

First steps in finding out about downsizing

Contributed by bugs

Downsizing, self-sufficiency, ethical consumer, hobby farming, homesteading, the road to River Cottage, living the good life (especially after the release of the ITV programme "The Real Good Life!"), turning in to Tom and Barbara, going back to our roots. Some of those may be meaningless to you, some of them may even make you cringe (Tom and Barbara is my particular bugbear, although I quite liked Margot). Either way you'll come across many of these and more when you start to investigate making a positive difference to the way you live - whether that's finding ethical food, buying from local producers, or even taking steps to produce your own vegetables, fruit, meat or honey. If you're completely new to all this, I hope to give you some basic starting points for your investigations which will help you find out which elements of these lifestyles will fit you best.

The obvious starting point is the web - after all, it's only a click away from this article. However, I've got a couple of things to say about that later, and I want you to read the rest of this, so I'd like to start with a few books that make a good, wide-ranging introduction. I'll also cover some magazines, and finally the web - with a few links to get you started.

Probably the most obvious book - often referred to as a bible - is the late John Seymour's Complete Guide to Self-Sufficiency. It's been through many editions since its launch in the seventies, and it is available at the moment as The New Complete Self-sufficiency: The Classic Guide for Realists and Dreamers. There's a reason for this longevity - it's a forthright, entertaining and practical introduction to probably every aspect of the life you might want to lead, from making soap to baking bread (don't get the ingredients mixed up). Seymour's personality shines through, and the illustrations make new terms and ideas a lot more approachable. John Seymour passed away earlier this year at the ripe old age of 95 - a wonderful advertisement for his philosophy.

Another obvious candidate, and in its own way even more accommodating than Seymour, is Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's River Cottage Cookbook - another one that seems to be heading for a long shelf-life and rightly so. Fearnley-Whittingstall's writing is perhaps even more entertaining than his presenting, he seems to believe in his statements, and has options for everyone from the bedsit-dweller to grand landowners. It's an entertaining and inspiring read - and the paperback's quite cheap too. He's recently followed this up with the River Cottage Meat Book - see the separate review on this site for more details (link at the end).

Sadly out of print, but worth looking for second hand, is Home Farm by Paul Heiney. It has clear pictures, broad summaries, and makes an easy read for winter dreaming. Also highly recommended, is The Complete Book of Raising Livestock and Poultry by Katie Thear. Another Downsizer.net contributor, Jonnyboy, describes it: "Think of it as the practical foil to Paul Heiney's book for the imagination!".

Finally, if you fancy something a bit more challenging but still aimed at a beginner, get my favourite, Cottage Economy by William Cobbett. You might think a 19th century book on improving the life of the average labourer doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs, but I find myself laughing and agreeing with Cobbett much more than with any contemporary writers.

It's worth considering that you will find most of these books in your library, and on the shelves next to them you'll probably be able to pick up similar ones that you might prefer.

There are three magazines that I know of which are appropriate to the budding smallholder, grower, or keeper of a few backyard chickens. Country Smallholding carries excellent advice, lots of beginners' articles, real life stories, and is responsive to its readers. It's thoroughly worth a subscription. I'm less familiar with Smallholder magazine and perhaps someone can put me right on that - visually I find it less appealing than Country Smallholding and have not picked it up so I don't know anything about its content. Finally there's Kitchen Garden Magazine which is especially good for realistic urban- and sub-urbanites, taking in to account allotmenters, container growing, and fitting edibles in to awkward shaped smaller gardens. For those thinking a little further than herbs and veg, Sue Hammon, a chicken expert who runs the Wernlas Collection, a supplier of rare breed chickens, writes a monthly column which caters for all levels but especially beginners.

There are quite possibly hundreds of thousands of websites covering these subjects. One thing they do tend to have in common is genuine enthusiasm for sharing their way of life with potential converts. Unfortunately, that doesn't help the beginner because you may find it difficult to judge whether the writer knows their stuff or is just a more vocal beginner than you. A good option is forums - which is why I left this to last. Do attempt a little reading before you start posting! Even if you don't have the books or the time to read them, spend half an hour or so browsing sites like River Cottage.net (of TV and Hugh F-W fame), Country Smallholding, Kitchen Garden and er, a little place I know called Downsizer.net. All these sites are friendly and welcoming, and will not snub you for asking a beginner's question; but if it's clear that you've put some thought in to your subject you'll inspire a much better value response out of the limited time other users have to respond. It should be pointed out that most of these aim to promote something - River Cottage is connected to the publishing, food and courses empire-ette of the same name; Country Smallholding and Kitchen Garden are attached to the magazines.

This is not an extensive list of resources to set you on your way to successful self-sufficiency, but I've used all of these resources myself as an absolute beginner and I hope they'll be useful starting points for other people in the same position. Comments and suggestions for additions are welcome in the forums.

[Review of River Cottage Meat Book](#)

[Downsizer.net Weblinks](#)