



LAND & WATER • H00 • START: PLANNING YOUR HOMESTEAD • MODULE 1 OF 7

GETTING STARTED: FROM IDEA TO FIRST STEP

From wanting a homestead to your first bed, your first hens and a plan you can keep up: what comes first, what it costs and where to learn more

**4FREELIFE**

A4 • SCREEN VERSION

12 CHAPTERS • 7 APPENDICES

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

YOU DON'T BUY A HOMESTEAD, YOU BUILD ONE

Most people who dream of their own homestead don't give up because of poor soil or a fox in the hen house. They give up because they started everything at once: two acres of land, twenty hens, goats, a polytunnel and an orchard in the same year. By July there is more work than hours in the day, the garden disappears under weeds, and the love of the land turns into tiredness and debt.

This module is the entry point to the whole 4freelife library. It shows you how to get from an idea to a first step you can keep up: what to settle before the first spade goes in, how much time and money a small start takes, what to do in each season and in which order to read the other guides. At the end you have a written vision, an honest look at your starting point, a first-plan calculator, a first-season calendar and a plan for your first 90 days.

IN SHORT

- **Start small and do it well:** one bed you really look after is worth more than a big garden lost to weeds.
- First settle **why, who, how much time and how much money**. Land and animals come later.
- The rule for beginners: **one new area per season**.
- The first three things on almost every homestead are **water, compost and the vegetable garden**. Hens, fruit trees and everything else come after.
- **Keep records from day one:** what you sowed, how much you harvested, how much you spent. A journal is the cheapest teacher there is.

BACKYARD

covered by this guide

SMALLHOLDING

covered by this guide

SMALL FARM

covered by this guide

**SELF-SUFFICIENT
HOMESTEAD**

covered by this guide

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01 • CHAPTER

WHAT A HOMESTEAD IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T



4

homestead levels: from backyard to self-sufficient homestead



1

new area per season is enough to begin with



5

years before a homestead works as a whole

A homestead, as we mean it, is a home that gets a good share of its food, water and fuel from its own land and its own work. It isn't necessarily a farm that sells. Nor is it a return to the 19th century: you use what the old smallholders and crofters knew, but also a solar panel, drip irrigation and a calendar on your phone.

A homestead isn't an escape from work either. It **is** work: daily, seasonal and sometimes hard. In return it gives you food you know the origin of, security when the shops let you down, healthier children and the feeling of making something yourself. It rarely makes quick money. If money is your main goal, first read H00-05 Time and money: what a homestead demands and the series H64 Homestead economics.

The four homestead levels

Every 4freelife guide is marked with the sizes of homestead it applies to. Find where you are now, not where you'd like to be in ten years.

Level	Rough area	What it typically has	Work in season
1. Backyard	up to ~1,000 m ² (¼ acre)	Vegetables, herbs, a few fruit trees, 4–6 hens, compost	4–8 hours a week
2. Smallholding	1,000–5,000 m ² (¼–1¼ acres)	+ polytunnel, orchard, soft fruit, bees, potatoes	8–15 hours a week
3. Small farm	0.5–2 ha (1¼–5 acres)	+ rabbits, meat poultry, goats or sheep, hay	15–30 hours a week
4. Self-sufficient homestead	2 ha (5 acres) and more	+ cow, pigs, grain, woodland for firewood	30+ hours, the whole family

The hours are rough and apply to the growing season (April–October). In winter you need less than half, unless you keep larger livestock, which need work every day of the year.

TIP

Level 1 is not "worth less". A well-run back garden or plot of a few hundred square metres can give most of the vegetables, all the eggs and some of the fruit for a family of four. Many people stay there all their lives and are happy with it. A council allotment (in the US a community garden plot) is a good level 1 if you have no land of your own.

02 • CHAPTER

FIVE QUESTIONS BEFORE THE FIRST SPADE

Before you buy land, seed or hens, sit down with your family and answer five questions. Write the answers in **Appendix A • p. 14**. Half an hour of talking will save you years of wandering.

1



Why? Food, health, security, the children, peace of mind, extra income? Write down the three main reasons in order of importance. When things get hard, this piece of paper reminds you why you are doing it.

2



Who? Who in the household really works, and how much? Who looks after the animals when you are away? Children help, but they can't be the main workforce.

