

SIMPLE LIVING

in the Southwest

We're discovering the wonders of solar power, desert gardening and living on less.

By Susan Lahey

I never thought I'd be asking my children this question, but here it was: "Would you rather have a house with *land* or *indoor plumbing*?"

My children, ages 9, 11 and 13, didn't hesitate: "Land," they said. That settled it. After months of combing the Internet for houses in northern New Mexico, I had finally found one with everything we'd said we wanted. It was near the mountains; it had trees; it was only 30 minutes from Taos; and even though it sat on five acres, it was still within my meager budget. The house was also located in a gorgeous spot, with one set of mountains looming large to the east, and a charming valley stretching away to the west, bordered by ethereal mountain ranges beyond.

On the other hand, it was a 500-square-foot, one-room cabin. The only electricity was from one solar panel that pumped just enough juice to draw water from the cistern and run a low-wattage light. In lieu of a bathroom, it had an outhouse and a shower enclosure in one corner of the cabin, with a camper's shower bag hanging over it. It had a woodstove for heat, a propane stove for cooking and no refrigerator.

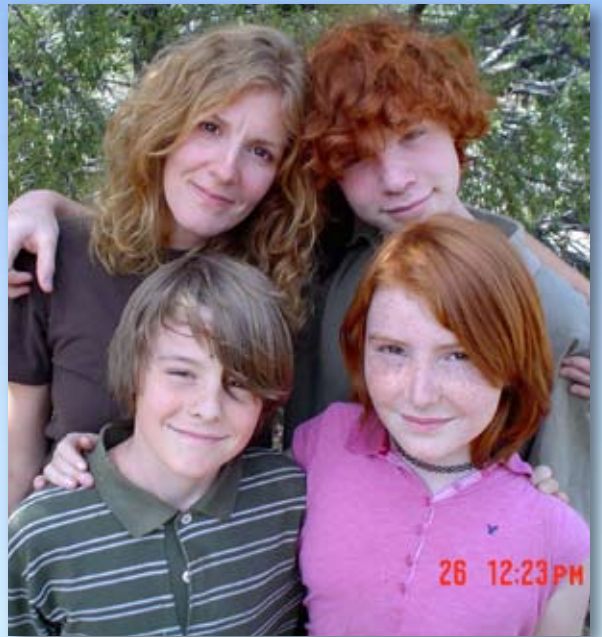
The cabin was a radical departure from our little farmhouse in Kansas City, Mo.,

where nature was harnessed into manicured lawns and tidy hedges. But for me, it was a dream come true. While living in Kansas City, I'd been working to live more simply: I started a little garden, stopped using air conditioning and learned to rely on a woodstove for heat. But moving to this cabin would really test the convictions I'd been spouting for years.

My kids, who are far more game than most children I've met, kept expecting me to get over this fantasy—like the time I wanted to get a nose ring—but I didn't. I bought the little cabin and we moved in.

LOW-IMPACT LIVING

Our cabin is a strawbale



octagon that was built by two women and their adolescent sons. They built it out of beautiful stripped logs and straw bales plastered with cement stucco, which makes it feel unbelievably cozy, quiet and sturdy.

The first night I heard the winds roar down from the mountains, I worried that my car would be knocked over. But the house was unshaken. The front three walls of our house face south and are built almost entirely of double-paned glass. The temperature doesn't matter, if the sun is shining—and it usually is—our house will be warm by about 10 a.m. and stay warm until long

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after nightfall. During the winter, one good fire at night keeps the place very comfortable.

A SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

When we moved here about a year ago, my main job was as a freelance journalist. I stumbled into another job when, one weekend, my kids and I volunteered to help a local environmental organization, Amigos Bravos, block illegal ATV paths that were damaging the forest. The leader of that project was looking for a program coordinator for another local environmen-

tal group, the Rio Colorado Reclamation Committee, that's tackling pollution from a local mine. I fit the bill and she hired me. My jobs allow me to work from home, which is great because I've always homeschooled.

I was, in many ways, completely unprepared for this adventure. I didn't really understand how to work the solar-electric system or the pump that sucked water from the cistern and groaned deafeningly, like a cranky garbage disposal that's caught hold of a fork.

Fortunately, I have smart and curious children. By reading the owner's manual and playing with the switches on the DC power box and inverter, we learned which ones turned on the water pump, and which turned on the outlets. We saw that if the indicator light was green, we were good to go. If it turned yellow, we were getting low on battery power and if it turned red, we were in danger of zapping our batteries entirely.

We made a few mistakes. I knew that refrigerators were energy hogs, but I didn't realize that so is anything else that heats or cools. One day, feeling bold, we plugged in the toaster oven and tried to make a piece of toast. The power indicator on the inverter looked like the stock market on Black Monday. After that we made toast in the propane oven. Working has been another challenge. I need my computer to write, so when the power is too low to run the laptop, I drive 30 minutes to an Internet cafe in Taos so I can work.

