

Taking it Easy on the Road to Self Sufficiency

Author: Rebecca Warren

"Rome was not built in a day and Rome was probably not worth building. A sound self sufficient small holding certainly is" - John Seymour

Many people who make the move to rural Portugal aspire to a degree of self-sufficiency. For some a few rows of vines and a couple of chickens will suffice but others will settle for nothing less than full wine, cheese, oil, vegetable and meat production. Some are fulfilling a lifelong ambition and others a more recent dream. For me it was a little of both. I remember as a child drawing plans of farms with square fields full of matchstick cows and stables labelled "horsis" and "chikins". But as I got older I bought into the ideals of society and soon forgot farms in my pursuit of money, motorbikes and a mortgage. Many years later I had acquired all three and, as a bonus, a boyfriend who made the first and last seem somehow less important. We started to ask "what is it all about really?" the question that leads to so many life-changing decisions.

A stop off at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales on a rain-sodden motorbike holiday brought all those forgotten childhood dreams rushing back and before long we were excitedly discussing smallholdings despite our complete lack of knowledge of animals or gardening. It was to be a few more years before we found ourselves in a position to live out the dream but here we now are with our own patch of dirt, the time to spend digging it, a great climate and supportive and knowledgeable neighbours. And what neighbours! It's very daunting to watch them effortlessly grow all their own food, and enough for their menagerie of animals, milking goats and sheep and making cheese with one hand whilst pressing a thousand litres of wine with the other. They glide smoothly from season to season knowing exactly when to harvest the olives, when to plant each vegetable, how to prune vines and slaughter pigs without flinching and turn every last bit of the carcass into delicious food, not only enough for themselves but also for various members of their huge extended families working abroad in Switzerland and France and children in Lisbon, to say nothing of the bags, boxes and bottles of produce they pass our way. They make it look so easy. For any fellow would-be smallholders I would like to offer my warmest encouragement and a hearty pat on the back for having got this far but also a few words of warning: It is very easy to read books on animal care but very difficult to find yourself with an unwanted cockerel in one hand and a knife in the other. Gardening books will tell you when to plant a certain crop but an unexpected late frost can kill it or weeds will quickly engulf it or your animals will get to it and demolish months of work in minutes the first time you forget to shut the gate. A fox proof shed is easily constructed for poultry but if you forget to shut them in it, before dark, every single day, you might as well not bother. If you are not born to this way of life it is not easy at first. Those neighbours only make it look so because they were picking grapes and olives before they could talk and helping out in the kitchen and the fields since they were born.

There may be a breed of sensible realistic smallholders out there who pace themselves and get thoroughly to grips with each aspect of their new life before launching into it, people who spend years researching and working on other peoples farms before taking the plunge for themselves, who plan things carefully before carrying them out. If so I have yet to meet one. Chances are if you have gone past the stage of talking to other people and saying, "oh you are lucky" and "I wish I could do something like that" and actually bought some land then you're probably insane enough to want everything now and believe that you can. But if you don't want to end up more stressed than a stock-exchange market trader with a million pound mortgage then you really need to take it easy. Before you dash out and buy a hundred chickens, a flock of sheep and goats, and a rotavator and start ripping out every bit of woodworm infested timber in your house, wait! The main reason people cite for

leaving the rat-race behind is quality of life but if you're dragging yourself out of bed at six to start watering and working in the hot sun clearing brambles all day and mixing concrete and then sitting up sharpening tools before collapsing into a tent every night then you'll pretty soon kill yourself, or each other. Start with small animals and only a few. Make sure you have suitable accommodation for them and that you can comfortably provide them with food and bedding and have the time to feed them and clean them out. Consider buying them young so that you can get to know each other. Time just spent in the company of your animals is not wasted. The more familiar they are with you the easier it will be to catch them when they get into your vegetable garden and the sooner you'll spot any tell tale signs of sickness. Also it's endlessly entertaining. Some days, especially starting in a new country, you'll spend wrangling with setting up your new life, gaining residency, a postal address, insurance and the like. Treat this as time spent working - don't force yourself into the garden with a hoe at seven o'clock at night because you've spent a whole day dealing with paperwork. Crack open a bottle of wine instead and appreciate the sunset.

Cultivate a relationship with your neighbours. Here in Portugal they're almost guaranteed to be friendly and helpful. They know what to plant and when, how to prune vines and olives - invaluable if you've grown up in a country without these wonderful things and where to buy healthy livestock. Many of them, having seen their children leave for the cities or abroad are delighted to see people enjoying the way of life they've been living for centuries and if you make any effort with the language they'll try desperately to understand you and help you learn. That said, don't be bound by everything they tell you. Although their farming methods are no doubt much more in tune with nature than your average factory farm they do use chemicals and you may have to stick your heels in to convince them if you don't want to. Free range animals are something of a novelty and if you don't expand on the local variety of crops then you will end up eating cabbage for four months of the year. We've found our neighbours to be baffled by but interested in us. If they also have a good laugh at us from time to time, well it's a small price to pay for their support and advice. But most of all - take time out to enjoy your new life. Eat proper food and take the time to enjoy preparing it. Stare at the scenery, catch up on reading and make time to spend with people. Don't beat yourself up for what you haven't got round to. Instead congratulate yourself on having achieved what most people only dream of. It's not the Good Life if it gives you stomach ulcers.

If you embarked upon your self-sufficient lifestyle with dreams of long walks looking for mushrooms, cosy winter nights in front of the fire and time to learn the guitar and have ended up wondering how you ever thought you were short of time when you had a "proper" job, don't despair. Any day now you'll get the weeds under control, your holiday let will take off and you'll finally finish the bathroom and be able to take a wash. Until then - rest assured that you're not alone. Plenty of other people are finishing a day clearing brambles that would have had Prince Charming pack up his sword and resign himself to a life of bachelorhood only to slump in front of an empty log basket and then think "oh stuff it, I think I'll just go to bed anyway". Speaking of log baskets - mine is empty so I shall go and chop some logs, and while I'm at it I should really feed the rabbits and the chickens and the geese and the goats need milking and you know I think there's just enough daylight left to get out the cement mixer and lay the kitchen floor!

Read Becca's LiveJournal: www.beccawarren.livejournal.com.