3



How much time? Honestly write down the hours per week from April to October, alongside your job and other commitments. Most beginners overestimate their time by a factor of two.

4



How much money? How much can you invest in the first year without a loan and without putting the household budget at risk?

5



Where? Do you already have land? Do you live on it or come at weekends? Distance decides what is possible.

Weekend plot or full-time homestead

If you only come at weekends, plan differently: fruit trees, soft fruit, potatoes, onions, garlic, squash and bees can cope with a week without you. Polytunnel tomatoes without automatic watering, and hens without someone to shut them in every evening, cannot. Animals need a person **every day**. Until you live on the land or have a reliable neighbour, start with plants.

FROM EXPERIENCE

A family from Leeds bought 4,000 m² (about an acre) an hour's drive from the city, in the Yorkshire Dales. In the first year they planted 30 fruit trees, two rows of raspberries and 200 m² of potatoes, and kept the vegetable garden at home. Only in the third year, when they moved, did they bring in hens and a polytunnel. By then the fruit trees were already bearing.

03 • CHAPTER

WHERE YOU ARE NOW: YOUR STARTING POINT

Every homestead starts from something. One person has land and no know-how, another has know-how from a grandparent and no land. Six things decide how you start. Score them in [Appendix B • p. 15](#).

Resource	Question	If it's weak
Land	Do you have somewhere to grow, and how much?	Start with containers, an allotment, rented land or a relative's garden
Water	Is there water in August?	Rainwater and mulch first; see series H04 Water
Time	How many hours a week in season?	Plants that don't need daily work
Money	How much without a loan?	Second-hand tools, swaps, seed from neighbours
Know-how	Have you ever run a garden or kept animals?	One area a year, a local mentor
People	Who helps, and who covers for you?	An arrangement with a neighbour before any animals

Water is criterion number one. Without reliable water in summer there is no garden and no livestock. If you are still choosing land, read H01-01 Choosing and assessing land before you pay for anything.

Know-how you already have

Write down what you can do: dig, mow, drive a tractor, make jam and chutney, milk, dispatch poultry, fix a tap. Write down what your family knows too. Older relatives and neighbours often know more than they think. Their knowledge of your area (when the last frost comes, which bean variety does well, where the spring dries up) isn't written in any book.

04 • CHAPTER

START SMALL: FIRST PROJECTS

The first year isn't for producing everything. The first year is for **learning on a small scale**, without big losses. Three projects work on almost any land and in any climate.

1


Compost bays:
two bays made of pallets, 1 × 1 m.
Starts straight away, all year round.

2


First bed: 10–30 m² (100–300 sq ft) next to the house, in the sun, near water.

3


Easy vegetables:
lettuce, radish, French beans, courgette, potatoes, onions.

4


Mulch and water:
straw or grass clippings, a water butt for rainwater.

5


Weigh the harvest: kitchen scales, every harvest into the journal.

Why in this order

Compost is the foundation. It feeds the soil, and the soil feeds the plants. The compost you make this year is what you need next spring, so start now. More in H03-01 Compost: cold and hot, from waste to humus.

A small bed near the house beats a big vegetable garden at the far end of the plot. What you see every day is what you look after. A 20 m² bed gives roughly 40–60 kg (90–130 lb) of vegetables in the first year: lettuce, beans, courgettes and tomatoes for the summer.

Hens are the best first animal, but only once the vegetable garden is running and you have a fence and a hen house. Four to six hens give eggs for the family, eat the garden leftovers and give manure for the compost. Guide: series H20 Chickens.

WARNING

Don't buy animals before you have **a finished house, a fence, a month's worth of feed and someone who feeds them when you are away**. An animal is not a project you can put off until next week. Many species also have to be registered. In Great Britain you need a CPH number (via the Rural Payments Agency or your devolved equivalent) for sheep, goats, pigs and cattle, and poultry keepers register with APHA; in Ireland, DAFM gives herd and flock numbers; in the US and Canada, rules differ by state and province. Bees are registered in some places too. Check with the competent authority where you live.

The one-new-area rule

Each season, bring in **no more than one new area**: the vegetable garden this year, hens and fruit trees next year, then a polytunnel or bees. Until the new area has "settled in" — until you can run it without constantly reading up and panicking — don't add the next one. The order of investment over five years is set out in H00-06 What comes first: a five-year investment plan.

