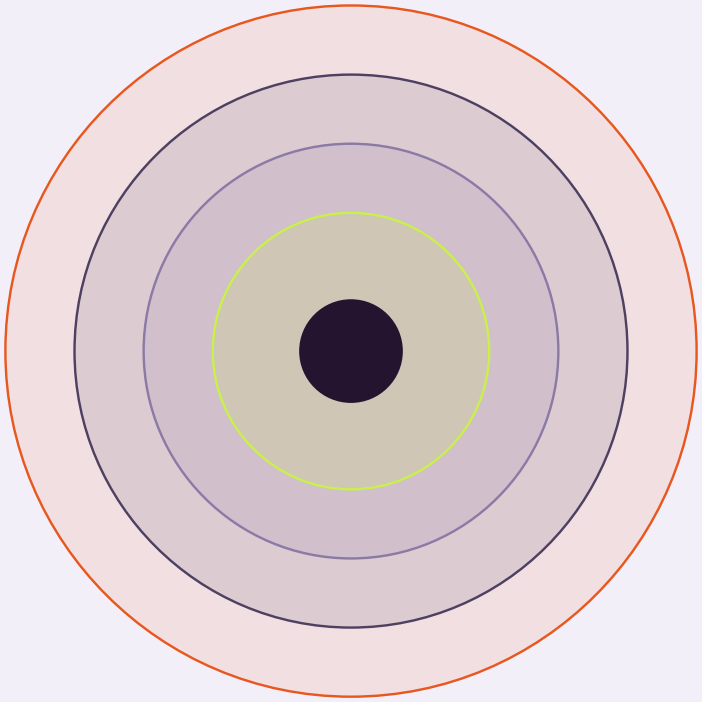
NOVEMBER 6, 2026



Back to Basics: A Complete Guide to Traditional Skills

A reading of the book by Abigail R. Gehring (2008)

1. ACTION BOOK

CONTENTS

Inside this edition

The book in a minute 3

The takeaways 4

Your action book 6

Before you go 7

PART TWO · THE ACTION BOOK

The setup checklist 9

Spend one hour a week with your hands 10

Keep a homestead notebook 11

Preserve something each month in season 12

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Back to Basics: A Complete Guide to Traditional Skills, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Abigail R. Gehring, who has edited a shelf of self-sufficiency guides for Skyhorse, updated this big illustrated how-to, which grew out of the 1981 Reader's Digest book of the same name. Its argument is plain: a simpler, more self-reliant life is built one practical skill at a time, and ordinary people can still learn those skills. The book runs in six parts: buying land and building on it, energy from wood, water, wind and sun, raising vegetables, fruit and livestock, enjoying the harvest the year round, skills and crafts for house and homestead, and recreation at home and in the wild. It teaches through step-by-step instructions and drawings rather than stories, from building a log cabin and grafting fruit trees to keeping chickens, making cheese and dyeing wool with plants. It also keeps projects for people without land, such as weaving a rag rug on a homemade loom.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Self-reliance is a stack of small skills, not one big leap.

The book is built as hundreds of separate projects, each one learnable on its own. You don't need to buy a farm to start. Baking bread, sharpening a chisel or weaving a small rug each count, and each makes the next one easier.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Before you fall for the house, find out where the water comes from.

The opening part, on buying country property, gives a whole section to developing a water supply. A tired house or barn can be repaired. Land without a reliable supply of water is very hard to live on, however pretty it looks.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Design a home around how you live, and draw it before you dig.

The first part moves from buying land and preparing the site to planning the home, before any building starts. That order is worth copying: draw the plan to scale on paper first. Mistakes are cheap on paper and expensive in timber and concrete.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Save energy before you try to make it.

The energy part opens with making a home efficient, and only then turns to wood heat, water power, wind and solar. A draughty house wastes whatever you produce. Sealing and insulating comes first because it is the cheapest power there is.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A harvest is only half the work; the other half is making it last.

A whole part of the book is about enjoying the harvest the year round: canning and jam, preserving meat and fish, cheese, maple sugaring and homemade drinks. Growing food matters less if most of it spoils in a week. Preserving is what turns a summer glut into a winter pantry.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Grow what you will actually eat, and start smaller than you think.

The growing chapters run from the kitchen garden and fruit trees to bees and fish farming. Read as a whole, they show how much each crop asks of you. A small bed you keep up beats a big one you abandon by July.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Animals need you every day, so match them to your time and your space.

The livestock chapters cover poultry and larger animals, and each needs housing, feed and daily care. Hens are the usual first step because they ask the least. A goat or a cow changes the shape of your whole day.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Hand skills turn raw materials into things you keep for years.

The crafts part is the biggest in the book: spinning, weaving, natural dyes, soap, candles, baskets and woodwork. One project builds a hutch table with hand tools alone. The point is less to save money than to understand how things are made and mended.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Old-fashioned fun belongs in a self-reliant life too.

The book closes with recreation at home and in the wild, including square dance calls, homemade toys and paddling a kayak. Work on a homestead never really ends. Leaving room for play is part of the design, not a reward for finishing.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Choose three skills for this year
- [ ] Walk your home looking for draughts
- [ ] Set up one small growing space
- [ ] Gather a basic hand-tool kit
- [ ] Find one teacher near you

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Spend one hour a week with your hands
- ◯ Keep a homestead notebook
- ◯ Preserve something each month in season

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Choose three skills for this year

Pick one skill that feeds you, one that uses your hands and one for your home.

Write them on a card and keep it where you plan your week.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Walk your home looking for draughts

On a cold or windy day, hold a hand or a candle near doors, windows and outlets.

List the leaks and seal the worst one this weekend with weatherstrip or caulk.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Set up one small growing space

Build one raised bed, fill a few large pots on a balcony, or ask about a community plot.

Plant two or three things you eat every week.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Gather a basic hand-tool kit

Collect a saw, a chisel, a square, a hammer, clamps and a sharpening stone, secondhand if you can.

Give them one shelf or box so they are always ready.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Find one teacher near you

Look for a canning class, a woodworking evening, a spinning guild or a beekeeping group within an hour of home.

Book one session this month.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Spend one hour a week with your hands

Block the same hour every week for your current skill.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Keep a homestead notebook

Write down what you planted and when, what you made, and what went wrong.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Preserve something each month in season

Put one preserving session on the calendar while fruit and vegetables are cheap and plentiful.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

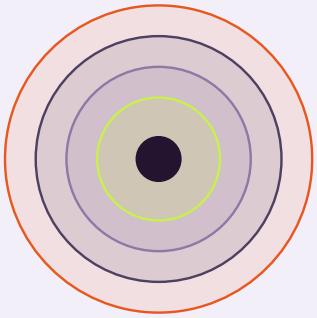
MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Learn one old skill well, and the next one comes easier.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER ABIGAIL R. GEHRING