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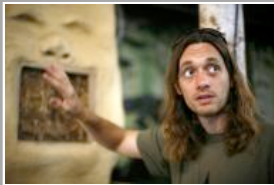
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Ben Sklar ASSOCIATED PRESS

(enlarge photo)

Scott Kellogg, a founder of the Rhizome Collective, teaches inexpensive ways to become ecologically self-sufficient in a city setting.



Ben Sklar AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)

Scott Kellogg says duckweed, grown at the Rhizome Collective, is fertilized by catfish and tilapia in an aquaponics system. The duckweed is used in biogas or as feed for chickens at the collective.

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Scott Kellogg, a founder of the nonprofit Rhizome Collective, talks about urban sustainability

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Cheaper methods for an environmentally sound lifestyle

Advocates have tips to help the green-minded with a tight budget.

By Asher Price AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Tuesday, March 25, 2008

Beyond the fence of East Austin's Rhizome Collective sits a salvage yard piled with cars. But in the shadow of this graveyard of a fuel-fed civilization, the collective has planted the seeds of self-sufficiency.

As the transportation of oil and food grows pricier, sustainability might not mean living off the fat of the land as much as scrounging off the lean spots amid the pavement.

Oyster mushrooms grow in coffee grounds, a fig tree thrives on soapy gray water from a washing machine, and electricity is generated by a wind turbine made of old bicycle parts.

This weekend and again in April, Scott Kellogg, a founder of the nonprofit Rhizome Collective, will lead a session called Radical Urban Sustainability Training, or RUST, in keeping with the inevitably gritty feel of this down-at-the-ground environmentalism.

Billed as an "intensive seminar on urban ecological survival skills," RUST will include sessions titled "Humanure and worm composting," "Energy depletion and city futures," "City chickens and micro-livestock" and "DIY air purification." The training upends the notion that being off the grid involves living like a rural hermit in a log cabin.

Kellogg is a 33-year-old who wears reinforced Carhartt jeans and keeps a Leatherman multitool and flashlight hooked to his belt. He drives at least once a year to his native New York state in his Volkswagen Jetta, specially outfitted to run on restaurant grease. He says it gets 45 miles to the gallon.




"It's primarily about saving money," he said. "In the future, the last thing we'll do with oil is burn it. It's so much more valuable as a food: The fattiest foods are calorically dense."

Instead of the sweeping questions that consume much of the environmental movement, about, say, nuclear versus coal-fired power, Kellogg is thinking basic and cheap.

Roof-top solar panels, seen by some environmental groups as the future of power, are not a long term solution, he said, because building them is an energy-intensive, toxic process, and installing them requires special expertise.

Instead, he prefers "passive solar energy": A plywood box, lined with foam insulation and painted black, with a heat-tempered glass top to let sun in, can heat to about 200 degrees, Kellogg said, hot enough to cook potatoes and squash.

"It takes longer — you have to start in the morning — but it's really

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good-tasting food," he said. "The starches all turn into sugars."

Kellogg co-authored "A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Sustainable City Living," to be published in June. During the RUST training, he will show off Rhizome's aquaponics system, in which catfish and tilapia consume food scraps or barley from a nearby microbrewery and fertilize duckweed, which, in turn, is harvested for biogas or used as feed for chickens, which he calls "micro-livestock."

He will explain how a chicken tractor works: In a cage without a bottom, leave it to the chickens to till and fertilize the soil. And he'll describe how to purify soapy clothes-washer water by running it through a stack of "constructed wetlands," each a bathtub full of rocks, soil and aquatic plants.

There are lessons even for apartment dwellers. For example, they can put their banana peels, fruit rinds and vegetables scraps into a bucket of red wigglers, worms capable of eating their weight each day and producing a rich fertilizer for plants.

The Rhizome Collective, which began in 2000, is a kind of proving ground for urban sustainability. Edible cacti as well as fig, pomegranate, persimmon, loquat and almond trees grow in the collective's courtyard, once an asphalt parking lot. Water from a 3,000-gallon rainwater tank is used to grow rice and arrowhead, an edible tuber.

Kellogg said "relocalizing" food production has a humanitarian bent. Instead of trying to sustain a "high, unrealistic standard of living," in which wealthier nations exploit poorer ones, he aims for "an intensely cultivated space" ultimately designed to "grow all our food here, process all our waste here. We don't have to be a giant vacuum of resources from countries to the south."

"We see ourselves as systems thinkers, as components in a larger system," he said.

It's hard to determine the number of urban sustainability adherents, but projects like the Rhizome Collective's have cropped up across the country, from Philadelphia to San Francisco.

Anxieties about climate change, the cost and quantity of oil, and air and water quality have driven "a lot of people to have a desire to live in a simpler and more globally responsible way," said Stephen Wheeler, a professor at the University of California, Davis, who co-edited the "The Sustainable Urban Development Reader."

Sometimes the realities of urban space bump against the sustainability laboratory.

An eviction complaint filed last year by a neighbor said the Rhizome Collective had "built (a) treehouse, turned area into barnyard, are raising turkeys, chickens, creating unsanitary conditions and odors" on the adjacent land.

Kellogg said the animals were subsequently moved back onto the Rhizome Collective's property.

Hiccups aside, sustainability advocates say the movement is about health as much as the environment.

"In many areas, the grocery store isn't right around the corner," said Karen Banks, the garden program director at Austin's Sustainable Food Center. "Instead people go to their convenience store, where they get Cheetos and Coca-Cola, high-calorie items that aren't nutritious."

Community garden experts recommend city dwellers test their soil to find out if it is contaminated before they plant.

Kellogg has a solution for soil contamination, too: Grow mushrooms. The fungi "will literally tear apart a hydrocarbon chain," he said.

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Weekend seminar

RUST sessions will be held Saturday and Sunday and April 12-13 at the Rhizome Collective, 300 Allen St.

The price is on a sliding scale of \$150 to \$350; the organizers ask participants to pay what they can. A work trade involves paying \$75 and working eight hours for the Rhizome Collective.

Space is limited. For more information, call 294-9580.