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## Urban homesteaders find ideal ground in Altadena

**Neighbors swap produce, honey, eggs and much more in Altadena, where the urban homesteading movement has produced much more than sustenance.**

By Veronique de Turenne, Special to the Los Angeles Times

March 10, 2011

Sometimes, the peach on a backyard tree is just a peach, a sweet, home-grown bonus. In certain circles of Altadena, though, that peach is a gateway fruit.

One tree becomes three, which becomes an orchard. The quest for organic fertilizer leads to a flock of chickens, which beget a garden. Before you know it, there's a herd of goats out front, heritage turkeys in back, a beehive, a rabbit hutch and a guard llama.

This isn't just growing your own, a few clay pots on a condo balcony, say, or a tomato patch next to the rose bed. It's full-on urban homesteading, people raising fruit, produce and livestock in the city, and nowhere in Southern California has it taken off like in Altadena.

"There's a lot of hot air about urban homesteading right now," says [Erik Knutzen](#), a Silver Lake resident who co-wrote the paperback guide "The Urban Homestead" with his partner, Kelly Coyne, and [blogs](#) on the subject. "But in Altadena, they really are doing something."

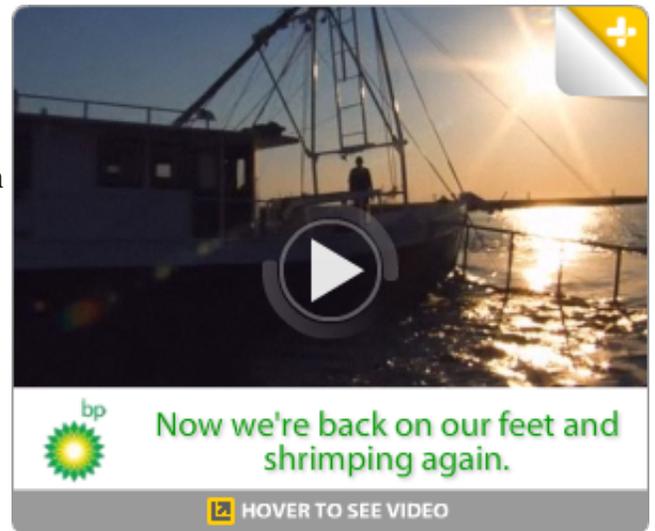
With a strong agricultural past, a quirky history and relative isolation from the L.A. basin's sprawl, Altadena's a natural for the urban homesteading movement.

"Altadena is one of the most phenomenal agricultural areas because of the rich alluvial deposits," Knutzen says. "And it's the only audience I've ever spoken to where there was a live rooster in the auditorium."

Some urban homesteaders tap into the growing preference for hyper-local products. Others are driven by the merciless squeeze of this awful economy, Knutzen says. In fact, a low-tech gauge of economic health is the subscription list for monthly [Backyard Poultry](#) which spikes whenever times get tough.

Whatever that first garden project may be, more often than not it snowballs.

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Case in point: Kazi Pitelka, a viola player with the Los Angeles Opera. In the mid-1990s, she bought a house on a 3/4-acre lot whose garden had been neglected for years. As she brought it back to life, Pitelka planted a few fruit trees. Then she planted a few more. Now a member of the [California Rare Fruit Growers](#) Pitelka harvests fruit such as mangos, bananas, apples, guavas, cherries, apricots, citrus (30 kinds) and star fruit from an orchard of 120 different trees.

Three vegetable gardens yield year-round produce. A flock of 30 chickens provides eggs and meat. Pitelka's foray into chickens led to raising turkeys for the holiday table. (That first year, the turkeys, which were so large they couldn't fit in the oven, were named Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter.) Now she raises smaller heritage birds, which love to roost in her trees.

The mini-farm takes a lot of work and money, but the results are worth it, Pitelka says.

"Breakfast this morning was bread I made, eggs I raised and fruit I grew," she says. "That happens a lot, and I'm far from alone. It's Altadena itself that attracts people who want this kind of life."

Altadena, which sits at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, is at a physical and psychological remove from L.A.'s megalopolis, says historian and longtime resident Michele Zack.

"We're at the very fringe of L.A., backed right up against the mountains," says Zach. She's the author of "[Altadena: Between Wilderness and City](#)," published by the Altadena Historical Society in 2004. "The area has a strong rural past — it began as a wine-growing region — and boosterism aside, it has this fantastic, granitic soil that grows almost anything."

As an unincorporated part of L.A. County, Altadena is free from the restrictive zoning laws of nearby cities. It's OK to keep poultry and many kinds of livestock, a task made easier by the community's large lot sizes. Add in a history of being home to artists, musicians and assorted free spirits, and you've got the makings of a back-to-the-land movement.

Among Altadena's more colorful characters was [Jirayr Zorthian](#), a painter and sculptor who traded art classes on his 48-acre ranch for lessons in physics from his neighbor, Richard Feynman, a Nobel laureate. Zorthian, famous for his annual birthday bash, a bacchanal of food and drink and naked dancing girls, willed the ranch to his son, Alan, after his death at age 92 in 2004. Today, a fledgling homestead is taking shape.

A pair of dairy goats roam the ranch's steep hillsides. There's a horse or two and a flock of chickens, of course. A neighbor keeps about a dozen beehives on the property and pays his "rent" in honeycomb. After a mountain lion ate two milking goats, a llama was purchased and put on guard duty. But the steep mountain slopes favored by the goats proved beyond the llama's abilities, so now it fills the role of ranch mascot.

Overseeing it all is Gary Dawson, who moved from Pittsburgh in 2004 and became the ranch's caretaker. He cares for the vegetable gardens and fruit trees, makes wine from the honey, pickles olives from a small grove and dabbles in chicken breeding.

"I want to make a new breed, between an Americana, that lays blue eggs, and a Barnevelder, a Dutch breed that lays brown eggs," Dawson says. "I want a Barnevelder that lays blue eggs, and that would be the

Altadena chicken."

Farther from the mountains, Gloria Putnam is having great luck with goats. A search for a source of fresh cow's milk led to owning the Mariposa Dairy, a herd of nine milk goats. Putnam and her partner, Steve Rudicel, live in his family home, an 18,000-square-foot house once owned by [Zane Grey](#).

"For the first year we were here, all we did with our time and income was fix the leaking roof," Putnam says. "When we finally looked outside, we saw we had all this land."

The couple put in raised vegetable beds, added chickens and bought two goats. Two goats became nine, and the friendly, funny, strong-willed animals soon became the focus of their homesteading enterprise. The couple milk the goats twice a day, and Putnam makes cheese. Last year, she entered the International Dairy Competition at the Los Angeles County Fair and won an award in the mold-ripened goat cheese category.

Now Putnam's considerable skills as an organizer have led to a monthly [Urban Farmers Market](#) in Altadena, a hit with growers and shoppers alike. At its inaugural meeting in October, 330 people attended. The number grew to 550 in November. In January, a holiday weekend, close to 400 people braved drenching rain to buy hyper-local produce.

None of which surprises Gail Murphy, the founder of [RIPE](#), a local fruit-swapping group.

"People build [kinship] around church and school, and here we've had that come out of our backyard produce," Murphy says. Members meet regularly to trade and share excess produce from backyard trees and gardens.

"There were four or five of us at the beginning, and now there are close to 200," Murphy says. The food swaps have led to an information network, potluck dinners and a sense of living among neighbors.

"Growing our own food has led to sharing it, which has led to something we knew we needed but didn't know we had," Murphy said. "A true community."

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