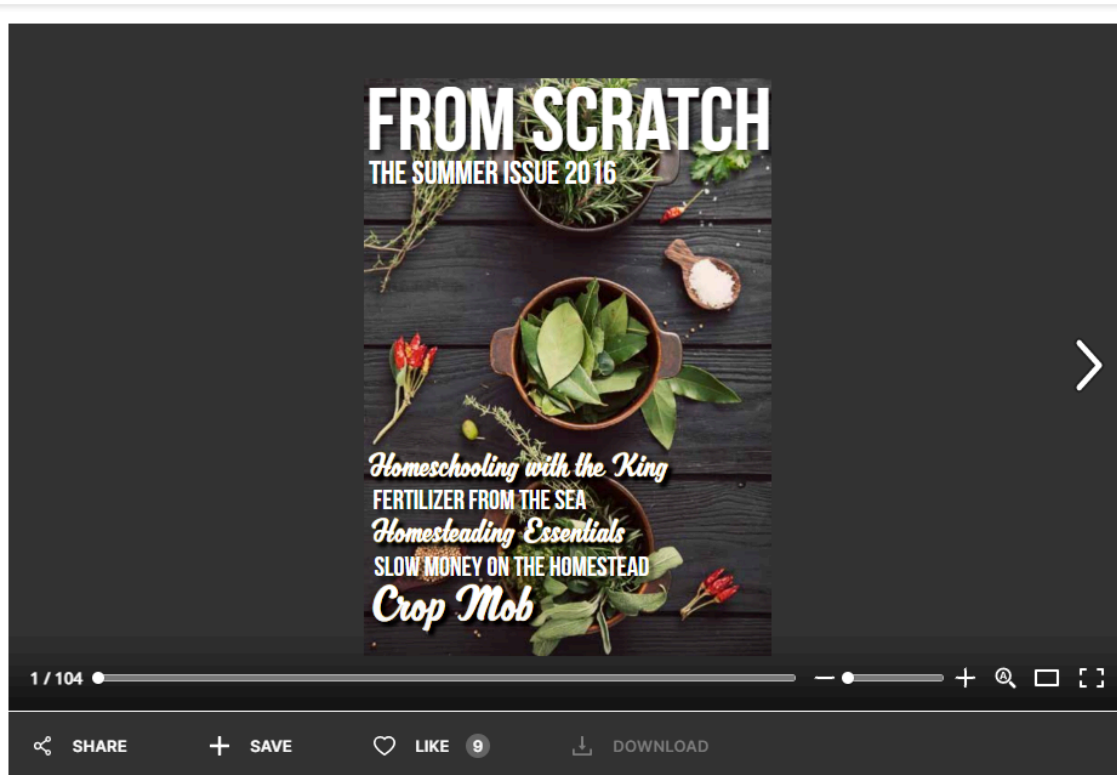


# Building a Rose Arbor: A Radical Act of Carpentry

By Jessica Arends

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by the heavenly buzz of the saw turning on, the powerful sheerreesh of the cut followed by the pop, pop of wood dropping. I fall into a gentle rhythm, feel the sun on my neck, smell freshly cut cedar, watch celebratory saw dust spray out like confetti. From across the neighborhood I hear the sound of another electric saw calling back.

"How are things going?" I squint up to see the homeowner from my crouched spot by the saw: "Just fine," I smile. "What lacquers do you use for cedar?" she asks. "I have some in mind, but I thought I would ask you since you are the carpenter."

There's a long pause. I know nothing about cedar lacquers. Is she testing me? Just then Mike appears to ask her questions about the beds and they disappear behind the hedge. Phew.

It's time to dig holes for the arbor posts so Mike gives me

a demo on the Auger, a gas-powered hole digger that looks like a cross between and giant drill and a weedwhacker.

Despite trying various angles and pulling with all my might, I can't get the starter cord to catch. I try several times then become self-conscious thinking I must look ridiculous. I sheepishly walk to the end of the yard to fetch Mike.

He is polite, happy to assist but I can't help thinking: here I am, the weaker sex, asking for help again. He gets the starter cord to catch with ease, his body accustomed to the movement and the amount of strength needed.

He hands the machine over to me and I awkwardly begin to jab it into the ground. The difference between this experience and taking a carpentry class are magnified.

I feel squeezed between two priorities that illustrate a bigger conundrum I experience

in life in general: my desire to learn more skills and do work that I enjoy and the fact that I have been hired to work efficiently and get a job done.

When we are children, learning is prioritized; a concept quickly challenged by the expectation of economic success as we become adults.

Now I experience a tension between doing something in order to learn and offering expertise for financial gain. I feel grateful for all the informal teachers I have had along the way.

A column of exhaust rises up around the Auger as the hole slowly grows.

My back muscles threaten to lock up and my brain goes numb from the vibrations, but I delay hitting the off switch because I know I will have to ask Mike to start it again.

I finally cut the motor. Sweet bird calls fill in the now very

loud quiet. Abandoning the foul thing, I pick up the manual post hole digger, a much more peaceful if slower tool.

Two hours later I conclude: a three-foot hole is much deeper than you think it should be. And: cutting wood is much more fun than digging holes.

