

Savor Summer Abundance in the Country

Summer on the farm, with all its chores, is a fleeting season. Discover new ways to prioritize and relish every warm, delightful day.

By Lisa Kivirist

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Zucchini pile-up on the kitchen counter. Tomato tie-up. Barn chore back-up. Gapers block due to fireflies darting through the night sky.

Despite the fact that I moved to the country to escape the craziness of urban traffic congestion, I quickly realized I gained a rural form of rush hour: summer.

But summer on the farm involves no smog, stalled vehicles or road rage.

A season of beauty and abundance, summer magnifies all the fundamental joys of country living all at once: garden-fresh food; postcard-perfect scenery; a rainbow of flowers in bloom and an outdoor-living mindset that begs for spontaneous picnics.

On the other side of the Popsicle stick, summer ushers in the busiest farm season. Since we moved to our farm in Wisconsin, I start energetically lusting for summer early in the spring, holding back the temptation to transplant seedlings before our mid-May frost date.

Flash to the end of the summer and I'm craving the first frost and hibernating around the woodstove.

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Like a torrid love affair, my relationship with summer goes through predictable cycles: We crave each other, passionately adore each other, then mutually burn out in the end, part ways and retreat to solitude.

The key to fully savoring summer on the farm is keeping balanced—working hard while having a satisfying dose of fun.

By the time autumn rolls around, you want to feel a bit tired, yet fulfilled—gratified with both the produce and the memories harvested along the way.

Tap into summer's potential by exploring themes of the season.

Prioritize & Focus

More than any other time of year, the average summer day offers a buffet of options and possibilities. Mow, weed, harvest, repair, process. Summer's to-do list never ends.

The key to finding balance between summer sanity and lunacy is accepting exactly that: You'll never be "done."

Try to focus on identifying and prioritizing the most imperative tasks for that day. Postpone nonessential projects till the fall or next spring.

Weather plays an important role in summer prioritizing. Thanks to the Internet, we can assess a quick snapshot of the weather for the week to help prioritize our days.

Get the harvest in before the heat wave starts at the end of this week. Run into town for errands when the mercury peaks. Why burn up in the heat when we can wait a few days for a break in the weather to get farm chores done? Hang out laundry on Friday after the storms roll out and weed after the pounding rains soften the soil, making it less of a chore.

For many hobby farms, most income comes in during the summer, so our livelihood is automatically prioritized. The world won't stop if the lawn grows a bit hairy, but if you don't have fresh produce harvested for your roadside stand, no income will come in.

To-Dos for Summer

Take advantage of summer's bounty:

Eat Fresh Our zealously for processing often overshadows the fact that summer remains the time to eat fresh. Harvest salad greens every morning for daily salads (not in the afternoon when they're wilted from the heat). Don't start canning strawberry jam until you've completely gorged on fresh berries.

Take Everyday Photos We often forget to document the everyday beauties of this farm season. We started an album devoted to farm photos, capturing summer abundance with shots of the kitchen counter buried with fresh produce or a magical, misty summer sunrise.

Dress Up for Town With summer's workload, grubby old clothes reign wardrobe supreme. Take a needed break from muddy grunge and make a habit of taking a shower and donning a bright sundress and straw hat for trips to town. Even if you're just dropping off library books, you'll feel like you're going to a party.

Share Zucchini Bread Summer abundance begs to be shared, particularly with senior neighbors who may no longer be physically able to garden. Given that most seniors typically live alone and don't cook big portions, our neighbors love small samples from our many mega-batches of zucchini bread, tomato sauce and stir-frys.

Rekindle Childhood We all have a favorite summer childhood memory, most likely linked to the outdoors. Tap into your memories this summer and hang a swing from your favorite tree, keep the freezer stocked with bomb pops and rekindle your inner Picasso with a fresh box of sidewalk chalk.

Take Bodily Care Summer takes its toll on our bodies, so give tender care when possible. I've found light, long-sleeved, cotton shirts and long, loose pants—scavenged from our local Goodwill shop—make the best outdoor work attire. I don't have to worry about sunscreen all over my body and it's easier to shower at night without mud caked on my knees.

Fix a Signature Drink Celebrate summer with your "official" summer farm drink, something you savor in the shade after chores are done.

Rhubarb is abundant in the Midwest and is the inspiration for our "Rhubarb Fizz," a church punch bowl recipe adaptation designed for one-glass servings without all the high-fructose corn syrup common in soda pop. The rhubarb-sugar-pineapple juice syrup will keep for several weeks in the refrigerator.

Ingredients 12 c. chopped fresh or frozen rhubarb 2 c. water 3 c. sugar, unrefined like turbinado 1 c. pineapple juice 2 liters unflavored seltzer water

Directions

In a crockpot or large saucepan, cook rhubarb and water over low heat for approximately two hours or until rhubarb is a soft pulp.

Drain pulp and place warm liquid in large bowl. Stir in sugar until completely dissolved. Add pineapple juice. Chill.

For each individual serving, add ice to glass and fill serving glass half full with rhubarb syrup. Top with seltzer water and stir.

Experiment with how sweet you like your drink, adding syrup or seltzer water accordingly. Serves 4 to 5.

We run a B&B on our farm, with the majority of that income generated during summer. This means we keep the house tidy and ready for the next round of guests at the expense of weeding time in the garden.

Breaking down jobs into bite-sized, more manageable pieces helps tremendously. I learned this the hard way with canning salsa.

Our family harvested tomatoes in the morning and had them cooked up by the afternoon, but then ended up staying up

past midnight to get everything canned as we still had our other farm chores.

The next morning I woke up to a dirty disaster of a kitchen, deflating my zest for food preservation.