05 • CHAPTER

WHEN YOU START: FIRST STEPS BY SEASON

There is no wrong time to start a homestead, only different first steps. Months are for lowland UK and Ireland. In the US and Canada, go by your USDA hardiness zone: zones 7–9 run 2–4 weeks earlier, zones 3–5 2–4 weeks later.

If you start...	Do this first	Don't rush
In winter (Dec–Feb)	Plan, map, order seed, build compost bays, get tools, read	Buying animals
In spring (Mar–May)	A bed, potatoes, onions; buy tomato plants ready-grown	A big garden: start with 20–30 m ²
In summer (Jun–Aug)	Mulch, watch the water and sun, sow for autumn and winter (cabbage, lettuce, carrots, kale)	Planting fruit trees (wait for autumn)
In autumn (Sep–Nov)	Plant fruit trees and garlic, make leaf mould, prepare a bed for spring	Hens before winter if you have no dry, draught-free house

A year of watching

If you have just moved onto new land, the best investment is **a year of watching** before any big works: where snow and frost lie longest, where water runs after a downpour, where late frost settles, where deer, rabbits or badgers come through. Meanwhile work only a small bed and the compost. The observation calendar is in H01-01, and the site map in H01-03 Mapping your land: sun, wind, water and microclimate.

TIP

Photograph the plot from the same spot on the first of every month for 12 months. At the end of the year you have the best map of sun, frost and water there is — and it costs nothing.

06 • CHAPTER

HOW MUCH TIME AND MONEY A SMALL START TAKES

Money and time are the two limits that decide everything. Below are rough figures for a small start. The 4freelife personal plan uses the same norms, so the numbers match.

First project	Rough cost	Work in season
30 m ² vegetable garden with compost bays	about £60 (tools, seed, mulch)	about 1 hour a week
Drip irrigation for 30 m ²	about £45	saves watering time
5 hens with a house and run	about £325	about 45 minutes a week
5 fruit trees (tree, planting hole, stake)	about £125	about 15 minutes a week
10 m ² of soft fruit	about £60	about 20 minutes a week
1 m ³ tank (IBC, about 220 UK / 264 US gallons)	about £150 new, cheaper second-hand	very little

All prices are rough and differ by country and year. In the US and Canada, the same figures in dollars are a reasonable first guess; expect up to 20–30 % more for hen houses and nursery trees. Work out your own first plan in [Appendix C • p. 16](#).

WARNING

Don't take out a loan for your first homestead year. Invest from savings and from what the homestead already gives. If you don't know how much you need, keep records for a year first (H00-07 The homestead journal).

Where to save, and where not to

Save on tools (a second-hand hoe and spade from a car boot sale, farm sale or yard sale will last decades), on seed (swaps with neighbours and at Seedy Sundays, your own seed from the second year), on mulch (leaves, grass clippings, straw from a farmer nearby) and on containers (IBCs, old baths, pallets).

Don't save on water, on the hen fence (foxes, and in the US raccoons and coyotes, don't forgive), on good trees from a reputable nursery or on protective gear.

SAFETY FROM DAY ONE

The romance of a homestead disappears fast when someone gets hurt. Five rules apply from day one, whatever your level.

1



Overgrown land: abandoned fields and scrub can hide old wire, glass, dumped waste, open wells and collapsed drains. Walk the land with boots and gloves before you clear it, and never enter old mine workings or quarries.

2



Tools and machines: a chainsaw, axe, scythe and two-wheel tractor or rotavator need protective gear and training. Never use a chainsaw alone in the woods. More in H05-07 Safe working with tools and machinery.

3



Ticks and tetanus: check your body after working in long grass (Lyme disease is spreading in the UK, Ireland and North America). Check your tetanus vaccination with your GP or doctor (boosters as your doctor advises).

4



Fire and CO: stove, range cooker, generator and wood-fired dryer. A carbon monoxide alarm and a fire extinguisher are a must. Never run a generator indoors.

5



Food: low-acid preserves, meat and garlic-in-oil carry a risk of botulism. Before your first jars, read H43-01 Preserving basics: hygiene, jars, sterilising. In the US, follow USDA tested methods.

