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# The Solari Report

June 8, 2017

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## **Solari Food Series With Harry Blazer and Anais Dervaes**



An Urban Homestead



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**Harry Blazer:** Hello. Harry Blazer here with Anais Dervaes from the Urban Homestead at [www.UrbanHomestead.org](http://www.UrbanHomestead.org).

Anais, hello.

**Anais Dervaes:** Hello. Thank you for having me on.

**Harry Blazer:** You're out in Pasadena, California?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes, we are. We are outside of Los Angeles – about a 15-minute drive out of Los Angeles.

**Harry Blazer:** You guys are kind of famous, right? You've had quite a bit of publicity about what you've done.

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. People have started paying attention to how we were growing food on such a small plot of land. Word of mouth got around, and more and more people care about it. More people got inspired.



I remember thinking, “Who on Earth would share or read about what we are harvesting? Who would even care about that?” But it seems that a lot of people did. So that’s been quite a journey to see that grow to what it is now.

**Harry Blazer:** When you look at your website, you see this picture of a house with a backyard filled with wonderful looking food. Are you basically an ‘urban homestead’ like your name says? So you have a small piece of land behind your home in kind of a suburban setting?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. We live in a 1917 home. It’s a relatively old neighborhood here in Pasadena. Our house is from 1917, and others on the street are around 1896 and the early 1900’s. So this is an old residential area.

Our lot is 66 feet by 132 feet. So it’s about a fifth of an acre, but only a tenth of an acre is cultivated because you have to subtract the square feet for the house and the garage and things like that.

**Harry Blazer:** Do you have any auxiliary land that you also grow on, or is everything still being grown in that one-tenth of an acre?

**Anais Dervaes:** Everything is still being grown here. Over the last four years one of our neighbors let us use her place to grow some more herbs and raised beds and edible flowers, but primarily we have 50 raised beds in the backyard. We’re pretty intensive on everything that’s grown here. We’re still growing a lot from our property.



**Harry Blazer:** You advertise that you produce food boxes for people. So you're not just growing food for your family, but you're also growing it for other people as a business, correct?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes, that is correct. We not only grow our produce, but we also do the farm box program like you said.

It's been a long journey. Like I said, we've always had a garden. We've had a garden here since we moved here 30 years ago. We had a small backyard garden, and then in about 1995 it was a good year rain-wise, so we had a lot of edible flowers and herbs.

We approached some of the restaurants in town, and they were interested in purchasing our edible flowers and herbs. So we started selling back in 1995. About two years later we added more heirloom tomatoes and adding them to what we sold to local restaurants. So at one time in the mid- to late 1990's we had about ten restaurants and little tea shops and caterers that we supplied with specialty organic produce herbs and fruit.

Then the dot-com bust happened, and a lot of people weren't spending money on organic produce. So we decided to do a front porch farm stand. We put little baskets out on our front porch with the jams and the produce. People started coming and purchasing off that.

Then about five years ago we did the farm box program. With the farm box program, we partner with two other local farms. We have a partnership with a bread person and two other beekeepers. We put together a farm box program for about 30-40 subscribers per week.



**Harry Blazer:** Do you consolidate at your place or at their place? Do you send your stuff to them and they consolidate? How does that work?

**Anais Dervaes:** We consolidate here. Wednesday is the busiest day because we're not only picking our stuff in the morning, but we pack up all the greens, we have the edible flowers and herbs, the vegetables, and then two other farms bring in their stuff.

It's a customized farm box program, so we have all the tables lined up. Then we sit there and go through and customize each box per each customer's request.

**Harry Blazer:** So it's not like a CSA where they get what you produce; they actually can order what they want.

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. We decided to do that. It's a little bit more work for us, but in the end we have 100% happy customers. They aren't stuck with things that they don't eat. Some of them are allergic to certain fruits or vegetables, so they can specifically say that they don't need that food. Also, being in California, a lot of people also have fruit trees in their very own backyard. So they may not necessarily need fruit, and their box will consist heavily on greens and other vegetables.

With this program they are able to know what they're getting, and it makes for happier customers.



**Harry Blazer:** How many items would you offer? Right now, for example, how much of a choice would I have between the different producers you've partnered with?

