From Curlers to Chainsaws

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My machine? It sits on my kitchen counter and is bigger than a breadbox. It’s brown and clunky with twelve shelves made of window screen. It heats up and a fan blows air over the shelves. It is regulated by a thermostat with suggested temperatures: for meat, for vegetables, for fruits. It hums. It whirls. It fills the room with scents of the summer garden. It lulls me to sleep at night.

My machine has been around longer than any one of my cars, longer than any one of my computers, even longer than most people I’ve known. My romance with my machine arose from necessity and my experimentation with food preservation. In 1983 a severe illness forced me to go on a diet of all organic foods, and at that time, there were very few such foods anywhere where I lived in Iowa. Oh, you could buy organic rice and organic peanut butter at the local food co-op, but that was about it. All the vegetables the co-op carried came right off the same truck that delivered California plastic-wrapped produce to the Hy-Vee supermarket down the street.

So I bought organic meat from nearby Amish farmers, and decided to grow all my own vegetables. The other alternative? Pay to have the veggies shipped to me at great cost. And then it hit me. If I grew my own food, I would have to preserve my own food, too. With long, harsh winters, Iowa has a short growing season. Most of the vegetables in the garden would have
to be “put by” and stored. And their preservation would most likely involve some kind of mechanical device or machine. Yikes. I didn’t know much about machines. Just the thought of a machine, any machine—anything from a simple device you had to remember to turn “off” once it was “on,” to a machine that had the potential to amputate a digit—was enough to make my neck muscles tighten into spasms. So I began using the devices that the women in my family had used to preserve food. A process of trial and error, it took a while before I found “my machine,” the machine that finally made me feel comfortable, the machine that I loved so much I eventually found a way to do without it.

I froze the Amish meat and started canning the vegetables with a pressure cooker. I had remembered how my grandmother canned just about everything, her homemade apron tied around her waist, the steam warming the kitchen, the jars cooling on the kitchen table, their lids
pinging soft notes in a syncopated rhythm. The pressure cooker was my grandmother’s machine. With a grunt, she hoisted the heavy thing up from the bottom cupboard onto the gas stove. A quick snap of her wrists secured the lid, sealing the gasket tight. She lifted the pressure regulator off the steam-vent tube with a roast fork. She played the pressure cooker like she played the piano, with bravado, her hands dramatically rising and falling, each staccato movement executed with complete confidence.

I lifted my pressure cooker from the box, and the whole scene lost its nostalgia. Obsessively, I began reading the instructions, my heart racing, imagining that once I started heating up the cooker on the stove, the whole thing would blow up, spraying glass and rotten tomatoes all over the kitchen walls. Finally, I figured out that pressure canning wasn’t that difficult and I nailed the procedure. Nothing went flying. No salmonella appeared. I did not drop dead of food poisoning. Every jar pinged at just the right time—just like Grandma’s—and the jars sealed. I put away bushel after bushel of pressure-canned green beans and sweet corn and stored them in a cabinet in the darkness of my basement.

But what a job. Most of the vegetables I canned were harvested in the heat of the Iowa summer when temperatures climbed to one hundred degrees. I stepped out into my garden in mid-morning, the sun bearing down hard upon my head. A few snips, a cut with a knife, and the veggies landed in a wire basket. Then a quick bath for the harvest in cool water in the kitchen sink. Ah, I let my fingers linger in the pool, some momentary relief. But soon the heat from the stove and steam from the pressure cooker sent the mercury even higher. Sweat oozed out of the pores of my back. Rivulets of sweat trickled down my chest. I tied a bandana around my head to keep sweat from dripping into my eyes. So you heat up this little steam-bath pressure cooker on the stove in the middle of the hottest days of the year?

I began researching food preservation and found that canning only retains about 40 percent of the nutrients in foods. That seemed like a good excuse to give up that method.