In an emergency call **999 or 112** in the UK and Ireland, **911** in the US and Canada.

08 • CHAPTER

PEOPLE AND KNOW-HOW

Nobody builds a homestead alone. The best source of know-how is **the neighbour who has grown things in the same village for 40 years**. Ask when they sow beans, which tomato variety they grow, when the last frost comes. Take them a jar of honey or help with haymaking. That is how knowledge has always passed on in the countryside.

Who to ask	What for
Neighbours and old hands	Local climate, varieties, water, frost, wildlife
Agricultural advisory service (Teagasc in Ireland, Cooperative Extension in the US, farm advisers and agricultural colleges in the UK)	Soil tests, varieties, crop protection, grants
Vet; APHA (UK), DAFM (IE), state veterinarian (US)	Animal registration, vaccines, disease
Beekeeping, fruit, poultry and smallholder associations	Courses, a mentor, group buying
Seed swaps and heritage seed groups	Old local varieties, experience
Local council or county (planning and zoning)	Land use, building, permits, grants

Write the contacts for your area in **Appendix G • p. 20**.

TIP

Find one mentor: someone who has done what you want to do, in your climate, for at least ten years. One visit to their homestead in May will teach you more than ten books.

09 • CHAPTER

HOW TO USE THE 4FREELIFE LIBRARY

The library is divided into six pillars. Each series has seven modules, and each module is a stand-alone handbook with worksheets. You don't need all of it. Read what you need this season.

Pillar	Series
Land	H00 Start: planning your homestead · H01 Land and homestead planning · H02 Soil: cultivation and preparation · H03 Soil fertility · H04 Water · H05 Tools and machinery
Plants	H10 The vegetable garden · H11 The polytunnel · H12 The orchard · H13 Soft fruit and grapevines · H14 Field crops · H15 Forage and pasture · H16 Medicinal and culinary herbs · H17 Seed and propagation · H18 Mushrooms
Animals	H20 Chickens · H21 Ducks and geese · H22 Turkeys and guinea fowl · H23 Quail · H24 Rabbits · H25 Goats · H26 Sheep · H27 Cows · H28 Pigs · H29 Bees · H30 Fish · H31 Horses and donkeys · H32 Dogs and cats · H33 Animal feed · H34 Natural animal health
Food	H40 Milk · H41 Meat · H42 Poultry and eggs in the kitchen · H43 Vegetables · H44 Fruit · H45 Grain, flour and bread · H46 Honey and bee products · H47 Drinks · H48 The homestead kitchen through the year
Pantry	H50 Cellars, clamps and earth pits · H51 Drying · H52 Smoking · H53 Salting and brining · H54 Fermentation and pickling · H55 Fat, oil, honey and sugar · H56 Grain and flour storage · H57 Cooling without electricity · H58 The pantry calendar
House	H60 Firewood and heating · H61 Energy · H62 Building on the homestead · H63 Traditional crafts · H64 Homestead economics

A reading path for each level

1		Backyard: H00 (the whole series) → H10 The vegetable garden → H03 Soil fertility → H20 Chickens → H43 Vegetables (preserving) → H58 The pantry calendar.
2		Smallholding: everything for the backyard + H04 Water → H11 The polytunnel → H12 The orchard → H13 Soft fruit → H29 Bees → H50 Cellars and clamps.
3		Small farm: + H01 Land → H02 Soil → H14 Field crops → H15 Forage → H24 Rabbits or H25 Goats → H33 Animal feed → H34 Animal health → H64 Economics.
4		Self-sufficient homestead: + H27 Cows → H28 Pigs → H41 Meat → H60 Firewood → H61 Energy → H62 Building.

The other modules of series H00 are the frame for everything else: H00-02 works out how much food your family needs, H00-03 gives you the year month by month, H00-04 links plants, animals and compost into a loop, H00-05 works out time and money, H00-06 tells you what comes first, and H00-07 teaches you to keep a journal.

10 · CHAPTER

HOW YOU KNOW IT'S GOING WELL

The success of a homestead is measured in numbers, not feelings. At the end of the first season, answer four questions:

- ☐ How many kilograms of vegetables, fruit and eggs did we get? (scales and journal)
- ☐ How much money did we spend, and how many hours of work?
- ☐ What worked, what didn't, and why?
- ☐ Do we still have the will? Is the family happy?