**Anais Dervaes:** We also have add-ons. So you not only get honey and jams, but you can get bone broth from another little local company that makes the bone broth. We have a lady who offers bread, and then we have the vegetables. So this week you're getting lettuce mix, chard, kale, arugula, and then in addition we also have the eggs. So we have chicken eggs, duck eggs, cabbages, and then the herbs – chives, oregano, parsley, mint, edible flowers. Then we have peaches, apricots, and carrots. We have a lot of things. Strawberries are starting to come in.

**Harry Blazer:** How about tomatoes?

**Anais Dervaes:** It's still too early for tomatoes. I noticed that at some of the farmer's markets people are starting to carry them, but they either are grown in greenhouses or whatever. It's a little early for us. Our tomatoes are about a foot high and not producing any fruit right now.

**Harry Blazer:** What month would be your peak where you have the most offerings?

**Anais Dervaes:** The most offerings would be from July to October. We can grow 365, but that is the time where maybe 80% of what you get in the box would come from our place.



**Harry Blazer:** So you're a year-round operation, but you peak during July and October.

**Anais Dervaes:** Right.

**Harry Blazer:** As you look on your site, which is actually quite interesting, you talk about something called podcasts. What is that about? Tell us about the podcasts.

**Anais Dervaes:** We had this on the to-do list for many years because a lot of people are interested in what we do and have questions or they want to hear stories. They want to know how we do things as well as tips and techniques.

Now we started launching the podcast in June of this year. It's something we look forward to sharing with our readers and our fans around the world.

**Harry Blazer:** When you take a look under 'Elements' there are quite a few things that you talk about here. I'm just curious if you are deploying a lot of these technologies.

You know about growing food, and I imagine that you use no GMOs and take an organic or biodynamic approach. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about how you grow your food.

**Anais Dervaes:** Of course we don't use any chemicals or sprays. We're not certified organic, but we grow organically here on the homestead.



We mulch heavily. We use a lot of our own compost. We have our chickens and ducks, so we have that rich manure. We've been composting and mulching for over 30 years. In some parts of the yard we're about a foot and a half to two feet higher than our neighbors. We keep adding new soils by the composting and mulching methods. We've enriched ourselves so much that parts of our yard are higher than our neighbors' now.

**Harry Blazer:** You say that you use no sprays or fertilizers or synthetic fertilizers.

**Anais Dervaes:** No chemicals. Right.

**Harry Blazer:** So you use no sprays whatsoever? Even ones that might be allowed by organic?

**Anais Dervaes:** Correct. No chemical sprays or insecticides. The only thing that we will spray when worse comes to wear is occasionally we'll spray mineral oils. Like I said, we are just really natural. If it really gets infected, we might spray or just turn it under and start over.

**Harry Blazer:** Do you use any IPM (integrated pest management) technologies?

**Anais Dervaes:** We do have a lot of ladybugs and praying mantis here on the property. We have created little habitats for them, so they are here every year. They balance each other out well. Some years – with the 'global weirding' in the weather –



there is a pest battle, and sometimes the plants lose out. But we do have a healthy array of beneficial insects here on the property.

**Harry Blazer:** Tell us about the use of cover crops or fallow or rotation. Do you use any of those techniques?

**Anais Dervaes:** We do. We keep track of what we plant in each raised bed every point that we turn it over or have successive plants. So we basically keep a growing calendar or a growing schedule. So if lettuce was planted in the bed one year, then it's not planted the next year and something else is.

Twice a year we will take the soil out from the chicken and duck compound, so we renew the soil annually with that. The chicken and duck compounds towards the end of the year will be about two feet higher because of all the manure and all the composting that occurs naturally because of the hay and stuff like that.

Every year we introduce a new layer of soil into the raised bed. We keep track of that. We keep track of the plants so we don't plant tomatoes in the same bed year after year; we rotate.

We plant the plants close together so there's no soil exposure. In a sense, it's like living mulch. There is no sun touching the soil. So in a sense, the vegetables are their own cover crops. Then we do have some cover crops on the outlying areas. We have a clover patch and let some things grow wild to attract insects. We call it 'beneficial flower borders' and things like that.



