

Classes at Primrose Farm Park Demonstrate How to Get Back to the Land

With encouragement to “go green” popping up all around us and a changing economic climate that is inspiring people to look for more cost-effective ways to provide food for the family, people are turning to the types of homemaking and gardening activities that were once a way of life only a few short decades ago. At Primrose Farm Park, the St. Charles Park District has revived a 1930s working farm so visitors can see how technology and social change have impacted the lands and farming communities of the Fox Valley. Set among its one-hundred acres of open



agricultural space, historic farm demonstration plots and restored farm buildings offer an energizing environment where people of all ages can reconnect with some essential and long-lost arts and skills. From learning how to milk a cow by hand to putting your shoulder into the forceful art of blacksmithing, classes at Primrose Farm Park are designed to take visitors back to a simpler time while giving them the tools they'll need to apply these practices to today's homes and gardens.

Hands-on Help

Primrose Farm is a working, living history museum, one that enables visitors to experience many of the day-to-day aspects of farm life in the 1930s. It took a lot of people putting in a lot of hard work to run a farm back in the day before mechanized equipment became available. Today, it's easy to take for granted the milk we pick up at the grocery store or the tools found hanging on the garage wall, but early farmers had to create and produce most everything by hand.

One of the most fundamental of mechanical arts, blacksmithing is a craft few people get try for themselves. A local blacksmith with more than twenty years experience, instructor Chris Hubbard guides students ages 14 and above through such basic skills as how to control the fire needed to heat up raw steel, to how to swing a hammer to change its shape. Working with hammer and tongs and outfitted with their own safety goggles and protective gloves, students can work on various projects such as forks or candlesticks they'll then be able to take home.

Of course, one of the most common blacksmithing tasks involved making and repairing shoes for horses, just one of the many chores farmers did from sun-up to sun-down. There are many other animals that reside on a farm, all of whom have their own, unique needs and routines. “We want to show people why certain animals exist on farms, why farmers have raised these kinds of animals, and why they are important to our food supply,” says Kirk Bunke, Primrose Farm Manager. Primrose Farm today is home to Auburn Java and Columbian Wyandotte chickens, Shropshire sheep, Jersey cows, and Yorkshire hogs, as well as two Belgian geldings named Bob and Tom. Held Mondays through Saturdays, one-hour “Family Farm Chores” sessions welcome people willing to pitch in to learn how such animals are cared for and fed.

Doing such chores is bound to work up a powerful thirst, one that dairy farmers could once easily satisfy with a cool drink of fresh milk from their own dairy cows. Before the day of milking machines, however, a farmer milked cows by hand, another chore that required its own, specialized technique. In “Hands-on Milking” children and adults are shown how to properly milk a cow, practicing on a fake cow in the classroom before heading over to the barn and trying it

out for real one, part of Primrose Farm's small herd. Class participants will also learn how the milking machine was developed, what technological changes took place over the years, and the steps involved from the time the milk leaves the dairy until it ends up in the grocery store in bottles or processed as butter, cheese, or ice cream.



Take Your Thyme

Given the choice between a luscious, ruby-red tomato picked fresh from the garden or a pale pinkish one encased in a barrier of plastic wrap piled in a heap at the grocery store, most folks would opt for the garden-fresh choice. But growing your own vegetables is a daunting task. Questions abound, from how to start seeds, to when and where to plant them, and from how to fight pests, to how to harvest produce. Working with instructors from the University of Illinois, the "Planning a Vegetable Garden" class at Primrose Farm Park is designed to teach beginning and other interested gardeners the basics of growing your own vegetables.

"The focus will be on home gardening," according to Bunke. "We want to help people who are interested in starting a vegetable garden figure out how to lay out a plot so they can maximize the output and minimize the labor that goes into vegetable gardening." Instructors will demonstrate how an efficient layout can save gardeners time while helping them increase both the quantity and quality of vegetables that can be harvested.

Nor are vegetables the only foods a home gardener can produce on their own. Plants called "edible ornamentals" — flowering vines such as annual nasturtiums and perennial plants such as the common day lily — have parts that not only look good in a more traditional mixed garden setting, but taste good when properly prepared as part of a salad or soup. And while Simon & Garfunkel may have sung rhapsodically about parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme, good cooks have always known that a variety of easily-grown herbs can bring exciting new flavors to almost any dish. With aromatherapy and herbal health remedies also becoming more popular interests, gardeners are looking at ways in which these versatile and attractive plants can be incorporated into home gardens. Also under the instruction of staff from the University of Illinois, both "Edible Ornamentals" and "Herbs for Kitchen and Garden" classes will provide valuable background on

Recycling Nature's Bounty

When introduced to gardening at an early age, children will not only learn a skill that can benefit them throughout their lifetime, they also gain an early appreciation for the natural world that will help them become stewards of the environment. And one of the most elemental ways of demonstrating how parts of nature interconnect is through the amazing act of worm composting. Since many children may only see worms as they slither across the driveway after a hard rain, they will be fascinated to view them up close in a more personal way. In the "There's Worms in My Kitchen" composting class, kids will learn how worms act as nature's recyclers as they watch them eat through ordinary kitchen scraps to create compost that, in turn, will be used to feed vegetables and flowers out in the garden. Class participants will learn how to make either a simple worm bin they can use at home or a larger bin suitable for classroom projects.

Plants, too, can be recycled into uses beyond their original purpose. Take the versatile gourd, for instance. Part of the pumpkin family, these small ornamental fruits are a standard part of



traditional fall and Thanksgiving decorations on table centerpieces and flower arrangements. But when hollowed out, gourds make great natural birdhouses or can be used as containers for other plants. University of Illinois staffers will provide information on how to choose the best seeds for growing your own, how to train them to grow on trellises, as well as tips on drying them and ways to turn them into fun and useful craft projects.

And back before the days when people just walked into a hardware store and bought a broom, pioneers and farmers made their own. "This is a very traditional, rural skill that dates from the 1830s into the twentieth century," says Bunke. Farmers would use a crop called "broom corn," a plant that looks like the corn typically seen in area fields today — until it begins to flower. Then, says Bunke, broom corn produces long, thin strands that stay straight and that can be cut, soaked, and tied into bundles to form brooms. Students in the all-day "Basic Broom Making" class will learn how to weave corn straw into functional art, and will have their choice of making two brooms from flat, round, or turkey-wing designs.

For more information on these and other activities at Primrose Farm Park, contact the St. Charles Park District at 630.513.4370.