

RURAL SKILLS
SHORT COURSES
SPECIAL



Learning the Good Life

Heather Dixon meets a woman who is making a business out of teaching self-sufficiency

Ten years ago Victoria Merrick would have struggled to successfully grow her own vegetables, let alone weave willow, spin yarn, plant hedges and turn driftwood into Christmas decorations.

Now she makes cakes with eggs laid by her own chickens, grows fruit and vegetables in raised beds and could probably develop a reed bed filtering system without too much trouble.

For Victoria swapped a hectic cosmopolitan lifestyle, running chic city cafes and barista courses, for the highs and lows of rural self-sufficiency in a quiet Lincolnshire village when she married her husband, Shaun. The contrast couldn't have been greater.

The first few years were spent adjusting to family life in a large old farmhouse standing in 40 acres of land – miles from urban civilisation and on the other side of the world from her native Australia.

Then, four years ago, Victoria decided to

Heather Dixon

Heather is a freelance writer based in Yorkshire with a love of rural life



put her developing rural skills and long-standing business acumen to good use by setting up Wicked Stepmother's World – a series of workshops based at the farmhouse in which people could learn how to live the 'good life'.

The 'tester' courses proved so popular that before long she was organising workshops in everything from planting a willow coppice and weaving baskets to organising an aromatherapy garden and keeping chickens. Rag rugging, sausage making, keeping pigs (not necessarily in that order), baking bread with wild yeast and making rustic ladderback chairs swiftly followed as word about Victoria's rural courses spread far and wide.

'Over the years my interest in rural crafts



RURAL CRAFTS: Wool spinning workshops are popular

and sustainability has developed and evolved as I have discovered new skills,' says Victoria. 'I started the workshops on a small scale, inviting a few local crafts and business people to share their knowledge, but now they come to me asking whether I would be interested in running a course on a particular subject.'

Victoria believes the recession has had a significant impact on the success of the courses. The workshops focus on mending and re-using rather than throwing away; on growing your own produce and improving wellbeing. The programme includes more than 70 courses, workshops, demonstrations and lecture days embracing the kitchen, the garden, living sustainably and traditional rural crafts.'

As well as organising the courses, Victoria, along with Shaun, manages 40 acres of garden, woodland, lake and fields.

Countryside



NEW SKILLS: Victoria Merrick

She also helps neighbours Bill and Linda Hobson, who launched Somerby Vineyards Ltd in 2006 with a modest 150 vines planted in Victoria and Shaun's walled garden.

They now have more than 2,000 vines, including Orion, Ortega, Phoenix, Regent, Rhondo and Solaris, and Victoria is planning to introduce more courses related to grape picking and wine making.

She gears the programme around the seasons and over the next few months (October to December 2011) workshops will include basket weaving, nature-based decorations for the home, and orchard planting and management.

Lincolnshire woodsman and craftsman Ray Lister will lead workshops in basket making from locally-grown willow and the art of wood management and burning.

'Ray has travelled worldwide practicing his craft and now manages local woodland growing hazel, willow and ash for coppicing and charcoal making,' says Victoria.

'He coppices wood for fuel and makes charcoal. The workshop will rediscover the art of burning wood as a fuel and learn about growing, harvesting, gathering, processing, seasoning, different varieties, storing and burning wood.'

The course will also include a demonstration on how to use a wood-fired stove to its optimum, its cleaning and maintenance as well as how to effectively and safely use a chain saw. It's a world away

from Victoria's upbringing in Australia.

Her great-grandfather was Australia's fourth Prime Minister Sir George Reid and her father, an engineer, went on to buy and run his own farm. Victoria worked as a nanny for Australian comedian Barrie Humphreys before establishing cafes and patisseries in Sydney. She was eventually invited to help set up an Espresso School in London, then met Shaun and married him after a three-year, long-distance romance, giving up everything to move to his family home in Somerby.

'Shaun suggested we build a vegetable garden,' said Victoria. 'I knew absolutely nothing about growing things but was completely hooked by the time we had the first harvest. As my passion for the rural life evolved and the courses took off, everything I was interested in became the subject of a workshop.'

The name Wicked Stepmother's World evolved from Victoria's self-effacing and humorous view of her role in relation to Shaun's four children. The name stuck and the 'good life' followed. Now a supporter of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's Landshare movement, Victoria is opening a community shop at her home, selling local produce, which is likely to include her own homemade bread and wine.

'We grow all our own fruit and vegetables and for eight months of the year I don't have to buy flowers because we have a grow and cut garden,' says Victoria. 'We are not completely self-sufficient, but we are on the way.'

And she is convinced that the success of Wicked Stepmother's World reflects a significant shift in the way people want to live. 'We are going back to basics,' she says. 'People are beginning to appreciate the satisfaction of growing and eating their own fresh food, of mending something instead of throwing it away. Before long the ethos of self-sufficiency and the revival of rural crafts and traditions will no longer be alternative but mainstream.'

● www.wickedstepmothersworld.co.uk
Tel: 01652 628560



PRACTICAL: Keeping chickens is one of the courses available

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Workshops coming up:

AN INTRODUCTION TO GREEN WOODWORKING

Tutor: Ray Lister
Date: Friday, October 14, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £95 includes materials, equipment, refreshments and lunch.

THE HEALING GARDEN

Tutor: Trudy Norris
Date: Saturday, October 15, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £55 includes refreshments and lunch.

ORCHARD MANAGEMENT

Tutor: Ray Lister
Date: Sunday, October 16, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £85 includes refreshments and lunch.

AN INTRODUCTION TO SPINNING

Tutor: Joan Halliwell
Date: Saturday, October 22, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £75 includes materials, equipment, refreshments and lunch.

THE ART OF PRUNING

Tutor: Dustin Hamilton
Date: Friday, November 4, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £65 includes refreshments and lunch.

WEAVE A WILLOW FRAME BASKET

Tutor: Ray Lister
Date: Friday, November 11, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £95 includes materials, equipment, refreshment and lunch.
Limited number: 6

THE ART OF BURNING WOOD FOR FUEL

Tutor: Ray Lister
Date: Saturday, November 12, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £65 includes equipment, refreshments and lunch.

DRIFTWOOD TREES, WREATHS AND DECORATIONS

Tutor: Jean Hall
Date: Wednesday, November 23, 2011
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £65 includes materials, equipment, refreshments and lunch.

CHRISTMAS WREATHS, DECORATIONS AND FLOWERS

Tutor: Rachel Petherham
Date: Thursday, November 24, 2010
Time: 10am-4pm
Cost: £85 includes materials, refreshments and lunch.

