

## **Why the Starfish Blog?**

The Starfish Story  
by Loren Easley

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean.

Approaching the boy, he asked, "What are you doing?"

The youth replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die."

"Son," the man said, "don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make a difference!"

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said..." I made a difference for that one."

I first heard this story in Costa Rica during a Habitat for Humanity International training conference in 1997. Since then, I have heard it many more times and it always inspires me. It reminds me that even though I am just one person, I can make change. This blog is my attempt to make a small difference in the world. Thank you for taking the time to read about my thoughts and ideas. I look forward to your comments.

## **Hello World!**

February 5, 2010

Welcome to my blog! Here you will find posts about: going Green, parenting, the joys of reading, being a mom, making a difference, teaching ESL, traveling, finding balance in life, and having fun with your spouse. I look forward to sharing with you and to hearing your comments as well. Thank you for joining me here.

## **I Wish I traveled As Much As My Food**

February 20, 2010

My food is more well traveled than I am these days. My syrup is from the state of Washington, my clementines from Spain, and my coffee from Costa Rica, My clementines alone traveled about 3,997 miles (the distance between Barcelona and Baltimore) to get to my plate. Barbara Kingsolver, one of my favorite authors writes about how our food travels long distances, and uses a tremendous amount of fuel to get to our tables. In her book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, A Year of Food Life* (2007) she writes: "Americans put almost as much fossil fuel into our refrigerators as our cars. We're consuming about 400 gallons of oil a year per citizen – about 17% of our nation's energy use – for agriculture, a close second to our vehicular use. ...getting the crop from seed to harvest takes only one-fifth of the total oil used for our food. The lion's share is consumed during the trip from the farm to your plate. Each food item in a typical U.S. meal has traveled an average of 1,500 miles" (page 5). I find it fascinating and distressing to think that we are using so much gas to transport our food.

As a concerned citizen of the world I do conserve energy at home – I try hard to keep the thermostat at 68 degrees, and to turn off the lights when I leave the room. My husband and I also choose to drive a Honda Civic because it gets about 34 miles per gallon. Now that I know how much fossil fuel we use to transport our food, I am going to add buying more locally grown fruits, vegetables, eggs etc., to my list of things to do to help our planet.

This is especially hard to do in the winter in Maryland though, where there are few locally grown fruits and vegetables available. However, I know I can make some small changes now. For example, I noticed in the supermarket, that I had a choice between apples from the state of Washington and Eastern apples, so I chose Eastern apples, since we live on the East Coast. In addition, my daughter and I happened upon an Amish market in nearby Laurel a few weeks ago, where they sell lots of locally grown produce, cheese, meat, and of course, incredibly wonderful pies. Why not buy essentials from the local Amish farm? It's a great excuse to buy great pies too. Since the Amish market is about 20 minutes away, I won't be driving there every week, but I have decided to make a point of going there occasionally to buy local.

In the spring and summer it will be easier to make bigger changes. I plan on buying delicious locally grown fruits and vegetables on a regular basis from one of the many Farmer's markets in our area. Fruits and vegetables from the Farmer's market are usually better tasting than those we buy in the supermarket anyway, because they don't get picked too early and they don't have far to travel to us. Kingsolver writes: "If every U.S. citizen ate just one meal a week (any meal) composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce our country's oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels of oil every week. That's not gallons, but barrels. Small changes in buying habits can make big differences. Becoming a less energy-dependent nation may just need to start with a good breakfast" (page 5).

I am inspired by the Kingsolver family's year long quest to grow their own food and raise their own chickens in order to conserve fuel. "We hoped a year away from industrial foods would taste so good, we might actually enjoy it" (page 22), Kingsolver writes. In addition, I feel motivated to do better when making choices about the food I buy. I know my daughter, and my dog for that matter, loved going to the Farmer's market last summer when I made the effort to go; all of those juicy strawberries, cherries and blueberries, just waiting for us to take them home. This year I choose to eat the most delicious foods I can find and conserve fuel in the process. Inherent in this decision is the resolve to buy local when possible.