Next, I tried freezing my vegetables. Freezing retains about 60 percent
of nutrients. You still have to blanch produce before you freeze it, but the process is quick and not as steamy as canning. The problem with freezing is that you have to put your veggies in a freezer. First you have to invest in a freezer, and soon you run out of freezer space. Your freezer is filled with vegetables, but you have no room for your meat. So you upscale and buy a bigger freezer and this freezer takes more electricity. You end up paying for your frozen produce every month on your electric bill. And then a major ice storm comes along in January, snapping off the limbs of your trees, the falling branches taking down your power lines, knocking out your electricity for a week. Your electric bill drops, but your frozen vegetables thaw and your meat rots. You pack up your vegetables and trot outside, storing them in a metal box in the garage—safe from rodents. But then you hit the January thaw. Your box of veggies turns to mush. Your meat draws out the sleeping flies from the corners of the garage. And that was the food you were counting on to take you through until spring.

The third try was the dehydrator. Dehydrating retains almost 90 percent of nutrients. I’d seen pictures of dehydrators in gardening catalogs. I’d heard that they were convenient and quick, but I’d never really experienced one in action. Grandma never used a contraption like that, and I knew there would be a steep learning curve. I checked out a book from the library on dehydrating food and studied the process. I began to understand that different foods dry at different temperatures in a slow process, but one without much fear of failure or burning the house down. OK, great. At least no explosions or flying glass.

I decided to give dehydrating a try and ordered a small, cheap “snack” dehydrator to test out my ability. A snack dehydrator is like a child’s version of the real thing. It holds only a couple of trays of food. In a snack dehydrator, you might dry a couple of tomatoes as opposed to a bushel of tomatoes on a “real” dehydrator. I bought the snack dehydrator because I wanted to see if I could master the drying technique before I invested in a larger model. It was like taking piano lessons as a child. First, I practiced on an old clunky upright at school. Once my parents thought I’d stay with the instrument, they invested in a sleeker upright at home. When I never fully
Mary Swander

imitated my grandma’s talent, they sold the piano and I took up the banjo. I didn’t have a lot of faith in my dehydration abilities at first, and I didn’t want to waste money on an expensive machine. Dehydration conjured up wretched meals on camping trips, cowboys farting beans around the chuck wagon, and hardtack with sailors dying of scurvy.

But the snack dehydrator turned out to be a good fit. Looky here. Just a heating coil and a little fan. I liked that. Not much to break or to go wrong. Not much to fix if it did. And if it couldn’t be fixed, I didn’t waste a lot of money. The snack dehydrator soothed my fear of machines. I love machines for the work that they do. I love their cleverness, their inventiveness, their designs. But I hate it when they break. I hate it when I’m too dumb to fix them. I hate it when they are too heavy for me to carry to the car to take to someone else to fix. I hate it when I get the repair bill.

Most of all, I hate the gender issues that machines create for me. I grew up in the fifties and sixties. Girls were supposed to help their mothers clean the house, do the dishes and laundry. Boys were supposed to buzz away with power tools, snow blowers, and hot-rod cars. Girls weren’t supposed to worry their pretty heads about fixing anything. That was left to the men. But at the same time, girls were considered dumb when they couldn’t fix machines.

“All you have to do is just turn this little screw. See, stupid?”

Screw you, I thought, but didn’t dare say it. Girls weren’t supposed to use such language.

Ah, the classic double bind. And even if you did have some interest in machines, your ideas were discounted and dismissed.

“The cord on this vacuum cleaner is a real pain,” I said when I was about twelve years old, doing my Saturday chores. The vacuum cleaner cord got caught around chairs and table legs, abruptly halting my movement through the house. Once a week, my job was to vacuum everything, from the second floor all the way down to the basement of the house—carpets and tiled floors. You switched the attachment over—the smooth side for carpeting, the bristled side for tile and wood floors. You stuck on the crevice attachment to burrow down into the dust hidden in comfortable chairs.
with fluffy seat cushions. But wherever you went, you had to drag along that cord, that umbilical conduit designed to wrap itself around your neck and cut off the blood supply to your brain.

“I’d like to invent a battery-powered vacuum,” I said.

My mother’s chin dipped tentatively, ever so slightly toward her chest. There’s a good but impossible idea.

