

Living off the land

Post by “HsiehKW” of July 25, 2023 at 5:41 AM

Anybody here "lives off the land" or somewhat close to it? I've been meaning to at least do that partially. Got done with a big move to the outskirts of the city and it is kind of rural here, not sure about relaxing yet though. We're renting a house "semi-native" house they call it and it has maybe some good 15x15 meter area that we can use. I do not have a green thumb and a cactus plant died on us when I was younger. But that's something I see myself doing in the near future.

Searching the internet, I don't see any resources about the [use of The Garden](#). I would imagine it wasn't all for aesthetics. Would Epicureans then would've lived off their land? I think they might have bought bread judging from Epicurus's famous "gloating" about living on less than a penny. But I guess it would have been quite likely they did use it for sustenance in some way. I'm just wondering if some of us here have embraced this kind of lifestyle.

Post by “Don” of July 25, 2023 at 7:05 AM

[Quote from HsiehKW](#)

I think they might have bought bread judging from Epicurus's famous "gloating" about living on less than a penny.

I addressed the quote from Seneca about the "penny" in a post from January:

Post

[RE: Weight Loss Methods - Poll of EpicureanFriends Results](#)

Diogenes Laertius 10.7:

he spent a whole mina daily on his table, as he himself says in his letter to Leontion and in that to the philosophers at Mitylene.

[U158]

Seneca, Letters to Lucilius, 18.9: The great hedonist teacher Epicurus used to observe certain periods during which he would be niggardly in satisfying his hunger, with the object of seeing to what extent, if at all, one thereby fell short of attaining full and complete pleasure, and whether it was worth going to much trouble to make...



Don

January 18, 2023 at 12:14 PM

And, yes, the Garden (ho kēpos ο κήπος) would have included vegetables and fruit. If you search around on the site here (or take a look at my paper on the location of the Garden in the Files section) you'll see some description of the size and use. They would not have exclusively lived off the land, however; no more than any other ancient Greek living in the city of Athens.

Post by “Cassius” of July 25, 2023 at 7:29 AM

Good subject for a thread, and yes I myself divide my time between city life and "the countryside" - where I hope to spend more and more of my time. But as of yet I have not developed much of a green thumb, with the exception of planting several fig trees which are now mature and producing.

Post by “HsiehKW” of July 25, 2023 at 9:38 AM

[Cassius](#) That reminds me I have to check on our sole aloe vera plant lol

Thanks, [Don](#) will read it.

Post by “Little Rocker” of July 25, 2023 at 3:50 PM

I also have a sad history of killing succulents, but I grew tomatoes for a few summers before I started traveling regularly, and it was amazingly rewarding. I say give it a go! As for Epicurus, there seems to have been a record of him writing to thank a friend for selling grain at a fair price during scarcity, and another record of the Epicureans rationing beans. So as Don says, it

seems they did grow many things, but like everyone else, they were not entirely self-sustaining. As I understand it, Greece always had trouble growing enough food to feed its population, which is one of the reasons they had so many colonies. And then there were skirmishes among the city-states for the agricultural land. There's a good book about this, aptly titled *War, Food, and Politics in Early Hellenistic Athens*, GJ Oliver.

Post by “Don” of July 25, 2023 at 4:30 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

There's a good book about this, aptly titled *War, Food, and Politics in Early Hellenistic Athens*, GJ Oliver.

By Zeus, I love my library! Just put a hold on it in our collection. Ready to pick up Thursday 😄

Post by “Bryan” of July 25, 2023 at 4:50 PM

I think this is an important topic. Epicurus valued autonomy and self-sufficiency. It seems to me that having money will provide neither when something really goes wrong with the country/currency.

Post by “HsiehKW” of July 26, 2023 at 12:21 AM

[Don](#) I'm meaning to experiment with how far I can go live on today's equivalent of 2 asses in my currency. But unlike Epicurus, I don't think I'd have a good reason to gloat or boast.