### **More on Fresh Fruits and Veggies**

March 3, 2010

Participate in Community Sustainable Agriculture (CSA), find a farmers' market, plant a garden, now's the time... spring is coming. After my first blog entry about buying local fruits and vegetables, a couple of you mentioned Community Sustainable Agriculture (CSA). What a great idea! For those of you who don't know what CSA is (I didn't), it offers patrons the opportunity to support local farms by buying "shares" of the local farm. These "shares" are redeemed weekly during the growing season, in the form of a basket of fresh fruits and vegetables. According to Local Harvest, a non-profit organization ([www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)) there are at least 2,800 farms in the United States using the CSA model. CSA benefits farmers, because they receive money from consumers for "shares" before the growing season starts. This helps ensure a plentiful harvest, since farmers can invest early

on, in seeds, farming equipment and labor. Patrons of these farms benefit of course, because they receive wonderful, fresh produce throughout the year.

Local Harvest offers information about CSA's, farmers' markets and other local food sources as well (Note: Link on the right, under Blogroll, "Find Local Farms/CSA's"). I was pleased that their farmers' market locator came up with many farmers' markets in my area. You can look up farmers' markets at <http://www.USDA.gov> too, but their farmers' market finder is a little less user friendly.

Maybe you want to grow your own fruits and veggies this spring. Get helpful tips on how to get started at: <http://www.realsimple.com/garden>. From there you can also find links to, how to plant a container garden. Real Simple suggests contacting your local gardening center and your cooperative extension services office for tips on what fruits and veggies will thrive in your area. Use the search function at the USDA website to find the cooperative extension near you. "The Cooperative Extension System is a nationwide, non-credit educational network. Each U.S. state and territory has a state office at its land-grant university and a network of local or regional offices. These offices are staffed by one or more experts who provide useful, practical, and research-based information to agricultural producers, small business owners, youth, consumers, and others in rural areas and communities of all sizes" ([www.USDA.gov](http://www.USDA.gov)). Who knew there was so much information nearby. Happy spring everyone!

### **Creative Container Gardening**

April 5, 2010

I am pleased to announce I have started my container garden. The mint, sweet basil and cilantro are happily settled in individual pots at the entrance of our house. I did a little research on a nifty website sponsored by Triscuit,

[www.kraftbrands.com/homefarming/pages/default.aspx](http://www.kraftbrands.com/homefarming/pages/default.aspx)

and found that most herbs need about one square foot per plant and lots of sun. The cilantro however, likes morning or afternoon sun, but not both. My cilantro is tucked back a bit to get shade in the morning and sun in the afternoon. Another helpful hint about herbs is that mint can take over your garden. It thinks it is a ground cover, best to plant it in a pot.

Before looking up information on container gardens, I took a little side track and Googled "recycle old crib" (something I've been thinking about for a

while). I found "Top 11 Ways to Recycle Baby Cribs" at <http://www.greenecoservices.com/>. My favorite idea, since I am in gardening mode, is to turn parts of your crib into a trellis. So, yesterday we planted Cypress Vine along our back yard fence. Then we set up the crib ends against the fence to act as a trellis. We are looking forward to summer when the vines bloom with pink, white and red star shaped flowers that attract hummingbirds.

The trellis idea inspired me to think of more uses for our crib and I decided the crib drawer will make a great container for gardening. I went again to the "home farming" pages mentioned above, clicked on "Get Started Home Farming" and entered my zip code, to plan my crib drawer container garden. After answering a couple questions: what are your space requirements and what is the amount of time you want to spend on your container garden, the site gave me some recommendations. Plant carrots, peppers and bush beans it says. Planting carrots and peppers looks pretty straight forward. Carrots go from seed to harvest in about 10 weeks, they will grow to about 12 inches high and should be planted one seed per six inches. Peppers go from seed to harvest in 19 weeks, they will grow to 1 to 2 feet tall and should be planted one seed per foot. If seedlings grow in to close together you should thin them out – pull out a few seedlings to make sure there is enough space for the rest of them.

Growing string beans takes a little more planning. Apparently the best way to successfully grow string beans is to start with quality seeds. Also, it is important to ensure that the soil isn't too wet or cold. Growing them in a container is ideal, because you can manage the soil moisture content and warmth better. Green beans grow to be 12 to 18 inches tall and for best results should be planted in succession, one seed per 6 to 9 inches every two weeks. In other words, don't plant all bean seeds at once. Green beans go from seed to harvest in 8 weeks.

In the next couple weeks I plan on starting my crib drawer container vegetable garden. I am happy that after providing a safe sleeping space for our little girl, and at least 5 other children, when they were babies, I have found a good retirement plan for our crib. After it has helped us in the garden, since the wood is not treated, it will eventually rot and go back into the earth. What a great life it will have had, watching babies grow and now flowers and vegetables too.