**Harry Blazer:** So everything is done in raised beds?

**Anais Dervaes:** In the backyard, yes. In the front yard, it's just more edible landscape because it's city property and we have neighbors. So it's more landscaped in the front.

**Harry Blazer:** What kind of irrigation do you use?

**Anais Dervaes:** Right now everything is either hand-watered or the clay pot irrigation method, ollas. So we hand water or use ollas buried in the yard and in the raised beds and in the pots.

**Harry Blazer:** Do you till or no-till or a combination?

**Anais Dervaes:** No-till.

**Harry Blazer:** And do you ever bring any external inputs into the system, or are you basically using all of the internal inputs that you're producing?

**Anais Dervaes:** We do have to boost it sometimes. We can kind of tell. My brother has a better grasp on that. He can tell if you need to bring in any natural boosts.

The major thing he might do is bring in fish emulsion or worm casting spray on the leaves. Other than that, it's pretty basic. We try to keep it simple and try to do it in a way that is not so overwhelming that you have to keep continually bringing stuff from the outside. We try to keep as much as we can from what we can do on the property.



Sometimes we will do worm castings or fish emulsion spray on the leaves.

**Harry Blazer:** How many members of your family are involved in this?

**Anais Dervaes:** Right now there are three. Our father who founded this work passed away suddenly in December. So right now it's just three of us.

**Harry Blazer:** And how much time would you say each of you puts into this on a weekly basis?

**Anais Dervaes:** It's evolved over time. It's been 30 years. People comment, "You guys don't have any weed. This is a natural process."

It's just a garden that can maintain itself in that we have no weeds. We have that under control. It's just about harvesting, planting, and just maintaining.

With the 30-year-old property and doing it for 30 years, it's kind of routine. It doesn't take as much time. There are seasons that require more hours to the day.

Spring or fall where you're putting in a lot of plants and then the end of the season where you're taking out the plants and produce. But I would say we're actually doing less hours in the garden as the garden evolves and grows older and more efficient in how we do things here.



**Harry Blazer:** So if we divided your activities into growing and all things around growing and harvesting, another activity in terms of marketing, and then another activity in terms of education, would that summarize the three major categories you're involved in?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. It's the outreach and the business side – more on that end. So we teach workshops, we put on farm dinners in the community, we have after school 'Farm to Table' program for the kids, and when we have time we'll go out and give speaking engagements. Then there is the business aspect, which is keeping the farm box customers happy, getting their orders, dealing with our other vendors, finding new vendors. So there is a lot to do. You wear many hats during the day.

**Harry Blazer:** So if we then broke it into: growing, marketing, business aspect, and education, what percentage of your time would you spend in each of those three categories?

**Anais Dervaes:** I'd say that maybe during the day I would say one-third, one-third, one-third.

**Harry Blazer:** Can your family make a living doing this, or do you guys have other jobs? Is this a full-time job and a full-time living?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. You can make a decent living doing this, but that is why we don't just do gardening. We have the outreach and we always try to do things to bring in additional income.



We do sometimes have part-time work if a friend of ours needs help. If a friend of ours opens a café, we'll start helping them for a little bit of extra income. But the sizeable income does come from the property – the produce and the outreach.

**Harry Blazer:** Some other elements here are alternative energy. How does that play into your system?

**Anais Dervaes:** We have solar panels. We installed them in 2004. We use that for our energy source. We also opted in for green power with the City of Pasadena. We got a rebate when we put in the solar panels, but we couldn't save the power and batteries because we needed the rebate from the City of Pasadena. So what they do is they run your meter backwards.

For those, if we can't produce enough power, we opt into the City of Pasadena. They have a green power program. So for an extra \$.02, if we do need extra power, we pull from the wind power from Palm Springs.

So basically our homestead is running off renewable solar or wind energy.

**Harry Blazer:** Transportation is an element. What can you tell us about that?

**Anais Dervaes:** My brother buys diesel for diesel cars. So we took waste oil from the restaurants that we deliver to, and then we turn it into fuel.



**Harry Blazer:** Urban farm animals – is it basically just chickens and ducks, or are there other things that you have there?