I used this [ancient money calculator](#) for fun to estimate how much would it be today in USD and in my country's currency. The minimum wage here is \$7.29 *per day*. If I used the calculator correctly, 2 asses would amount to \$5.47. I think a family of 3 with one breadwinner in this particular rural area can "easily" feed themselves on just \$4 per day. There may even be some who do live on less than \$2 per day, considering this is a rural area and I recently found out

that many live without water and electricity (recently moved). One of our neighbors, in fact, doesn't. But that \$2 per day would probably be just rice with salted fish, instant ramen, or even just soy sauce and oil just to give rice flavor. That said, I could *easily* live on just \$0.50 per day but that's not really an achievement (and probably not healthy). And, definitely, nothing to boast about given the context here.

I think living off 2 asses at \$5.44 in the US based on a \$7.25 minimum wage, would be somewhat commendable. I lived there for a while (during high school) and if I remember correctly that's not much. So, I'm wondering if anybody of us here already tried the same experiment. How did it go? Is it sustainable? And how would we today define living in moderation in relation to finances?

[Bryan](#) that's also my general idea. Hard to do without a community though. But I'mma try. I guess it comes down to hiring help for me (something Epicurus wouldn't mind, I believe).

Post by “Root304” of July 26, 2023 at 1:36 AM

I grew up on 20 acres of pasture land, but my parents must not have seen the merits in introducing me to things like gardening or tending to livestock much, though we had those things. So I never acquired a real desire to produce food. I am more of a value added type of guy, turning that food into fermented beverages. 😊

My wife is big on house plants and I do have a sole pothos plant next to my statue of Epicurus that I thought I'd get to be in solidarity with her, and to notice/remember my Epicurus. It has survived many dryspells of me forgetting about it for weeks. 👍

As for living off the land, that may be something I have in the cards as some friends of mine and I are pooling our money together early next year for some land to have our commune on. So that's fun to think about.

Post by “HsiehKW” of July 26, 2023 at 2:12 AM

Oh nice! Fermented beverages sound really great too. If I were in your stead, I'd probably steer that into a beer, wine, and cheese-making kibbutz. Hope you can share photos when the time comes, just for us to see and feel a little progress. I will too when get to start planting, etc.

Post by "Don" of July 26, 2023 at 8:04 AM

Even with the difficulty (or almost impossibility) of getting modern equivalent values for ancient money, your calculations look at least plausible to me. Nicely done.

The important thing to me seems to be that even experimenting on eating what "less than an as" would buy, Epicurus wasn't starving himself like an ascetic. He wasn't trying to live on a single grain of rice like Siddhartha Gautama during his ascetic phase. Epicurus was experimenting from time to time on how much would actually satisfy his hunger.

[Quote from HsiehKW](#)

Don I'm meaning to experiment with how far I can go live on today's equivalent of 2 asses in my currency. But unlike Epicurus, I don't think I'd have a good reason to gloat or boast.

We have to be careful about phrases like this, because we don't have Epicurus's "well-known" letter that Seneca refers to. The relevant section is Seneca letter 18:8-11 (emphasis added):

Quote from Seneca

Even Epicurus, the teacher of pleasure, used to observe stated intervals, during which he satisfied his hunger in meager fashion; he wished to see whether he thereby fell short of full and complete happiness, and, if so, by what amount he fell short, and whether this amount was worth purchasing at the price of great effort. At any rate, he makes such a statement in the well known letter written to Polyaenus in the archonship of Charinus.[7] Indeed, he boasts that he himself lived on less than an as, but that Metrodorus, whose progress was not yet so great, needed a whole as. 10. Do you think that there can be fulness on such fare? Yes, and there is pleasure also, – not that shifty and fleeting pleasure which needs a fillip now and then, but a pleasure that is steadfast and sure. For though water, barley-meal, and crusts of barley-bread, are not a cheerful diet, yet it is the highest kind of pleasure to be able to derive pleasure from this sort of food, and to have reduced one's needs to that modicum which no unfairness of Fortune can snatch away. 11. Even prison fare is more generous; and those who have been set apart for capital punishment are not so meanly fed by the man who is to execute them. Therefore, what a noble soul must one have, to descend of one's own free will to a diet which even those who have been sentenced to death have not to fear! This is indeed forestalling the spear-thrusts of Fortune.