My father, the engineer, laughed. “The batteries would take too much juice. Would be too heavy. Too expensive.”

“Well, how about a small battery-powered vacuum then, one that could slip into tight places?”

“Ha-ha.”

Enter the DustBuster in the 1970s.

In my later adult life, I learned that I much preferred outside to inside chores. I bought my own lawn mower and worked myself up to the point where I could maintain it. See, stupid, you just turn a little screw, and out comes the dirty air filter. Turn another little screw, and out comes the dirty oil. Turn the wrench, and off come the blades. Turn another wrench, and on goes the sharpener on the electric drill. *Nnnnnnnrrrrrrrrrrrrr.* And the blades are sharp. Not too tough.

But that was about all I wanted to do with machines. I had a little tiller for the garden that gave me fits. Wouldn’t start unless I ripped my arm off pulling on the cord. Made too much noise. Ditto with the weed whacker. And I didn’t even want to think about something bigger—like fixing a car. Just take it into a reliable garage and let them deal with it. There are some things in this life that are worth the money.

But the snack dehydrator … just a heating coil and a little fan. I loaded it up and discovered the world of shrunken vegetable heads, those distorted and brittle dried selves of tomatoes, onions, and peppers. Wow, you just lightly blanch vegetables, shrink them, then store the tsantas in a canning jar with a tight lid. No steam, no screams. Or, better yet, double-bag the veggies to seal out the air. I placed the bags in a big plastic bin in a cool, dry place. Voila! I could take my food on the road. I could pull out a bag and pitch the tsantas in soups or stews. So convenient.
Soon, I was dehydrating everything. I made dehydrated tomatoes with basil. I made zucchini chips with paprika. I made fruit roll-ups, dried berries to add to muffins. I branched out into fish and meat and made jerky.

I went off for a whole semester at a time to teach in different locales with my plastic bin in the back of my car. Presto. I had ready-made dried soups and sauces. Presto. I had gumbo. Presto. I had tomatoes, onions, garlic, and mushrooms to add to spaghetti sauce.

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After several years, I outgrew my little snack dehydrator. The heating coil and fan couldn’t keep up with my bountiful harvests. I grew impatient. The stackable plastic shelves became too small and began deteriorating and cracking. I duct-taped the shelves together for another year, then broke down and took the plunge: I bought the industrial-model dehydrator, the Excalibur, the big one that sits proudly on my counter, ready for an abundant harvest. At last, I felt like I’d mastered the art of dehydration well enough to move up to this larger, more expensive model. This was it! This was my machine! This was my instrument that I played with real expertise. I stuffed it full of vegetables and pulled out thousands of tsantas, ready for any ritual, my little talismans there to ward off evil.

The devil never arrived. Instead, one day one of my angelic Amish neighbors wandered over and surveyed my dehydrating operation.

“That's something,” Katie nodded, standing in my kitchen, a red kerchief tied around her head. She wiped her hands on her apron and peeked inside the dehydrator at the tomatoes. She immediately saw the benefits of the device. No more steam from the pressure cooker. No more mushy, overcooked vegetables. No sterilizing glass jars. I could tell she was trying to figure out how she could dehydrate vegetables in her home, where she lived without electricity. Most Amish near me heat their homes with wood, but run their kitchen appliances—refrigerators and stoves—on propane, an allowable energy source within the dictates of their religious system.

“I’m wondering if I could dry fruits and vegetables like that in my gas oven,” Katie said.
“No doubt,” I said, “but you would have to heat the oven on low for a long time.”

She thought of other non-electric possibilities. “What about just laying the vegetables between two old window screens and putting them out in the summer sun?”

A bigger, cheaper dehydrator was born in Katie's mind.

And my mind began to take a turn, too. That's it. Why do we “English" think we need machines at all? Don't we just make our lives more complicated? Don't we just develop more wants and desires? What have all our machines gotten us? More repair bills and back pain trying to lift the darn things into the car. You start out with a snack dehydrator and where do you end up? Is an electric dehydrator better than a solar dryer? The electric dryer can be used at any time of the day or night, and in any weather. You don't have to wait for steady sunshine as you would with the solar dryer. But the electric dryer is much more expensive to run.

