

FOREST FOR THE TREES

Spending time in Panama's rainforest has given Jesse Kamm a unique perspective on sustainable living. She talks about the eco-conscious features of her homes and offers some insight on how to make our spaces more environmentally friendly.

Living more simply and consuming less just takes awareness. Some of us have become so accustomed to living a lavish lifestyle: I'm not talking about wearing Hermès and diamonds, but things like getting fuel from a pump, having water and power delivered directly to our homes and food being readily available with a simple swipe of our credit cards. These luxuries can be wonderful, but they separate us from the reality of what we're using and how our actions affect the earth. Over the years I've made it a point to check in and remember that I'm a part of my environment, not apart from it. This has led me to making better choices in my effort to live a sustainable lifestyle.

My husband, Luke, and I designed our house in Panama from scratch to be as sustainable as possible. There are no direct water, sewer or power lines available near our home, and running water and electricity are essential to living comfortably in the jungle. So we simply set out to use the best available technology we could find while remaining eco-conscious: We store rainwater in a 1,250-gallon tank, the sun powers all our energy needs and our waste is turned into compost that goes into the garden to nourish our plants. Our home is a quarter-mile walk from the boat dock and another five-minute boat ride into town, so every single bit of food, piece of wood, bottle of sunscreen or tank of propane we need must be carried across the island on foot through the humid and muddy rainforest. All of these circumstances make us a highly responsible and effective family when it comes to our consumption habits. We only purchase what we need, and we make darn sure we don't waste a drop of our resources. We spend time in Panama in order to connect with the earth—the feeling my family gets from living off nature's bounty is unbeatable.

Most of the living space in our Panama house is outside. We spend a lot of time on our giant wraparound porch that sits up in the jungle canopy—swinging in hammocks, drinking coffee and listening to the birds. We've managed to build a home that harnesses what nature provides and uses the space we have efficiently. I love that I watched and helped as my husband drove every nail into the structure as it came together plank by plank. I feel like I know every inch of this home.

If something goes wrong in the house, we know how to repair it. It's the ultimate example of simple and efficient living.

Anyone can live more efficiently by being mindful of the resources they're using. The first step in making a more sustainable home is living a more sustainable lifestyle. Little things like taking shorter showers, setting the thermostat to a reasonable temperature, only washing full loads of laundry and turning off the lights make a huge difference. When you do have to replace things, choose something that's as efficient as possible, such as LED lightbulbs. If you're in the northern hemisphere, make sure you have lots of south-facing, double-paned windows as they let in and retain solar radiation. If you live in a cold climate, spray-foam insulation works well for sealing all those little air leaks. If you live where it's warm, design your space with cross-breeze ventilation and shade in mind. Planting deciduous trees will keep your home cool in the summer and warm during the winter months—nature is your accomplice! We also have an organic container garden, which in no way feeds our family completely, but it does teach our son where food comes from.

Solar-power systems are amazing but need to be thoughtfully designed. Start with solar hot-water panels, as they get you a lot more bang for your buck than photovoltaic cells (which can be tackled once your needs for hot water are fulfilled). Water conservation is a huge issue, so plumbing your house so that gray water from your sink and shower flows out into the garden via drip lines is a great technique for saving water. Collecting rainwater is quite easy as well—if you plan on using the water for irrigation, hook your gutters up to a cistern and voilà!

People sometimes seem confused about what it means to go green. It doesn't mean rushing out and buying a bunch of new stuff while you throw out your perfectly good stuff. That just leads to the production of more things, which is the opposite of sustainable. Sustainability means choosing quality items, caring for them well and keeping them for as long as possible. It means consuming less—fewer clothes, gadgets, new cars and processed foods. Most of the time, living more sustainably only enhances our lifestyle and rarely inhibits it. It gives us a lot of pride and keeps us closely connected to our surroundings.