So, Epicurus undertook these intervals of experimenting with a meager diet, "less generous than prison fare," from time to time to prove to himself that if he *had* to live on that much due to unforeseen circumstances in the future, he could still be happy. He was testing his limits

experimentally.

We have to be careful about the English translation of Seneca's *glorior* in the Latin text as "boast". Remember that we're getting Epicurus's Greek filtered through the Stoic Seneca's Latin. *Glorior* does mean "boast" but also "take pride in." And remember we don't have Epicurus's words. We can't know how he described his feeling. To indulge in some DeWittean flight of fancy referring to a lost text, I could easily imagine Epicurus writing to Polyaeus: "Recently, I've been able to satisfy my hunger pleurably on less than an obol. I'm quite pleased with that outcome. Metrodorus has found he still requires a full obol, and we have had enjoyable frank discussions about our experiences..." That's all imagination remember. But if the lost letter went something like that -- and we don't know if it did! -- I could see the Seneca the Stoic saying Epicurus was boasting or was proud of himself.

Post by "HsiehKW" of July 26, 2023 at 10:00 AM

Thanks [Don](#)! I'll be careful next time. I didn't mean that in a negative way at all. Should have put them in scare quotes. I'm also experimenting in that way, trying to follow his footsteps in that regard. Doing IF every day, multi-day fasting from time to time, and trying to eat simpler -- from epicurean to Epicurean. This is where I am at in my journey. A four-day fast was my record back in college but now the most recent longest multi-day one I did was three. Now, I want to live frugally and hopefully partially live off the land. Good thing you brought up that point about how he was doing it to see whether he can if he *had* to, that is lost on me. That's a great way to anchor this experiment. And it will come in handy. So, thanks! Hopefully, I'll make it a lifestyle.

Post by "Don" of July 26, 2023 at 10:40 AM

In reference to my post 11 above, it is not out of the question in my opinion to consider periodic fasting or intervals of [caloric restriction](#) to be well within Epicurean practice. I'm not ready to call for either as a regular lifestyle but could easily see the teachers and students of the Garden periodically taking part in these and comparing results with each other. When you pay attention to your feeling of pleasure, is your meal truly satisfying? When times of famine come (as they most definitely did in ancient Greece!), how much truly satisfies my hunger and removes my pain? What do I **need** as opposed to what do I **want**? Then go about your regular routine until the next experiment. Do I need as much as last time or does less satisfy me? Or do I really need more? What do I **need** to be healthy and happy? Was I fooling myself last time, trying to

show off withstanding pain, like a Stoic?

This also has echoes of Epicurus sharing his bean crop in times of famine. He and his students were prepared to know what a reasonable or realistic ration was due to prior experience and experimentation.

This could be an interesting area for experimentation.

Edit/Addendum:

I wanted to add that nowhere do we read that Epicurus experimented in this way with clothing, housing, etc. He didn't experiment with living by begging or staying in a cave. He didn't go out with a flimsy cloak or barefoot in winter (like Socrates did to show how unencumbered by convention he was). He didn't try begging in the streets like Cynic. Epicurus had a modest house in the city, a large private productive Garden literally in the suburbs. Epicurus does write about fancy clothes and extravagant houses being unnecessary for well-being, but these could be enjoyed, just like a banquet, if opportunities presented themselves.

Post by “Pacatus” of July 26, 2023 at 2:11 PM

I've shared before that my wife and I spent 15 years on 20+ acres in the country. Our cottage sat down a chert lane and across a small limestone creek (called Terrapin Branch), and against a high wooded ridge. We had goats and various fruit trees (my wife made tasty dry country wines from tart cherries and elderberries – and even parsley once). We had a kitchen garden that yielded enough tomatoes, bell peppers, onions and garlic – and herbs such as oregano, parsley and sage -- to last the winter. In the last years, we had a small greenhouse.

To do that, I had to retire early, and we cut our income by nearly half. Let's say we lived those years in "rich simplicity."

Now we have lived for 10 years as townies in a small apartment. We only grow a few herbs on the deck. We do try to get a lot of groceries and produce from the local co-op. (During the pandemic we had nearly everything delivered – including wine from a discount wine club that supports up-and-coming independent vintners, including a number of women.) We eat out about once a week.

