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2024 - Stewards of the Land (Sandy Carlson,
editor)

"Back to the Land," but Make It Suburbia

Elexa Dawson

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Recommended Citation

Dawson, Elexa (2024). "Back to the Land," but Make It Suburbia," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Kansas City Reciprocity (detail)
Sean Nash

“BACK TO THE LAND,” BUT MAKE IT SUBURBIA

We belong in the circle.

The leaves on the trees in my neighborhood have turned and fallen and now peek out in soggy lumps from beneath a thick, early November snow. A few weeks ago, my neighbors bagged up the fluffy piles of nutrients, and I tried not to feel their disdain as I allowed the leaves in my yard to languish.

I did clean up the flowerbed right next to our front door, for the sake of neatness and vanity. I cleared the moonflowers that sprawled far beyond the borders of the bed, disturbing a bumblebee from an early stage of hibernation. Profusely apologetic, I backed away from the place I had been working and let her settle back in. Most native bees are ground nesting, unlike European agricultural bees who live in hives.

I covered the place where she burrowed back into the messy mulch bed with a clump of cut flowers that had been discarded behind the blooms, remnants of a bouquet from a Potawatomi cousin. I was glad I left it there, hoping birds would pick at the clumps of native asters and American beautyberries and spread them around my yard. I shook the flowers apart a bit, creating a little haystack of insulation to cover the ground where the bee reburied herself. I realized this was probably a poor substitute for the protective umbrella of heart-shaped datura leaves she had initially chosen and said a hopeful little prayer for us both. **I hope you'll be okay. I hope I can be a good neighbor to you.**

When we first moved into our suburban Emporia, Kansas, home, there was nothing but grass in the yard. In the last year and a half, I've introduced native flowers, fruits and a small vegetable bed, and allowed some mulberry trees that are coming

up in a fence row to grow. I'm rewilding the space while trying to maintain balance with the aesthetic expectations of life in a suburban community.

My preferences for land management are not entirely based on sentimentality and laziness. During the pandemic, I decided to pursue a degree in sustainable agriculture. A friend from the Indigenous

THE EARTH, IT TURNS OUT, IS REALLY AND TRULY LIVING AND ANIMATE.

food community suggested the Johnson County Community College program, and the Heart of America Indian Center offered me a scholarship. I learned so much about the magical mechanics of soil during that time. The earth, it turns out, is really and truly living and animate. Minerals and broken-down rocks are part of the structure, but there's much more to soil than just dirt. Seemingly inactive soil hosts a bustling production of nutritional and informational exchange between roots through fungal mycorrhizae. In addition to the soil's organic and inorganic solids, air and water must be present in adequate yet limited quantities to support plant life.

The Flint Hills have been my home since 2005, but I grew up country

in the Cross Timbers ecoregion of rural Oklahoma. Post oaks, redbuds and fragrant sumac thrive in the red sandstone hills, while persimmon, blackberry and sand-plums dot the well-beaten paths my cousins and I made through oak groves and over shortgrass prairies between our houses and our Nana and Papa's place. Our multi-generational compound consists of 80 acres and sits conspicuously close to the land my great-grandpa Bull lost to settlers.

That property was not ancestral but was his allotment from the U.S. government and the Cherokee Nation, which sold it out from under him. He was forced to move to Oklahoma City but worked and saved to buy his land back. The family who bought it never sold, so he bought the closest thing he could find. It's hard to imagine he chose to be a neighbor to the folks who ended up with land that I'm sure he considered his birthright.

My cousins and I ran those 80 acres top to bottom, on horseback, four-wheeler and foot. We hunted and fished and gathered fruit to take back to Nana's where she'd help us make jelly. Our large family often crowded around Nana and Papa's kitchen table to feast on venison chili, hand-reared beef and pecan pie.

My maternal grandparents also lived in the area, giving us another acreage to explore, and we enjoyed rabbit dinners



Flowering Wands
Sean Nash

that traveled no more than 20 feet from hutch to table. My great-grandmother lived on the next mile section, on land claimed in the land rush. My mom's cousins and I hunted rose rocks and scratched our initials into the sandstone waterfalls.

Connection to land has always been a part of my story. Now, I try to bring these skills and passions along to my new home, with its plank fences and concrete driveways of suburbia.

I believe it is the right of all peoples to reconnect to the land. There was a time when our ancestors were connected to the land in ways to which we may never return. We will have to forge new paths in our relationships with the earth and with our more-than-human relatives, and we'll have to start in the places we find ourselves right at this moment.

After getting my degree, I sought a way to blend my background in music with my passion for plants. I founded Good

Way Gardens to help facilitate a collective transition from domination over the land to communion with the land. While most of my peers were studying to work on farms and get out of town, I was moving in the opposite direction, thinking that the people who need the opportunity to connect with the land the most are the ones without access in the first place.

The Lyon County History Center opened its space at the Howe House for our monthly events and native foods garden. The property also boasts 15 acres of tallgrass prairie, the only spot of public prairie in the town of Emporia, and we encourage interaction through scavenger hunts on the mowed walking trail.

The Emporia Arts Council often joins us, facilitating projects based on natural materials. The events conclude with an outdoor concert. All ages are welcomed and encouraged to participate. I've seen five-year-olds pulling weeds and 85-year-olds getting their faces painted. The satisfaction I gain from this culmination of my life's interests and pursuits in a space that connects people to land through community and song is indescribable.

Elexa Dawson creates community-focused Americana music where sultry soul meets rural roots. Elexa is a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation of Oklahoma; founder of Turns Out Records; founder of Good Way Gardens, a land-based arts organization based in Emporia, Kansas; and a founding member of Kansas folk darlings, Weda Skirts.

We can't all go back to the country, but we can all be good neighbors. We can plant foods for native pollinators and eliminate unnecessary hazards. We can facilitate habitat and avoid the introduction of poisons. We can be mindful of our consumption, knowing that all resources are limited, rejecting the illusion of limitless growth.

Cities don't separate or insulate us from the responsibilities given through our original instructions to be good neighbors to all living things. The challenge is in finding ways to maintain our place in the circle. **Not above, not below. In the circle, we belong.**

"You belong in the circle,
not above, not below.

All of life is a circle.

You were born in the circle.

There is love in the circle.

We have peace in the circle."

Elexa Dawson, "Circle Song," from the album "Music is Medicine."



Wild Things Sumac #2
Diana Werts