## **Memorial Day Remembered**

June 2, 2010

An Excerpt from my Journal

May 23, 2008

We plan on going to D.C. today, since my husband's mom and her husband are visiting. One stop will be the Veterans Memorial. We ride the train, my daughter sits happily in her stroller facing me, I hope the stroller's breaks hold – of course they will.

It's a gorgeous day, light cool breeze, blue sky, cotton clouds. I feel light, as the air blows cool against my skin, over my bare toes, and shoulders. Ah, spring. Many people are here today, near the Mall, yet it's not too crowded. We see preparations for the Memorial Day Tribute. We pass the merry-go-round and my daughter says, "I want to go there." I tell her we will go on it next time. "Oh," she says, head bowed a little. I explain that her Papa (grandpa) and grandma are visiting and they want to see the Vietnam Memorial. "Let's catch up with them," I say. She agrees enthusiastically.

We walk a ways down to the Mall, stopping at Papa's request to look at the brick work on the Smithsonian Castle. It's a beautiful castle and Papa a carpenter and a builder, can truly appreciate its intricacies. My husband soon to be Dr. Boggs, physicist, points out the solar system walk, that shows the relative size of our solar system with planet placards throughout the Mall. We are currently standing in front of Jupiter, the planet depicted in front of the castle.

We cross the street and my daughter decides she wants to walk in the grass. We see the Washington Monument in the distance and as we get closer we see a large striped kite flying, which reminds us of visiting the International Kite Festival in this very spot, last month. On the other side of the Monument the WWII Memorial comes into view. The crowd is getting thicker now. Locals, Japanese tourists, Europeans, Latinos, we are all here.

For me, I've never seen these memorials and my motivation is to be with my family today. I think the memorials will be interesting and once I have seen them I can check them off my "list of things to see in D.C.", since we live in Greenbelt, Maryland, so close.

I like the way the WWII Memorial looks from the outside, State names boldly etched on the circular, stone, structure. We enter the monument looking up to admire the Eagles carrying their ribbons of peace. My daughter wants to walk along the top of the stone wall that circles down to the fountains in the monument's center. She is too short to see over the walls. I hold her soft little hand, and lead her down the walkway. "You don't need to walk on the wall to see," I tell her, "because soon we will be able to see the fountains from the walkway."

Then we reach the end of the wall, she turns and sees the fountains that cover the expansive rectangular pool, she breathes in deep, and quick, in surprise, and smiles. She leads me to the fountains. We sit together on the closest step to the water. People are putting their feet in the water, but I tell her no wading, because that's what the sign says. Then she sees some girls, she wanders over, beckons to me to follow her and quickly walks over to sit right next to them and make new friends.

The air is so cool, the sound of the water is forceful yet calming, the sun feels so good as we sit here side by side. I have my husband take our picture, to capture the moment. I could sit here for hours, it's so comfortable.

We move on to the Veteran's Memorial and I see –

Quilts

A man against the wall, body shaking, his friend's hand on his shoulder.

"Did he lose a whole regiment?"

So many people were lost, people like the young men whose photos I've just seen stuck to the memorial wall.

Another Veteran stands by in reverence, he's a volunteer here.

"Overwhelming names..."

It all starts to hit me.

I grip my daughter's hand and hope she never has to lose anyone close to her to war or go to war herself. I want to hold her and not let her go, her

soft hand in mine. She's been quietly observing this whole time. I've explained to her there are names of people who have died and are with the angels. We come here to remember them. We decide to turn around and I hold her hand tight. Part of me cries on the inside "it's so unfair, all those people dead, for most of them an early passing, all with parents and loved ones who mourn."

It's good to be here and to reflect. We meet up with my husband again and I ask him if he knows how many Veterans died in Vietnam. He says about 58,000, I tell him I think that's about how many have died in China because of the earthquake – so many people. It's so sad. Yet, here I am with my beautiful, strong, enthusiastic daughter, my loving, supportive, husband and his family – it's a gorgeous day and we feel blessed today to be healthy and happy together.

### **Delicious Corn Muffins**

August 4, 2011

I am pleased to announce Best Recipes, new content on the Starfish Blog. My first recipe, one of my favorites, is for corn muffins. My friends and family love these moist and tasty muffins and, as an added bonus, they are full of nutritious ingredients.

