And what you find as you get a little bit of practice in that is that there aren't really that many recipes in the world. It's very easy to get overwhelmed with blogs and cookbooks and magazines that all put you know there's probably half a billion recipes or something that you could go and find. But when you really look at them there's only a few major techniques that are represented by those recipes.

And once you really figure out the technique, once you figure out how to sear a piece of meat and then finish it in the oven. Or once you figure out how to braise something. Or figure out how to high heat roast vegetables. Or once you figure out how to cook a grain. Once you've done this to one thing you can really apply that technique skill to almost anything. So I am very torn because on the one hand I had to provide recipes but I also want to tell people go learn techniques and look at recipes as a way of getting more experience with techniques that you can apply to different things. And really that's key to being a confident, flexible home cook.

Theresa: And it's really that way in canning. That you have to follow the basic canning of so that you have the right acidity. But you can totally adjust the seasonings and make it your own.

Erica: Absolutely.



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Theresa: Yeah and so a lot of people are afraid to do that. That cinnamon isn't what's making the jam safe. It's what's adding your own little spin on it. And I loved that line about the Pirates of the Caribbean. I actually laughed out loud at that. And because I know you I could actually picture you saying that. [laughs] That was pretty funny!

Erica: Yeah and I hope some of my own personality came through in the book. What I wanted to avoid was the sense that I could make people feel guilty. I have this constant awareness that many people feel like they're not doing enough. Many people feel like they're not good enough. And people like me who write lifestyle blogs can contribute to that. And one of the things that I really try to do with this book was keep it real for people. Acknowledge that we're all working within time constraints, within money constraints, with different sets of values. So I tried to write in a way that people could get hands on and do more DIY lifestyle stuff, but without the judgment. So I hope I succeeded in that.

Theresa: Well I thought it came through. Your personality definitely came through. But I thought definitely you did not intimidate. What you do is empower. And I think that was really the key and that definitely came through for me as I was reading it. So I think you nailed.

Erica: Oh Theresa, thank you! I want to give you a big hug [laughs]

Theresa: [laughs] Well I was excited about your book coming out because I got to have the privilege of having a little bit of a sneak peak because I was one of your proofreaders when you were at the end and you were all comatose. Oh man, it was scary at the end I'm sure. You're just like get it done! But I was really lucky enough to get that sneak peak. And one of the themes that you carry throughout the book is the idea of finding a balance between doing the DIY versus you know buying something. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Erica: Yeah, absolutely. I think that the thing that so many of us struggle with is that there aren't enough hours in the day. And you know the philosophy of DIY is wonderful. But it can go so far that you're that you run



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out of hours. It's all about figuring out where the line is for you between what you can do for yourself and what doesn't make sense. And there's gonna be situations where it doesn't make sense to make your own lotions. I'd argue that there's probably never a situation where it makes sense to go buy a bunch of cleaners from the drugstore when they're so easy to make yourself at home with common ingredients. But you know I really feel like people need to look at their own life and their own time. Their own money and they need to figure out that line is for them.

Like I mention this in the book. I would love to be able to say that I don't use any plastic in my kitchen. It's something I've tried, I've challenged myself. But that's just not true. I use a lot plastic wrap to seal in freshness of stuff that I'm freezing or stuff that I'm making for my kids or to cover my leftovers. Of course I have the mason jars and the glass tupperware type things but plastic wrap just still has this place in my kitchen and I haven't been able to get rid of it.

Now I have in the past have felt some guilt about that. I have felt some ecological guilt about the fact that I still use plastic wrap. But and I'll be really honest with your listeners here. I just had to get over it. I have to look at my life and go okay I'm doing the best I can with what I have, with the time I have available, with the skills I have now. And now maybe in the future things will change and I'll be able to get rid of all that plastic wrap but for now it's a tool that allows me to do more for myself in other areas. So I'm just going to be okay with it. And so it's this fine balance in a DIY lifestyle between being empowered and feeling guilty. So I want people to go empowered. I don't want people to feel guilty.

Theresa: It's about not being so hard on yourself. Yeah, I like that. and like you said you have to justify the different things that we do do, to balance the things that we want to do. And you have to give yourself permission.

Erica: Absolutely. And I think we have to acknowledge that everyone is coming at this DIY lifestyle from their own circumstances. And they just need to figure out where they're going to get the most bang for their buck.



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Theresa: Excellent advice. Okay, I have one final question. So before you started on this journey of a more productive DIY lifestyle. You were just getting started. And now that you're older and wiser [laughs] I would like you to go back in time. What advice would you give to yourself now given all your knowledge.

Erica: Wow, the advice I would give to my younger self. You will find in the course of this lifestyle that certain things draw your passion. I have found this in the garden where certain years I've been really passionate about growing a whole bunch of different types of potatoes and then other years I've been really into melons. And then at home there have been times when I've been really passionate about soap making. And then there have been other times when I've been passionate about convenience foods that I can freeze. Whatever your passion is in the DIY lifestyle, throw yourself into it and enjoy it. Don't worry about doing everything all at once. It's okay to explore these skills sequentially. And it's okay to decide where your passion lies and throw yourself into that. So that's what I would say for everyone. Let your passion guide you. Let what you're really excited about learning guide you. Put away any idea of built or not good enough if you're not doing everything all at once.

Theresa: I think that's an excellent place to stop because that's really good out the door waving as everyone goes goodbye advice. [laughs] That's really good! Well congratulations Erica. I think your book is awesome!

Erica: Thank you so much Theresa and thank you so much for having me on the Living Homegrown podcast. Did you know because we're friends I listen to this podcast religiously. And I just love it. I am so happy that you're expressing yourself through podcasting these days.

Theresa: Oh thanks! Well I know you're one of the listeners that know about the outtakes at the end. And I can guarantee everybody that there were some outtakes at the end of this one. So everybody should keep listening all the way past the ending music if they want to hear the outtakes from this episode.



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Erica: Yeah everyone should listen to me embarrass myself [laughs]

Theresa: [laughs] But I did get her permission to include it at the end so we're good.

Erica: Absolutely!

Theresa: Yeah. Well thanks Erica and I'll be talking to you soon.

Erica: Thanks Theresa

Theresa: Well there you have it. That was my interview with Erica Strauss and her book *The Hands on Home*. So as always, if you're a regular listener you know I have lots of great information in the show notes for every podcast episodes. So I will have everything mentioned in this episode including Erica's book and the episode where we filmed her for *Growing a Greener World* on PBS.

But in addition, if you would like the chance to win a free copy of Erica's book hot off the presses I purchased an extra copy to give away. All you have to do is go to the show notes and leave a comment. All the details are right there for how you can win. So to do that, just go to LivingHomegrown.com/26. That's slash 2-6. And I will have all the information right there for you. And all you have to do is leave a comment and you might just win a copy of this book.

So thank you very much for listening today. I know how busy you are and I really appreciate that you took time out of your busy day to spend it listening to my podcast. So thanks for that!

I will see you all next week and in the meantime, keep working on those food choices that are local, seasonal, and homegrown. See you next time!



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Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. Visit 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.

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