I sat in the kitchen in front of Excalibur and meditated. Instead of articulating om, I concentrated on hummmmmmm. I listened to the dehydrator's rhythmic drone, the whirling, twirling blades of its little fan carrying me into the dark on those hot August nights, the new moon a silver rind in the sky. The fireflies twinkled on and off, the cicadas turning up their pitch, the garter snake backing out of its skin, leaving its crispy impression on my front step. And what impression was I making? What was I leaving behind? Why was I here? Why was I here on earth but to listen to the hum, to become the hum?

And to turn off the dang machine. Why did I need this electric dehydrator at all? Even this simple, small machine? A heating coil and a little fan. Couldn't I improve on this? Do without the electricity? Preserve my food without adding any more cost? I had dug a little root cellar for my potatoes, rutabagas, and carrots. Root cellaring took no added energy and preserved almost 100 percent of nutrients. Couldn't I find another way to preserve those things I couldn't root cellar? For eventually, even the big one, this Excalibur, would die and I would have to replace it, putting me forever on the treadmill of planned obsolescence and consumerism. The
Amish had avoided this whole syndrome in the first place. Weren't they telling me something?

I began sketching out the design for a gardening shed, one that I'd been planning to build for several years, one that would hold my hand tools: rakes, shovels, hoes, and spades. One that had been originally planned with just one small window. Now, on my sketchpad, I added a bank of south-facing windows to the design. Now I added insulation and a plan to fill up the space with mass: plastic barrels of water painted black to absorb the heat from the winter sun. At night, the barrels would emit the heat back into the shed. Now I sketched in a small cold frame attached to the south side of the shed.

In the early spring, I took my piece of sketch paper to Joe, the Amish carpenter.

“Well, Ms. Swander,” he said, tilting his straw hat back and scratching his head, “I believe I could improve on your design.” Joe sketched in more windows—on both the east and west sides of the shed—and he added a skylight. He slanted the roof and raised the south-facing windows to a height where they would catch more of the sun.

My shanty was ready by spring. Joe built the shed at his workshop and hired a Mennonite with a flat-bottomed truck to deliver the building to my acreage. A small shanty originally designed as a tool shed became a multipurpose building. In went my bushel baskets, rakes and hoes, row covers, trowels, and everything else I wanted near my garden. In went my seed trays and watering cans. The shelves Joe installed along the windows were perfect for starting seedlings. And in went drying racks I made from an old window screen.

In the summer, after my seedlings were planted and thriving in the garden, I began moving my dehydrating operation to the shed. I placed my vegetables on the screen racks, stacking them up on the shelves near the window. I closed the shed door tightly, and kept the door closed during the heat of the day, the optimal dehydrating time. The shed kept flies and other flying insects away from the tsantas. It generated a slow, low drying temperature, great for lighter-weight veggies. The cold frame emitted
a hotter, drier temperature, better for thicker vegetables like tomatoes with a higher water content. With my shed and cold-frame dehydrators, I could dry a higher volume of produce. I had plenty of room. And it cost me nothing for electricity. And the whole process took place in utter silence. The mesmerizing, annoying hum had been stilled.

Oh, there were still some things that needed a burst of hotter air from the electric dehydrator—like the fish and meat jerkies. And sometimes a rainy day spelled doom for the solar dehydrating operation; but mostly the shed and cold frame did the trick. I had learned from my Amish neighbors, learned how to do something without electricity, learned how to actually save time, money, and energy. I would have to maintain the shed—keep a fresh coat of stain on it, repair boards that might get damaged in a storm—but I would never have to go through the frustration of having the shed break down, conk out on me when the electricity went out. I would never have to lift the shed into my car to take it to a mechanic for repair.