But learning to live with very little electricity was actually easier than I thought it would be. One doesn't, it turns out, actually need a food processor, microwave oven, television, blow dryer, or any of those other things that are part of a "normal" household.

Living without privacy was something else. My oldest and youngest children are boys and my middle child is a girl. We plan to add a small strawbale addition this summer, which



Working, learning and relaxing. Above; Liam and Dillon play the strategy game "Go." Bottom right: Lillian bakes bread. Bottom left: Liam brings in wood for the stove.

will give us additional bedrooms, but we needed something in the meantime. I thought of the pioneers who rigged up bedrooms using sheets suspended from the ceiling, and decided to make a wall comprising bookshelves, my dresser, a set of glass-front kitchen cabinets I'd bought at a salvage place and a wonderful old quilt. This divides the front of the house, with the sink, woodstove and front door, from the back of the house, where we have the shower enclosure and the beds.

Also in the back of the house we have our chamber pot, of sorts. I knew we wouldn't want to travel to the outhouse in the middle of the night—bears, mountain lions and coyotes all live around here. So we built an indoor toilet, based on a design I found on the Internet. It's a box with a removable lid, and a toilet seat that sits on top of a 5-gallon bucket with some wood shavings in the bottom. My children are appalled if, while buying the shavings, I make any reference to how we intend to use them. For the benefit of anyone in the store who might be listening, I am supposed to pretend we have a gerbil.

I thought the outhouse was going to be my biggest obstacle. I met a woman who, every time she had to go to the outhouse in the winter, picked up her two cats and took them along as insulation. I had also heard of people who found all kinds of lovely things to say about outhouses. I thought those people were deluded, but now I understand them better. When I step outside first thing in the morning, even on a rainy or snowy day, I am always struck by beauty. The smell of the sagebrush and the pine trees mingles with the sound of birds, and I have new joy, every day, to be here.

In fact, my biggest trial has been the lack of a refrigerator. We eat a lot of canned vegetables and beans, and canned tuna and chicken, as well as pasta and rice, but fresh food has been more of a challenge. I've learned that buying ice every day costs a fortune and that one good thing about high fat foods, such as butter and whole milk, is that they actually



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keep better. We also realized that to eat more fresh vegetables, we needed to plant a garden.

DESERT LIVING

Because we lack a reliable water supply, we didn't try to plant our own garden the first spring we lived here, but a friend shared her garden with us. So the kids learned about tilling, planting and the irrigation canals called *acequias*, whose water is as precious as gold in this arid climate. The local official in charge of when the *acequias* run is called the *mayordomo*, and he decides how much water each person gets. So we had to water on his schedule and do flood irrigation—like the ancient Egyptians. While inundating the fields with water is not my favorite irrigation method, it does figure heavily into ancient history, and I thought it was cool for the kids to learn about it firsthand.

In fact, when I think about it, the kids have learned a lot of what I hoped they would learn by moving here. We've been so busy, I hardly noticed. They've learned

from daily life that rain and snow mean water for us, not just the plants. We buy our drinking water, but our bathing water falls from the sky, onto our roof, down a drain pipe and into the cistern. When there's a dearth of moisture, the cistern goes dry. That connects their lives with

When the moon is full, it turns the piñon to indigo and the sagebrush to silver. One expects to see mythical creatures dancing outside.

nature in a practical way, which I love.

It's the same with sunshine. When the sun shines, the house is warm and there's enough power to run the water pump and sometimes even a light or two. When the sky is overcast or the days are short, we know we have to plan ahead. We must collect water during the middle of the day when the sunlight is powering the water pump. If we don't, then when we turn the water on in the evening or early morning, the thing might not work at all. The

kids know they have to gather wood for the fire. And last fall, they gathered pine nuts for food from our hundreds of piñon trees as well as pine cones and sage brush for kindling.

They've also learned not to be fussy. We all revel in visiting people with houses where we can take long, hot showers and watch a movie. But we also love coming back to our cabin where we have to heat our shower water in a soup pot on the stove and use only a couple of gallons apiece; where we have to make the fire and empty the chamber pot, and we read at night by oil lamp or flashlight.

And we have our five untamed acres of piñon and sagebrush, prickly pears and yucca plants. Hundreds of rabbits live here, and a pack of coyotes lives nearby. We've seen bear scat and mountain lion or bobcat tracks. We have other neighbors, but we can't see them from the house.

At night there is silence and dark and a sky full of stars. When the moon is full, it turns the piñon to indigo and the sagebrush to silver and one expects to see mythical creatures dancing outside. We have plans for goats and chickens and horses and a garden. But whether we cultivate the land or just enjoy the wildness of it, I have to say, I think the kids made the right decision. 🌲



The view from Susan Lahey's backyard — her five acres near Taos, N.M.

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