I am not by nature ascetic – quite the contrary! 😄 I do intermittent fasting for its health benefits (12 to 16 hours three or four times a week). All in all, as townies on fixed income, I would say that we live in “*rich frugality*.”

Post by “Bryan” of July 26, 2023 at 2:28 PM

Hunger is the best spice "cibi condimentum esse famem" as Cicero, in one of his Epicurus roasts (De Finibus II.xxviii) attributes to Socrates. So the idea/statement would have been common/passé in Epicurus' time. The idea seems to be expressed in many cultures at many times in history.

Post by “HsiehKW” of July 26, 2023 at 4:48 PM

Thanks for sharing! I'm quite interested not in just understanding the teachings better but also in how it is practiced and lived by others. I must admit that I have that propensity to be ascetic in terms of clothes and just be away from the crowd in general. But not to achieve some virtue but it's just quite comfortable for me and I simply don't like being in public too often. It's too much pain sometimes. In terms of food, I have been quite extravagant by local standards. I wish to correct that as I think it won't bring me much pleasure in the long run, considering I'm a new parent. Now that it was brought it up, I think it's clearer to be now that looking for that "rich simplicity".

Also, I'm curious. Correct me if I'm wrong. I think a close community can be very helpful to practice. For me, I think this forum is a great way to compensate for the lack of face-to-face fellowship and the opportunity to learn from others, especially from those who have been at it longer, have some mastery, and exhibit impressive scholarship. But I wonder if any of us here have a sort of close community of Epicurean friends nearby, how that helps, and any tips on how you go about it if you are without such.

Post by “Pacatus” of July 26, 2023 at 5:42 PM

I just wanted to add to the above that I do not think of “frugality” as some kind of idealistic virtue-discipline (ala, say, the Stoics) – but just as the simple practical virtue of “*living well within your means*” – where the double entendre with that word “well” is deliberate. And living well just means living as pleasurable, painlessly and stresslessly as possible.

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[HsiehKW](#)

I've always been a natural introvert and even a bit reclusive at times (well, maybe more than a bit 😞). A few close friends matter a lot, but I would have a hard time living in a close community – even of like-minded folks. This is my Epicurean community. 😊

Post by “Don” of July 26, 2023 at 5:47 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

I just wanted to add to the above that I do not think of “frugality” as some kind of idealistic virtue-discipline (ala, say, the Stoics) – but just as the simple practical virtue of “living well within your means” – where the double entendre with that word “well” is deliberate. And living well just means living as pleasurable, painlessly and stresslessly as possible.

Well put! Thanks for sharing that!

From how I read your post, you see frugality as a means to "living well" and not an end in itself like a Stoic would. Frugality is not a capital-V Virtue to be followed in every situation at every time in every place.

Post by “HsiehKW” of July 26, 2023 at 6:57 PM

[Pacatus](#)

Good to know! I suspect that that is the case for many here. I would not be opposed to meet-ups though if anybody is living nearby (not likely). Honestly, I'd be thrilled!

And yes, I totally agree with that stance on idealistic "virtues" in general. They might be practically useful to some people, but for me, they are philosophically untenable. The more I dabble in the philosophy of logic and mathematics, the more I lean toward [constructivism](#) -- loosely, that axioms (like virtues) are chosen as a "means" to arrive at something, not taken to be objectively true (e.g., Euclidean vs non-Euclidean geometries). Also, in this view, it is better to 'find' or 'construct' a mathematical object to prove its existence rather than to rely on assuming its non-existence and then provide a proof of contradiction to establish its existence.

Always was uneasy when being taught this method in school. It's [mathematical Platonism](#).

Capital-V Virtue, I think, has loose analogs in science too. In evolutionary thinking, it manifests in ideas like "for the good of the species". It's also like symmetry fundamentalism in the philosophy of physics -- "an underlying symmetry must exist!" These may be loose analogies, but idealistic thinking can be detrimental to a lot of human endeavors. Taking it up can make you too rigid, like a do-loop that is not capable of learning or adapting.

Post by “Bryan” of July 27, 2023 at 6:17 PM

[Quote from HsiehKW](#)

I wonder if any of us here have a sort of close community of Epicurean friends nearby, how that helps, and any tips on how you go about it if you are without such.