Next round, we improved. The first day we harvested, cleaned and cut the tomatoes, chopped the onions, peeled the garlic, and gathered the canning jars and gear. The following day we sterilized the jars, and cooked and canned the salsa. A simple change, but it made all the difference in energy level and attitude.

In the middle of the necessary to-dos, try to prioritize a dash of newness. What was that one thing at the end of last summer you wished you would have done? Focus on that one thing.

My new thing this season is to harvest and preserve fresh grape leaves so I can learn to make dolmathes—traditional Greek stuffed grape leaves. For the last few years I've talked about it, but by the time I catch up with weeding and processing, the first autumn leaves have begun to fall and the grape leaves are too tough to process.

Weed

Weeding is like exercising on the treadmill: It's not your favorite thing to do, but it's the price you pay for a good-looking butt—or butternut squash. When it comes to weeding, the key is to minimize labor while maximizing results.

The first step for me was to cancel my magazine subscriptions with picture-perfect country gardens and embrace the “good enough” mantra: I will never pull the last weed in the garden and be “done.”

The strategy then shifts to efficient weed control and our resulting passion for mulch. We recycle a variety of biodegradable materials, such as cardboard flats, to put around established plants. We also purchase straw bales from a nearby farmer to use as mulch. Mulch not only keeps down weeds, it helps retain moisture in the soil, which means less time needed for watering.

Invest in the right tools for easy weeding. We're loyal to our stirrup hoe, which gently cuts weeds (way before they go to seed) at the soil line, leaving the greens to break down to compost. I can stirrup hoe a vegetable bed in minutes, which took some getting used to because I felt guilty for not kneeling down and pulling weeds by hand. My return for the time invested was much greater.

Strip

Yes, strip refers to paring down clothes due to summer heat. But as you slip bare feet into flip-flops, think more broadly of ways summer impels us to concentrate on the bare necessities. When life overflows with a never-ending farm-chore list merged with a buzzing social calendar filled with picnics and community events, we need to strip down days to our essentials, shaking off gratuitous activities in favor of what we really want to do.

Summer garden bounty recipes exemplify stripping down to core essentials. When I gathered my recipes together for our B&B and farm cookbook, I needed to write a qualifier in the opening paragraph of the vegetable side dish chapter.

I realized most of the ingredient lists for the recipes were atypically short: asparagus, olive oil, balsamic vinegar, salt. I didn't want readers to think ingredients were accidentally omitted, so I explained how summer garden dishes warranted no extra cheese sauce or anything other than a few flavor enhancers.

Consider a summer without, or with limited, air conditioning. While some of you may be gasping in horror, remember it was only a short generation ago that all farms were “naturally cooled.”

We open our windows at night to let in the cool air, then close them and draw the shades around mid-morning, when the mercury starts to rise.

If needed, we put a large fan at the bottom of the basement steps to blow cool air upstairs. We have a ceiling fan above our bed and a small window air conditioner unit in our home office where there's limited air flow. This hybrid model works well since our house stays surprisingly cool. And not going from extreme outdoor to indoor temperatures—like walking from the parking lot into the mall—keeps our body temperatures more consistent and comfortable.

Stock up on cool drinks and remember that the more time you spend outside, the better your body can adjust to the heat.

Go Local

Summer provides a roster of ways to experience and celebrate your local scene. This summer, try going to an area event

that isn't typically on your radar, like the county fair tractor pull or the local pool, even if your kids have long since fled.

Prioritize going to your community's key summer event. For us, it's our town's hot-air balloon rally in mid-June, an afternoon when we take a break from weeding and gaze at the vibrant display of color floating across the sky.

Given the busyness of summer schedules, I'll double-up and tie errands with an event in town, bringing a picnic and staying for the town's evening concert after shopping.

Local food opportunities abound this time of year. Despite the fact that we raise all our own garden produce, I'm always tempted by a farmers' market.

A celebration of seasonal abundance, I surprise myself with what I find there that I can use, but that we don't grow. From honey to black walnuts to fish from local farms, forage off the beaten path of the supermarket aisle and you'll find ample occasions to both eat fresher and support your local economy.

Celebrate Farm Life

Parties and summer go hand-in-hand, be it a large bash or an intimate gathering under the stars.

Create simple social rituals to bring people together to relish the beauty of the farm during this season. Informal potlucks reign at our place, never with a planned menu of who is bringing what (and if you don't have time to make something, come anyway as there is always enough food), yet we always feast fantastically with minimal effort and stress on our part.

Think beyond the classic Fourth of July for a reason to gather. Celebrate the Summer Solstice (June 21), French independence on Bastille Day (July 14) or let the garden stimulate a theme. Our fellow Wisconsin farming friends at Vermont Valley Community Farm host an annual "Pesto Fest" that is legendary among their CSA (community supported agriculture) subscribers, during which folks both harvest and whip up on-site (thanks to rows of borrowed food processors) their own pesto variations. Sharing and sampling, of course, is encouraged!

Identify a spot on your farm as your signature summer gathering spot. A campfire pit readily jumps to mind, but perhaps one of your outbuildings may inspire a social spot?

We have a covered shed that once housed tractors or farm equipment. The four walls are long gone, but the concrete floor, foundation beams and metal roof are functional. We cleaned it out, strung old holiday lights around the rafters and created our "Cantina," a favorite seasonal nighttime gathering spot, particularly during a rainstorm.

Live it. Love it. Leave it. Before you know it, you'll be harvesting pumpkins for autumn soup batches. Relish summer while it's here and croon along with Sandy and Danny from "Grease" as you crunch those pea pods off the vine: "Summer lovin', had me a blast. Summer lovin', happened so fast."

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About the Author

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