I began to wonder if there were other ways to save. Were there other machines that I could phase out of my life? My solar dehydrator launched me on an exploration of off-the-grid living. For now, I’m hooked up with electricity, but maybe down the road, I could eliminate it altogether. The electric oven takes the most juice in my house, so I looked into making a solar oven out of a paper box. Then I asked myself, “Do I really need the box?” I placed a black stew pot on the dirt inside the glassed cold frame, and, presto, it heated up just like a crock pot. Could I eliminate some of these irritating outdoors machines? What about getting rid of that frustrating tiller? What about getting rid of the noisy weed whacker? I already let my goats trim the ragged weeds along the edges of the fence. Then how to eliminate trimming and mulching with bark around the base of trees?

I began investigating permaculture and read books by Bill Mollison, the “father” of the movement in Australia. Permaculture is an integrated system of design that attempts to create a total ecological environment. It doesn’t just tweak one thing: how to dehydrate tomatoes in the most efficient
way. It encompasses not only agriculture, horticulture, and architecture, but also economic and legal systems. I found the work of Mark Shepard in Wisconsin, closer to home, in my same growing zone. Shepard took Mollison’s ideas and made them work in the American Midwest.

I began thinking on a larger scale. How could I make my whole small acreage more ecological, more integrated, more energy efficient, more productive, less costly, and with ultimately less work? How could I position my outbuildings, for example, to better use solar energy to heat themselves? To collect rainwater from the roof to eventually water the garden? How could I use my livestock for better pest and weed control?

With a larger, broader design in place, I understood how small techniques could be implemented to build a larger ecology on my acreage. Want to stop trimming and mulching with bark under your trees? Eliminate the noisy, gas-eating weed whacker and time and energy spent on hauling wood chips from the city dump? Mark Shepard mulches his fruit trees with a ring of irises, daffodils, and comfrey. The flowers keep weeds down and draw pollinators. The comfrey, with a healthy NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) ratio, enriches the soil and becomes its own fertilizer. Shepard uses his free-range chickens to check garden pests.

Want to stop mowing and take advantage of the land between the spruce trees in your windbreak? Plant blueberries. Want to stop pulling weeds and tilling the garden? Get rid of another noisy machine—that tiller? Plant a cover crop of white Dutch clover as a living mulch in the garden. Cover every inch of naked dirt with the clover, a legume that crowds out weeds and enriches the soil with nitrogen. Mow the clover once a year. Plant seedlings down into the living mulch. A no-till system. Gone is the need to rototill and amend the soil with large quantities of garden compost. Gone is the need to address soil erosion and compaction. Gone is the need for a large irrigation system as the living mulch helps retain moisture. Small steps add up to fill in the broad brushstrokes.

Bit by bit, my acreage is becoming more ecological and more beautiful. Ground covers, chestnut trees, apple and pear trees, raspberries, and Jackmanii clematis vines are taking root, budding, and bearing. Catbirds,
cardinals, goldfinches, jays, juncos, chickadees, and downy woodpeckers appear at my feeder. Wrens move into their tiny house swinging from the eaves. Bats take up residence in their house near the garden, where they control pests.

Slowly, my machines are fading away into the back corner of the tool shed. The lawn mower and weed whacker are used less and less. The no-till garden system has completely retired the tiller. Quiet and stillness are once again reclaiming my little piece of the countryside. A more functional design is taking over my acreage. In turn, my ecological worldview is expanding. If I can do this on a couple of acres, what could be done on a small farm? How could this concept be applied in a town or city? Couldn’t we design whole communities this way? What if the whole nation became a permaculture experiment? What if all the nations of the world joined together in this movement? Could we secure a local food supply in a growing world population? Could we address global climate change?

Now there is less struggle in my life, less toll taken on my body, less worry about breakdowns, and less time spent in counteracting this and that stress in a narrowly focused way—whether from pests, weeds, or even an overabundant harvest. Now I have more time to sit on my back porch and savor the blossoms on those clematis vines, to sip a cup of raspberry leaf tea, and listen to the songs of the wrens carrying twigs through their narrow, quarter-sized opening to their house to build a nest inside. And it all began in my own garden with my own lowly dehydrator—just a heating coil and a little fan—the hum and whirl of a simple machine, my machine, that shriveled my vegetables down to tsantas, and expanded my mind to fill an ever-enlarging space on the globe.