This would be a real outlier!

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 30, 2023 at 7:04 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

...it is not out of the question in my opinion to consider periodic fasting or intervals of caloric restriction to be well within Epicurean practice. I'm not ready to call for either as a regular lifestyle but could easily see the teachers and students of the Garden periodically taking part in these and comparing results with each other. When you pay attention to your feeling of pleasure, is your meal truly satisfying?

The idea occurred to me that I could make the 20th more special if I refrained from sweets for the week or 10 days before the 20th. The modern world makes sweets way too easily available, and so having a sort of "reset" period would make the experience more enjoyable. (It shouldn't be like the Christian Lent, but simply a voluntary individual thing).

[Quote from HsiehKW](#)

I think a close community can be very helpful to practice. For me, I think this forum is a great way to compensate for the lack of face-to-face fellowship and the opportunity to learn from others, especially from those who have been at it longer, have some mastery, and exhibit impressive scholarship. But I wonder if any of us here have a sort of close community of Epicurean friends nearby, how that helps, and any tips on how you go about it if you are without such.

I hope to one day start an in-person Epicurean philosophy group, and it would meet weekly. I need to get some materials together for that still (some hand-outs for reading) and it would be both a study group and a social group. There is the logistical hurdle of deciding where to have the meeting and how to advertise it.

Post by “HsiehKW” of July 30, 2023 at 8:20 PM

That would be great!!

Post by “Pacatus” of July 30, 2023 at 8:25 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

There is the logistical hurdle of deciding where to have the meeting and how to advertise it.

Just a possibility: depending on where you live, the Unitarian Churches are generally very open to various groups (the one in my community has a Wiccan group that meets, and I have known of Zen roshis and Taoists being Unitarian ministers). They might be happy to provide meeting space, depending on their general schedule. (Also, they ight offer some advertising via the church bulletin.)

Post by “Godfrey” of July 31, 2023 at 1:24 AM

In my neighborhood there's an Episcopalian church that, until COVID, provided spaces for a Zen sitting group and a yoga studio. I don't know if that's common practice or the work of an enlightened priest, but that might be another option to explore. Although opening up to Epicureans might be beyond the pale!

Post by “Little Rocker” of August 9, 2023 at 7:06 PM

Was thinking about this thread today after I listened to [John Prine's 'Spanish Pipedream.'](#)

<https://youtu.be/oPwq0YoOy4g>

Post by “Don” of August 9, 2023 at 7:33 PM

[Little Rocker](#) : your post had some embed code that didn't seem to be working. I hope you don't mind I fixed it. 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 10, 2023 at 9:48 AM

Thanks [Little Rocker](#) ..."blow up your TV" 😂 . Good thing it was "throw away your papers" and not your books! Also liked the line "try to find Jesus on your own". The equivalent might be find Epicurus on your own 🤔 (It's not possible to start a meet-up group unless you are in a big enough city).

But the true reality of living out in the country these days is it can be hard to (or expensive) to get internet, or good quality internet. (Starlink can be spotty and slow).

Although, living out in the country could include "blowing up your internet" ...but I couldn't live without it!

Post by “A_Gardner” of August 14, 2023 at 3:17 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3223-living-off-the-land/>

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

In my neighborhood there's an Episcopalian church that, until COVID, provided spaces for a Zen sitting group and a yoga studio. I don't know if that's common practice or the work of an enlightened priest, but that might be another option to explore. Although opening up to Epicureans might be beyond the pale!

Your mentioning of such a church reminds me of the Unitarian Universalist churches, so I wanted to mention them here to add onto the potential spaces for in-person meet-ups.

While it's also true that some churches are friendly to hosting group meeting for alternative viewpoints and beliefs, your best bet to contact and ask would be Unitarian Universalist churches. This branch of practice is highly eclectic and, though historically from Christianity, has become a church of many different faiths and beliefs including Humanists and Atheists! Due to the eclecticism of the congregations, they're basically open minded and pluralistic community churches.

Sounds like a contradiction, I know, but there's a long history behind that. Too much to put here.

So if anyone is near one, they would be some of the first to reach out to to see about establishing an Epicurean group in person!