#### Colossal Corn Muffins

3/4 cup plain yogurt  
1/3 cup butter or margarine, melted  
1/2 cup honey  
2 eggs

3/4 cup all-purpose flour  
3/4 cup whole-wheat flour  
3/4 cup cornmeal  
2½ tsp baking powder  
1/2 tsp salt  
1/2 tsp baking soda

Note: if you don't have plain yogurt you can use a fruity yogurt like, blueberry or strawberry instead.



Beat together yogurt, butter, honey and eggs in small bowl. Set aside. Combine flours, cornmeal, baking powder, salt and baking soda in large bowl. Add honey mixture. Stir just enough to moisten flour. Do not over mix.

Spoon batter into paper-lined or greased muffin cups. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven for 20 to 25 minutes or until wooden toothpick inserted near center comes out clean. Remove from pan; cool slightly on wire racks. Serve warm.

Makes 12 muffins.

### **How to Grow Delicious Blueberries**

August 30, 2011

This summer, my family ate delicious, juicy, blueberries that we grew in our backyard. Blueberries are native to Maryland, according to the USDA website and this convinced us to try growing them. After unsuccessfully growing tomatoes, beans and a pumpkin last year, and peas and carrots this year, we were so happy to finally plant something that gave us a healthy harvest.

Here is how we did it.

1. In late May, we chose two blueberry bushes, a Bluecrop and a Bluejay, two different varieties to ensure cross pollination.
2. We dug holes far enough apart to allow for growth, each bush will be between five and six feet tall, one was about 2.5 feet and the other about 3 feet to begin with.
3. We planted the bushes using dirt from the backyard, a little compost, and Leaf Grow.
4. Using a rubber mallet, we hammered in four tall stakes around each bush.
5. To keep the birds out, we placed a net over the eight posts. The holes in the net are just right for the bees to get in, but not for the birds.
6. We watered them every two or three days as needed.

At first we got a couple berries to try in early June from the Bluecrop – yum. Then gradually blueberry production on the Bluecrop rose. Every few days,

my daughter and I filled up our hands with plump berries, skipped joyfully up the stairs and breakfasted on juicy blueberries, saving a few for dad. Then there were so many berries on the Bluecrop and berries on the Bluejay too, that we had to get a bowl for them. There were blueberries for the three of us on a regular basis. The Bluecrop produced fruit early in the summer and the Bluejay produced fruit a little later, this gave us a nice steady harvest of blueberries through July. We are looking forward to many more tasty blueberries next year.

## **Tomatoes at Last – Tips for Growing Great Tomatoes and Green Beans**

September 30, 2011

“Mom, I never want to eat any green beans but ours. The ones at school are mushy,” my daughter says as we eat green beans from our garden. I think we could be the “poster children” for sustainable home gardening. We have such yummy tomatoes and green beans that we eat them right off the vines. They barely make it into our house for meal time.

Even my husband, who traditionally doesn’t like green beans, eats our green beans raw or lightly steamed. While many of our store bought veggies lie dead in the crisper, our tomatoes, green beans, and our fresh blueberries, we eat daily, right after we pick them. After a summer of barren tomato vines, I am not sure why we have so many lovely Super Gold heirloom cherry tomatoes. Whatever the reason, we are grateful.

Last year was our first try at being farmers and we didn’t get any tomatoes.

Tips for growing green beans and tomatoes, things we think we did right this summer:

1. plant where there is plenty of sun (full sunlight from about 11:00am to dusk)
2. keep soil moist (water every other day unless there is rain)
3. use a trellis or other support (we used a 3 ringed tomato cage)
4. use a deep planter box (ours is 3 feet deep)

Note: experts say it is easier to grow smaller tomatoes, like cherry tomatoes. This was true for us.

I got the idea to plant bush beans from a kindergarten teacher. She told me, when our tomato vines still were not producing, "Grow beans if you want almost instant gratification." Plant bean seeds and seedlings pop out of the ground in about a week and grow rapidly over the next several weeks, finally reaching about three feet tall. They produce green beans soon after that. The whole quick process is pretty amazing and it reaps tasty rewards.

Almost daily my daughter grabs a bean for each of us to munch on as we walk to school. When we get home she makes a detour over to our tomato plant and excitedly picks off a few beautiful, orangey red, baby tomatoes. She happily hands a couple over to me, putting one in her mouth. "Mom, yum!", she exclaims. Three cheers for home gardening.