If the answer to the last question is "no", scale down, don't scale up. A homestead that wears the family out hasn't succeeded, however much it yields. If the answer is "yes", add **one** new area. How to keep records and learn from them is in H00-07 The homestead journal: records, measuring, learning.

11 · CHAPTER

MOST COMMON MISTAKES

- ✗ Everything at once in the first year: vegetable garden, hens, goats, polytunnel and orchard, and by July it's all overgrown.
- ✗ A vegetable garden that is too big and too far from the house and the water.
- ✗ Buying animals before the housing, the fence and someone to cover when you're away.
- ✗ Buying land without checking the water in August and without checking the paperwork.
- ✗ A loan for equipment and machinery before you know what you really need.
- ✗ Working without records: you don't know how much you harvested or what it cost.
- ✗ Clearing overgrown land without walking it first for wire, glass, dumped waste and open wells.
- ✗ Ignoring neighbours and local knowledge because "the internet says something different".

PRINTABLE CHECKLIST

Essential

- ☐ Answers to the five questions written down ([Appendix A • p. 14](#))
- ☐ Starting point scored: land, water, time, money, know-how, people ([Appendix B • p. 15](#))
- ☐ Water for summer checked
- ☐ First project chosen: compost bays and a bed of up to 30 m²
- ☐ Cost and hours of the first plan worked out ([Appendix C • p. 16](#))
- ☐ Safety checked: overgrown land walked, protective gear, CO alarm

Desirable

- ☐ Plan for the first 90 days ([Appendix E • p. 18](#))
- ☐ Talked to at least two neighbours and one mentor
- ☐ Contacts for the advisory service and vet filled in ([Appendix G • p. 20](#))
- ☐ Monthly photo of the plot from the same spot

Know-how

- ☐ I know which homestead level I'm at and what is realistic for that level
- ☐ I know the rule of one new area per season
- ☐ I know in which order to read the other series

APPENDIX A

MY HOMESTEAD VISION

Fill this in together, the whole family. Read it again every January.

Why we want a homestead (three reasons, in order of importance)

What our homestead looks like in 5 years (one sentence)

Who works on the homestead, and how many hours a week in season

Who covers when we're away (animals, watering)

How much we can invest in the first year (£ / \$, without a loan)

Where: do we have land, do we live on it or visit

Homestead level today (1–4) and in 5 years

What we definitely DON'T want (e.g. large livestock, selling)

What scares or worries us most

Signatures and date

APPENDIX B

YOUR STARTING POINT

Score each resource from 0 (we don't have it) to 3 (excellent). The weakest resource sets the pace. If water scores 0, sort out water first.

Resource	What we have today	Score 0–3	What needs improving
Land (area, soil, sun)			
Water (spring, well, mains, rainwater)			
Time (hours a week in season)			
Money (first year, without a loan)			
Know-how (garden, animals, preserving)			
People (family, neighbours, mentor)			
Tools and space (shed, cellar, garage)			
Health and strength for physical work			
Total (out of 24)			

0–8: start with containers, a small bed and learning. **9–16:** backyard, level 1. **17–24:** you can plan for level 2 and above, but still one new area per season.

Know-how in our family

What we can do (garden, preserving, animals, tools)

What parents, relatives and neighbours know

What we must learn in the first year

APPENDIX C

FIRST-PLAN CALCULATOR

Enter numbers in the "Enter number" column. In Adobe Acrobat Reader the PDF works out the amount per item and the total by itself. If the fields don't calculate, multiply by hand: number × amount per unit, then add up. The amounts are rough and the same as in the 4freelife personal plan. In the US and Canada, read £ as \$.

What the first plan costs

Item	Unit	Enter number	Per unit	Amount (£)
Vegetable garden and compost bays (tools, seed, mulch)	m ²		× 2 £	
Drip irrigation	m ²		× 1.5 £	
Polytunnel (hoop, polythene)	m ²		× 25 £	
Hen house and run	hen		× 40 £	
Laying hens (point of lay)	hen		× 25 £	
Fruit trees (tree, planting hole, stake)	trees		× 25 £	
Soft fruit with supports	m ²		× 6 £	
Bees (hive with a colony)	hive		× 200 £	
Water tank or IBC	m ³		× 150 £	
Total investment				

How many hours a week it takes in season

Compare the total hours with what you wrote in [Appendix A · p. 14](#). If the plan takes more than 80 % of your time, scale it down: you need a reserve for illness, wet weeks and harvests that all come at once.