We finish up for the day. I drag my weary body into my car and try to convince myself I don't need to stop at the grocery store even though I have no food in the house. I wander around the aisles, limbs heavy with exhaustion, half brain dead.

How do people do this five days a week? A woman next to me in line glances disapprovingly at my legs.

I look down at my filthy carharts and muddy boots. This strikes a pleasurable if somewhat rebellious chord in me. Similar to the feeling of

being in public after pottery class when I am covered in clay, it feels like a kind of defiant declaration that, despite social expectations, I have in fact not been engaging in any beautifying activity – visible evidence that

I have been building a skill and getting dirty rather than satisfying the pressure of how women should look. Perhaps this is nostalgic from playing outside as a kid, but this feels deeply satisfying.

Once home, I appreciate the simple things: a hot bath, hand lotion, chap-stick and food. My bed is incredibly soft and I immediately fall asleep.

## DAY TWO

The next morning, I wake from the most solid sleep I've had in months. Sun salutations remind me of how yoga both restores overworked muscles and builds strength for the day ahead. I dig out my long underwear from the bottom


of my winter clothes pile to prepare for freezing morning temps and head out to the site. The homeowner greets me with a furrowed brow.

She thought the doorway to the arbor would be wider and the posts closer to the rose bushes. I've been terrified of making a mistake – what did I do wrong? I consult the original plans which I followed exactly. I acknowledge her concerns, gently explain that the posts are set but that she can still train the rose bushes up the arbor.

With a paying client to please, this is so very different from taking a class!

Mike has finished the beds, so he offers to help me complete the arbor. As a guy he just learned carpentry skills growing up, something not really accessible for most women.


I remember wanting to help my grandfather with carpentry



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projects, but was given tasks like painting or fetching screwdrivers.

With two of us time passes quickly. The posts now completed, I use the circular saw to make a few cuts then chisel the wood out to create notches for the crossbeams.

Mike smooths out the notches with the belt sander. With my full attention demanded by the saw and hands engaged, my mind becomes expansive and I easily slip into single-pointed mindfulness.

Things appear magnified and slightly magical: a bluejay's call in the neighbor's yard, the sparkling sun and cold air in our lungs, the rhythm of our bodies as we move boards, find tools and mark the timber.

I begin to marvel at the tools I use – the saw, chisel, hammer and sander. I wonder at their history, the innovative

people that helped create the refined design I now hold in my hands. I wonder: Were any of them women?

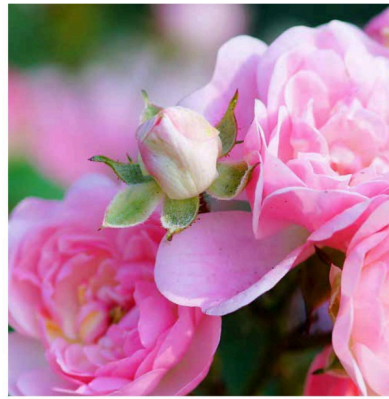
We secure the last few timber lox screws into the crossbeams, clamor down the ladders and fall silent to take in the final product.

We clean up the site and, luckily, the homeowner appears happy with the completed structure.

At home, I take a shower, make dinner and stretch. As I reflect on the day, I can't help but compare this work to that of my previous desk jobs.

After a full day of meetings and sitting at a computer, I would scramble to fit in things that were good for me: exercise, meditation, being social.

But the very nature of this work is physical, meditative and social, not to mention a constant source of



learning opportunities.

My attention is focused, not splintered between emails, facebook, or an onslaught of disparate tasks I have to manage and complete.

And at the end of the day,

my mind is my own. I'm not re-playing how a meeting went, working out an agenda, worrying about who will come to the event I am planning. There's also a deepened appreciation of my body whenever I do physically demanding work.

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It becomes incredibly useful, rather than something that needs to improve or change.

More time is spent taking care of my body than worrying about what it looks like. The result, paradoxically, is feeling leaner, stronger and more beautiful.

I also reflect on how economic pursuits, often disguised as career or even personal development, rob us of one of our most precious and irreplaceable resources: time.

Who has time to make something, be it dinner or a rose arbor, after working all day?

So we have to buy things, thus becoming increasingly dependent upon our money and our economic enterprises.

If we allowed ourselves time to learn the skills necessary for life, be they farming, carpentry, canning, raising animals, we become less

dependent upon the present economic structure and in better relationship with the land, each other and ourselves.

Working with one's hands becomes a radical act of self-reliance, creating meaning and community and countering the isolation and loneliness so many of us experience today.

A more self-reliant and principled life becomes possible.

Perhaps one day the novelty of this work will wear off and the exhaustion will outweigh the perks, but right now I am more interested in learning than working and that is enough to keep me at this carpentry thing for a little while longer.

Author's Biography: Jessica Arendt is a carpenter and writer living in Washington DC.

#### GARDENER'S HAND SOAP

- 1/2 cup white sugar
- 1/2 cup castille soap
- 2 tbsp fractionated coconut oil
- 1 tsp Vitamin E
- 15 drops Geranium Oil



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