**Anais Dervaes:** We have bees. On and off we've had quail and goats, and at one time we had rabbits, but chickens and ducks are still here. For over 30 years they have been an integral part of the homestead life. There are always animals here on the homestead.

**Harry Blazer:** Waste solutions. What can you tell us about that?

**Anais Dervaes:** We compost a lot. We have had worm composting. We have two big cinderblock compost piles in the back that we always reuse our waste and conserve. I don't know what else I have on there for waste solutions.

**Harry Blazer:** By 'waste' you mean the food waste that you would have?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. We always compost that.

**Harry Blazer:** But not graywater waste? Not black water waste?

**Anais Dervaes:** No, not black water. We do have a graywater system hooked up to our tub.

**Harry Blazer:** Okay. Water reclamation?

**Anais Dervaes:** That would be graywater. We do have a graywater system hooked up to the tub. On the to-do list we are going to incorporate the bathroom sink, too.



The kitchen sink is a little difficult because of the grease. But we do have a great water system on the tub. Basically it's like laundry water. We do use the laundry water to landscape, but the 'tub to landscape' is how we use the graywater system.

**Harry Blazer:** Another element you have here is 'living simply'.

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. We try to live simply. We buy second-hand clothes, second-hand furniture, and we find things on the side of the road and reclaim that to make it into something new. We just try not to consume so much. We try to be conscious consumers.

If we wear it out, make do or do without.

**Harry Blazer:** You also have here 'DIY' – do it yourself. Tell us a little bit about that.

**Anais Dervaes:** We do a lot of things ourselves. The website is done in-house. A lot of our posters and anything that we use for marketing, design, building structures, or trellises we try to do ourselves. Plumbing we try to do ourselves. Mechanics we try to do ourselves – up to a point. We try to do a lot ourselves so we save money and also gain another skill.

**Harry Blazer:** Have you run into any zoning issues, complaints from the neighbors, or anything like that? I know you've been around for 30 years, and regulations have changed a lot during that time. What can you tell us about that?



**Anais Dervaes:** Actually we're blessed to live in the City of Pasadena. We just had the City's officials here the other day. They credit our family to really bringing sustainable elements of what they are trying to strive for in the city to the residents. So they work with us. We pose questions to them, "Hey, what about this? What about that?"

They are willing to listen, and they develop programs. Now even the City of Pasadena offers a rebate program to take out your grass and replace it with edibles or natives. They are now offering a rebate program where they will go in and install a laundry-to-landscape graywater system. They also have rain barrel, composting programs, and free trees – like fruit trees to shade and give you food. Like I said before, they give you a rebate on the solar power. They are very progressive.

About eight years ago they put together a 20-point sustainable action plan for the City of Pasadena. So they are thrilled with what we are doing, and we are thrilled to be living here in a city that really appreciates how residents can be more sustainable in a city environment.

**Harry Blazer:** Tell us about your workshops. What kind of workshops do you run? Can anybody attend? How would you sign up for them?

**Anais Dervaes:** Anybody can attend. We're hoping to maybe launch some workshops online. We have a lot of fans worldwide, so we would like to touch and reach them.



Anybody can attend. We have: How to Raise Chickens, Making Your Own Wine, Canning, Jam, Kombucha, Raising Chickens and Ducks in the City, and the list is endless. It's sometimes overwhelming. We also have bread making workshops, herbs, and tinctures made with plants workshops.

Not only do we give the workshops, but we bring in local people to do the workshops, too. So we've had some soap making, spinning, and knitting. We have a wide range of skilled workshops here on the homestead.

**Harry Blazer:** Do you hold those workshops at your property – right there in Pasadena?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes, we do. We host them here in our backyard or in our garage.

**Harry Blazer:** I also noticed that you have a shop that advertises Urban Homestead Supplies. The online store offers 'sustainable wares for home and garden'. Tell us about that.

**Anais Dervaes:** We started selling stuff because people would ask us, "What do you use for this? What do you use for that?"

So we started carrying products that we use – the Homestead solar ovens, ollas, compost systems. So that is what we feature on the shop.