Item	Unit	Enter number	Per unit	Hours (h)
Vegetable garden and potatoes	m ²		× 0.035 h	
Polytunnel	m ²		× 0.08 h	
Laying hens	hen		× 0.15 h	
Fruit trees	trees		× 0.05 h	
Soft fruit	m ²		× 0.03 h	
Bees	hive		× 0.25 h	
Total hours a week				

APPENDIX D

FIRST-SEASON CALENDAR

What a beginner does and learns through the first year, without any big works. Tick the box when it's done.

Task	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	✓
Vision, starting point and calculator (Appendix A · p. 14, Appendix B · p. 15 and Appendix C · p. 16)													☐
Order seed, buy basic tools													☐
Pallet compost bays and the first compost													☐
Water butt or IBC under the downpipe													☐
First bed of 10–30 m²: prepare and mulch													☐
Onion sets, peas, lettuce, radish, potatoes													☐
Bought tomato, courgette and bean plants (after last frost)													☐
Mulch and water early in the morning													☐
Harvest and weigh every picking													☐
Sow for autumn and winter: kale, lettuce, spinach, spring cabbage													☐
First small batch of preserves, using a safe method													☐
Plant fruit trees (bare-root) and garlic													☐
Hen house and fence (if the garden is running well)													☐
Talk to neighbours and a mentor													☐
Monthly photo of the plot													☐
Review the year and plan the next													☐

■ Planning and learning ■ Soil and compost ■ Sowing and planting ■ Harvest ■ Animals ■ Water

Months are for lowland UK and Ireland. In the US and Canada, go by your USDA hardiness zone: zones 7–9 run 2–4 weeks earlier, zones 3–5 2–4 weeks later. The detailed calendar for every area is in H00-03 The homestead year month by month.

APPENDIX E

PLAN FOR THE FIRST 90 DAYS

Write the start date and three concrete tasks for each month. A task is concrete when you can tick it off: "build compost bays from 4 pallets", not "tidy up the garden".

Start date: _____

Month	Task	Deadline	Who	Done
Month 1				
Month 1				
Month 1				
Month 2				
Month 2				
Month 2				
Month 3				
Month 3				
Month 3				

What to get

Item	Where (new, second-hand, swap)	Price (£ / \$)	Bought

[illegible]

APPENDIX G

CONTACTS AND MENTORS

Trusted neighbour (name, phone)

Mentor: who, what they do, where

Agricultural adviser (Teagasc, Extension office, consultant)

Vet

Fruit tree nursery (reputable)

Seed supplier or seed swap

Association (beekeepers, fruit growers, smallholders, poultry keepers)

Local council or county: planning and zoning

Animal registration (APHA / RPA, DAFM, state agency)

GP or doctor and emergency number (999 / 112 / 911)

SOURCES

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- Holmgren, D. (2002): *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*. Holmgren Design Services. The principle of "small and slow solutions" and observing before acting.
- Bane, P. (2012): *The Permaculture Handbook: Garden Farming for Town and Country*. New Society Publishers. Planning a homestead in phases and zones.
- Falk, B. (2013): *The Resilient Farm and Homestead*. Chelsea Green. Developing a homestead over the years.
- Jeavons, J. (2012): *How to Grow More Vegetables*, 8th edition. Ten Speed Press. Yields on small areas.
- USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map — climate zones for the US.
- 4freelife personal homestead plan: the same rough norms for area, work and costs as in this module's calculator.
- Local check before publication: rough prices in UK, IE, US and CA (trees, point-of-lay hens, IBC tank, polytunnel); registration rules for poultry, livestock and bees (APHA/RPA CPH, DAFM, US states, Canadian provinces); names of advisory services; tetanus booster recommendations (NHS, HSE, CDC).

The fields and checkboxes in this PDF can be filled in and saved in Adobe Acrobat Reader (desktop and mobile). Filling may not work in some browsers — in that case, print the page.

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4FREELIFE
FROM SOIL TO PANTRY.

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