

Neighborhood Conversations

Peterka Family Interview

When did your family start thinking differently about reducing waste?

We have always tried to be conservation minded and aware of our choices in what we buy. It has always bothered us how much plastic is being produced for one-time use, especially for food packaging. Much of this packaging is not even recyclable. When we decided as a family to not purchase any food packaged in plastic, it was a big change. But, we just had to change the way we thought about getting our needs met. We've contacted food producers/distributors and stores, and visited local farmers markets to find different ways to purchase many of the same items without the plastic.

A lot of what we are doing has been inspired by others. Several years ago, we noticed a woman at the grocery store using used plastic bags and containers for her bulk foods, and other folks bringing in reusable grocery bags. These were simple ideas, and they have greatly reduced the amount of trash we produce.

We grow as much of our own food as we can, and we shop in bulk. We eat seasonally, and can and dehydrate excess food from our urban garden. We shop at farmers markets, like the year-round **Ballard Farmers Market** where we can buy food directly from local farmers, including cheese wrapped in paper and milk in returnable glass bottles. Our chickens provide us with a year-round supply of eggs (as well as fertilizer for the garden), and we have learned to make some of the foods that we have not been buying because of how it is packaged, including bread, and keifer/yogurt.

What role do your kids play in the household's daily and weekly routines?

We make many of our decisions as a family, and talk with our kids about the impact of the choices we make when we buy things. In the garden, each of our kids has their own plot, and are responsible for the planting, harvesting, and caring for what they grow. We cook all of our meals from scratch, and they are both involved to some degree in meal preparation. (The night of the interview, Zeth, age 9, went out to the garden with the flashlight, cut fresh brussel sprouts, and started to sauté them in olive oil and homegrown garlic.)

Did you start your urban farm/zero waste project with a clear goal in mind?

When we started, we did not have a zero waste goal in mind; it was a side effect of trying to simplify our lives. Living this way was a matter of opening our eyes to what is available and thinking about what we really want and need.

We recently spent almost two years living and working on a farm in Carnation, and were surprised at how much plastic is used in farming – even the haylage bales for the cows come fully wrapped in huge, white plastic sheets. (Think gigantic marshmallows.) When we moved back to Shoreline we wanted to minimize or eliminate what was brought on the property. We wanted to be intentional about our purchasing choices and how we grew our food. We use crop rotation, compost our food and yard waste in our backyard using a worm bin and compost system, and use the worm castings

and compost to enrich the soil for our garden. The garbage we have left only partially fills our 10 gallon tote once a month.

What obstacles did you face in your new urban setting?

We have not had many obstacles, and Seattle has a wealth of resources. Seattle Tilth, among others. It has been easy to find all of the supplies we need for what we grow and harvest.

We work hard to create an organic environment for our family and the food we grow, and so the personal choice of neighbors to use pesticides and herbicides is the hardest part of urban farming, since the chemicals don't know to only stay where they are sprayed. But, really, the neighborhood has been very interested and supportive. To do our part, we have not gotten a rooster for our chickens as a noise courtesy. We'd like to grow chickens too, but we will buy chicks when we need them instead, and we are happy with our year-round supply of eggs.

What do your neighbors say about your garden and chickens?

Many of the neighbors have been curious. One neighbor was especially interested in the chickens, so we eventually opened up a space in the fence between our yards so the neighbors can visit the chickens anytime they like – and they often come over every day.

The garden has created a sense of community. We believe in sharing the food we grow and have brought baskets of produce to many of our neighbors. Many people have asked how to start their own garden. While renting a sod cutter last year, we helped a neighbor start their own garden.

What advice do you have for other families who would like to recreate what you have done in your backyard?

Know why you want to make changes and do it as a family. If everyone is not on board it will be hard to make the changes stick.

It is very important to start small, and don't overwhelm – trickle in any new project or idea slowly over time.

Evaluate your purchases and ask, "Do I really need this? Can I find it used? Can I share it or rent it?"

Keep turning to new ideas and look for new ways to do things that are part of your everyday routines (shopping, food, cooking, composting, recycling, etc.).

Look at where you spend most of your time, and look for opportunities to trade TV or computer time for gardening or cooking with your family.

Join an urban farming co-op.

Does your family do anything differently for the holidays to produce less waste?

We have had the same artificial Christmas tree for 15 years now, and it was Brian's family's tree for almost 25 years before that! It's kind of funky Charlie Brown-like tree. We have really gotten away from consumer-based holidays and make gifts and share preserved food from our garden, and focus on enjoying time with family and friends. Over the past few years we've asked our families to

do things with our kids, instead of buying them more stuff. We've found that it's more meaningful for everyone. The kids can probably remember everything they've gotten to do with their aunts or grandparents over the past several holiday seasons, but they probably won't remember what things someone may have bought for them just last year.

Is there anything you are not currently doing to reduce waste that you plan to do differently in 2010?

Meghan is working with others on the launch of a new non-profit in Shoreline, the Shoreline Community Gardens. Our goal is to establish community gardens throughout Shoreline. The first community p-patch site in Shoreline is now underway on school district property in the Ballanger neighborhood, and the focus will be on urban farm education and sharing resources. Right now, the nearest community p-patches are in Seattle and the waitlists can be several years long.

Currently there are a small number of dedicated people and community groups (like the Shoreline Rotary Club) involved as volunteers helping with weekend work parties to get the land ready. The food grown in the Shoreline Community Gardens can be used for individual use and the surplus can be given to local food banks. The Gardens will be open for public access after school hours and on weekends.

Brian helped start an urban farming co-op, **Harvest Collective**. It is an 11-member "worker cooperative" and our goal is to share tools, resources, and land to grow food in the Seattle area in a sustainable manner. Starting with our own yard in 2009, Harvest Collective has removed lawns and created gardens at about a dozen residential sites in the Seattle area, and operated an internal CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) exchange – where we pool all our harvested crops.

In 2010, Harvest Collective will be working to spread the idea of urban farming by recruiting new Land Partners, expanding the number of garden plots in the area, and making the cooperative self sustaining. Urban farming is a great way to get fresh, ultra local food, reduce packaging, and get connected to your food source and community.