**Harry Blazer:** Do you give tours?



**Anais Dervaes:** We did give tours about six years ago with the drought. It was a brutal drought, and especially in the front yard we let a lot go because it was just really dry.

The average rainfall for Pasadena is about 19 inches. The last six years we've barely gotten five inches for each year. So things were really scraggly and depressing.

Now we were blessed with a lot of rain this year, and the garden is looking amazing. So we're hoping to maybe do a couple of tours coming up soon.

**Harry Blazer:** When you're short of water, do you have auxiliary supplies? Do you have your own well? Do you use the county water or city water? What would you do?

**Anais Dervaes:** We are on city water. We're not able to drill a well here because we're in the city.

The city of Pasadena has its own local storage of water, so it comes directly from the mountains. In Pasadena we're lucky to have our own water supply. We're able to tap into that.

**Harry Blazer:** So how did you get interested in this?

**Anais Dervaes:** I was born into the lifestyle. My father, after graduating from college, started homesteading in New Zealand. That's where I was born. He had a little garden, bees, chickens, goats, and then he moved back to Florida, where he was from. He also had a homestead there with a large garden and bees.



Then he came out here to go back to college, and he did the same thing. The first thing he did was find a garden. He always had his hands in the earth, and was living simply.

I was never not interested in this; I was just born to be in this lifestyle.

**Harry Blazer:** Is there anything that you would like to add? Is there anything else that you would like our listeners to hear?

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes. People often are inspired and impressed with what we do here. My dad used to always say, “Just start small. Take one step, and just do something. Grow an herb in your windowsill. Use a cloth bag. Turn off the water when you’re brushing your teeth. All those small steps together will have a big impact.”

Not everything works for everyone; one size does not fit all. This model may not work in another city or certain climates. Everybody’s situation is unique.

If everybody just looked at what they could do – support a farm through their farmer’s market, have somebody over for dinner, grow a community garden. If everybody started doing little stuff like that, I think we would have a big impact.

We encourage people to start small and do what they can with what they have right now.



**Harry Blazer:** So do it gradually in phases, incremental increases in complexity and offering, and take a modular approach – you might say. Would that be a good summary?

**Anais Dervaes:** That would be a good summary. Like I said before, people are seeing 30 years of work and progress on this place. It didn't happen overnight. Every year we challenged ourselves to do something different.

Some years we would take three steps forward but then four steps back. It's still a journey for us. We're still trying to be better. It's still a journey for us at this point.

**Harry Blazer:** But you are a tremendous resource as well.

If I wanted to know about herbs, it's kind of a modular. If I wanted to know about a garden of vegetables and then add fruit, and if I wanted to know later about chickens and ducks and so on, do you have a curriculum set up modularly like that?

**Anais Dervaes:** We actually do have our workshops. We're thinking about doing a webinar series or some e-books coming up in the future.

For the past four years we did an afterschool 'Farm to Table' program with a local school and actually drew out 13 sessions that I presented to the school there. They hire me every year to come in. It's a really successful program with the kids. I've been doing it for four years, and every year there are more kids wanting to hear about it and coming to the program.



For the kids I actually have 13 pre-made sessions that could possibly be launched online.

We're trying to get more things online and share more. Hopefully all that will come in the future.

**Harry Blazer:** You are Anais Dervaes.

**Anais Dervaes:** Yes, it's a Belgian name.

**Harry Blazer:** And it's [www.UrbanHomestead.org](http://www.UrbanHomestead.org).

**Anais Dervaes:** That is correct.

**Harry Blazer:** It was a pleasure talking with you. Is there anything else that you would like to say at this point?

**Anais Dervaes:** No. Thank you for having us. Not only do we have our website, but we have a podcast coming up in June. You can follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Hopefully you'll check in and see what we're doing here on the little homestead in Pasadena.

**Harry Blazer:** Thank you for your interest in being on the Solari Food Series. This is Harry Blazer signing off with Anais. Thank you so much.

**Anais Dervaes:** Thank you for having me.



## **MODIFICATION**

Transcripts are not always verbatim. Modifications are sometimes made to improve clarity, usefulness and readability, while staying true to the original intent.

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