

Going Organic in Decorah, Iowa

The Fischers' Commitment to Net Zero Energy, Native Plants & Organic Vegetables

By Kathy Litchfield
Decorah, IA –

When asked why she and her husband choose organic methods, Julie Fischer had a question of her own: “Is there any other way?”

Since the 1970s, Julie and Robert Fischer perked up listening to Rachel Carson and Sandra Steingraber. The more they learned about the broader effects of chemicals put onto lawns and gardens seeping into groundwater and leaving stripped soil and toxins behind, the more convinced they became that they had to choose another, more natural way.

“We lived in Kansas for about 30 years and became good friends with The Land Institute. We went to a lot of lectures and gathered lots of information there,” said Julie. “That further convinced us that there were really good ways of living with nature without poisoning ourselves and others including our natural insects that can be helpful in growing our crops naturally.”

The Fischers moved to Iowa in 2003 and to Decorah in 2010 and embarked upon constructing a nearly net zero energy home complete with passive solar heating, a mini-split-heat pump system, concrete floors that absorb and retain heat and south-facing windows. Rob spent years researching how to build energy efficient homes before they even started looking for a good building site and an architect whose philosophy lined up with their goals and desires.

“Among our goals were to be in a place where we could walk to most things we wanted to do, close to recreational trails. And to have good southern exposure, a straight roof line for solar panels, south-facing windows . . .” said Julie.

“We really notice the effects of passive solar on our house in the wintertime, on sunny days when it may be 0° outside but toasty warm in our living room,” said Rob. “Although we have a gas-fired high-efficiency boiler for in-floor heat during very cold weather, we use our mini-split heat pump when it is only moderately cold. It’s 26 degrees outside right now and it’s comfortable in here. We’re using credits we accumulate with our utility for the energy produced from the sun with the aid of our rooftop photovoltaic system!”

Immediately after constructing their home, the Fischers started thinking about landscaping. Their yard was all torn up and loaded with clay fill. Being just 44 feet wide by 110 feet back, they decided to plant almost all of the available space with vegetables, orchard trees, natives and perennial flowers.

The Fischers met Jeff Scott of Driftless Gardens, who is a brand new NOFA Accredited Organic Land Care Professional (CT course, 2014) at an Iowa home show where he had a booth. Scott had heard about the Fischers’ innovative building and began working with them in February of 2013.



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“As part of their home construction, they were pretty mindful about using net zero construction practices and they were invested in carrying that same idea to their landscape,” said Scott, whose background includes organic farming and youth education as well as horticulture.

Working closely with the Fischers, Scott helped them put together a standard site design including food production, native plantings, water management and access and not putting too much into the small space, “so that it still felt and acted like a functional and beautiful space.”

Scott used pavers to install a long, steady ramp approach up to the house from the city sidewalk, and advised the Fischers on native prairie plants and shrubs they could use in the surrounding area. They purchased some of their plants from Scott, who also maintains a propagation greenhouse.

Robert and Julie’s backyard features six espaliered heirloom apple trees with a mix of early, mid-season and late maturing varieties, two pear trees, raspberries, one aronia shrub and a diverse selection of their favorite vegetables including okra, tomatoes, beets, peppers, arugula, eggplant and broccoli. Beans climbed trellises all summer long; they had a wonderful rhubarb patch; shared their overwhelming broccoli harvest with their neighbors; and grew plenty of garlic and onions. Two big rainwater barrels collect roof runoff water they use in the gardens and for houseplants; they have a worm composter for their kitchen scraps; and regularly feed a huge compost pile in the backyard too.

In the front yard, Robert sourced limestone and glacial erratic stones and planted sedums and succulents between the stones, added oregano and other herbs and perennial flowers. He built retaining walls further out along the sides of the ramp for raised beds of kale, basil and other herbs and edibles along with the prairie forbs and greasses.

“People stopped by and asked what our weird looking palm trees were,” laughed Julie, “well that was our kale, until the deer mowed them down.”

One day Julie, a retired nurse, came home from work at the Northeast Iowa Peace and Justice Center, where she is volunteer coordinator of special events and “community conversations” on important issues including immigration and urban gardening, to find Rob digging what looked like graves in the backyard. “He had decided to dig down to where the good soil was, beneath the hardpan of clay left by the big machinery that had tamped it down. He dug about four feet down and was up to his hips in there,” she laughed.

The Fischers have only a few small strips of lawn left on their property, which they mow using a reel push mower, to the surprise of their neighbors’ little girl who accused them of “not mowing right because there wasn’t any noise.”

The Fischers’ efforts to convert lawn to gardens were quickly noticed by Seed Savers Exchange, located a few miles away, who took photographs of the Fischers’ property they plan to run in their spring catalogue. Rob, who is a German to English translator, serves on the local tree board and at the city’s municipal prairie – river bottom land that had been used for agriculture and was converted into a prairie attracting butterflies, birds and native species. The Fischers formerly used community garden plots before transforming their backyard into gardens and plan to use them again next year for spreading plants like winter squash and sweet potatoes.

“This is a wonderful place to do this kind of gardening. Everyone’s so positive about it and many people have gardens in their front yards now,” said Julie. “This is really a widespread trend, surely influenced in part by Seed Savers Exchange being close by. If you look out our back windows, three of our neighbors have vegetable gardens. There’s a lot going on here!”

Most rewarding for the Fischers is the feeling of satisfaction knowing they are not contributing to the “culture of poisoning things.” “We’re reacting against that, just growing things the way they should

grow and getting joy out of it,” said Rob.

Julie and Rob love when neighbors pass by and stop to talk and visit; they also love the physical work of getting their hands in the dirt, stretching their backs and inhaling the rich, heady scent of good compost. The couple, living what they dreamed about for so long, hopes to be able to sit back and admire their hard work as their plants get more established. “Sometimes I look outside and Rob’s just standing there, looking at things,” said Julie. “Maybe this year we’ll do more of that!”

