

2021 Posts

Prior to 2021, posts were more frequent. Perhaps Covid took its toll on subject matter. A recent change in blog service provider prompted me to abandon those earlier posts, though one or two may get resurrected in future if they have an enduring value. In any case, here are the four from 2021.

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Sunken Raised Vegetable Garden

May



Sunken? Yes, cut into the slope in front of our house so as to not block the view of the pasture.

Raised? Yes, so us old folks don't have to bend over unduly.

Vegetable garden? You bet. Over 220 SQ FT of planting area.

This project started off with renting and driving a back-hoe. It's a fix I seem to succumb to every few years. Sometimes, this being one of them, my lack of professional expertise leaves an inordinate amount of hand digging. There's no photo of the site after the back-hoe left, it would be too embarrassing. But here a milestone has been reached. The beds are complete, with six yards of topsoil hauled from the road side of the house, and planting begun.

Still a lot of work to do, however. A rabbit fence is needed before much growth occurs and netting to keep out the already inquisitive deer. And of course a lot of clean-up surrounding it.

Have to admit this is not an ideal project for an 82 year old but what the hell, older people have climbed Mount Rainier. And there's a certain satisfaction in getting it done without a heart attack. The downside is working a two hour day, at most. On the upside, those vegetables will taste just a little bit better than any others.

Prior to 2017, my thought of solar power on the Pacific coast boiled down to “forget it, too many cloudy days and there would be no significant payback through the winter months”. An article introducing net metering changed that. It described how the power company would bank credit for surplus power generated during warm months to be used to pay for shortfalls in the cloudy ones. And it claimed there are enough clear days in the Seattle area to do that. Frequency of baseball games with the roof open supported that claim.

We decided to investigate solar power and a little internet browsing allowed us to home in on two installers, each with over ten years experience in our area. The first one contacted, Sunergy Systems, sent a man out to survey our situation. He quickly identified optimum panel locations on south and west facing roof surfaces. Once on them he used a device that measured tree locations and heights that might shade the panels. This data was later fed into a program that computed expected power generation throughout a year.

Past power bills gave an indication of our annual consumption. Relating that to the generation data resulted in a recommendation of 26 panels, 17 facing south, 9 facing west. The second installer contacted came to much the same conclusion working from satellite images. Probably the openness of our roof allowed that shortcut to succeed.

There was a choice of three solar panel manufacturers: a California company (Sun Power) on the high end in cost and performance, an Oregon company which was mid-priced, and a Washington company which was the lowest cost and also benefitted from a higher State rebate for power generated. In the end, we opted for SunPower even though data showed it would take ten years to pay back the initial cost. SunPower enjoys a good reputation for reliability and standing behind their products. And the higher efficiency of their panels seemed important in our climate.

Cost quotes from the two installers for our configuration were essentially equal. We chose Sunergy Systems simply because they seemed more professional and they had no marginal reviews. I liked the fact that they are employee owned so they all have an incentive to perform. It proved to be a good choice. The two men who did the work were friendly and clearly competent. Our panels are on roof surfaces facing away from the street. After they were mounted, the man who installed them noticed that their top edge could be seen from the street. Instead of leaving them that way, he insisted on lowering them all to keep them out of sight.

The coup de grace came when the inspector took one look at the control units and said he could see this was a Sunergy installation. He related how they use Sunergy jobs to train new inspectors on how it should be done. Our choice of SunPower was also validated a year later when a micro-inverter on one of the panels failed. Their automated monitoring detected the failure. Since they had experienced other failures of these components, they had improved the design. They sent replacements for all our panels to Sunergy, who replaced them at no cost to us. In fact, it was done while we were out of town since they had no need to get inside. We were and are sold on the Sunergy Systems/SunPower combo.

The first two years we banked enough power to cover the winter months. That satisfaction prompted us to look at our gas consumption. A gas furnace/air conditioner combination was targeted when the air conditioner left us baking for four days during a hot

stretch. We opted for a high-efficiency heat pump which drove our gas bill down to about ten dollars a month. We also replace our conventional water heaters with tankless units.



The solar panels were supplying 99% of our energy needs. That is, until we decided to abandon the gas pumps with electric cars: a Tesla and a plug-in hybrid that uses about one gallon of gas per month. Only problem with that, the extra load meant we were not banking energy during the warm months. The irritation of paying for electricity during the past two winters grated on us. The answer was to go back to Sunergy Systems and add ten more panels. The simplest solution would have been to add them on the west facing roof. However, I had built a detached shop specifically oriented to catch sun earlier in the day and more effectively during winter months. As a side benefit, the panels improved the appearance of the shop's architectural shortfall. Sunergy Systems dealt with the added complexity without complaint.



The original panels were on a pace to pay for themselves in ten years. The additional panels will stretch that out but the satisfaction of knowing the sun is providing for the energy we use makes that more than worthwhile.

Two very minor uses of gas remain. Our lawn tractor forces me to head off periodically to the gas station in the Tesla. It's kind of fun to note the second looks while waiting in line. Perhaps people hope to see me jam a pump nozzle into the charging socket and are disappointed when I drag a jerry can out of the trunk. We also have a small gas furnace that augments the heat pump when outside temperature falls more than a few degrees below freezing. We live in a rural area prone to loss of the grid during storms. After a week of running on a small portable generator years ago, we invested in a natural gas backup generator that automatically powers twelve circuits. One of them runs the gas furnace so we can heat the house as well.

A purist might ask why not install battery packs and go off the grid entirely. Two PowerWall units could replace our backup generator if we could tolerate a cold house when the grid goes down. Significantly more storage would be needed to support the current demands of range, water heaters and Tesla charger. It's just not economically viable today. We happily join forces with the power company, giving them about twenty dollars a month to fill in our gas and electricity needs. Increased house value and enjoyment we feel from producing more energy than we use, make solar power a wonderful investment.

Pillage Trilogy Published

September



This series traces the tragedies and triumphs experienced by Delbert Pillage and Sylvia Cairns on British Columbia islands in the 1940-70 time period. Heart-wrenching, heart-warming historical fiction.

Some of you will recognize these books as the "Two Love" series re-titled and you will be right. They have received some refinement and editing, particularly Life Shattered, but the stories haven't changed. So, why re-title them? Because a reviewer once said she expected a romance

novel and while she thought the book was four star quality, gave it a two star rating instead. That has bothered me ever since, especially since it is the only bad rating Two Loves Lost has received.

These books are literary fiction that cross genre borders of young adult, romance, adventure, and historical fiction. Yes, the mid 1900's are now history. Not just in years, but also in culture and lifestyle. It makes me melancholy to realize I'm a relic of that bygone era, yet there's a measure of pride as well. People were more civil then, less materialistic, less stressed daily. They ate natural food for the most part and were spared the mental invasion of television. But yes, that's history now.

If you haven't read any of these books when cloaked in a Two Loves cover, I challenge you to read only one. Each whets the appetite for the next. In fact, I'm beginning to wish I had not labelled it a trilogy since thoughts are brewing for another one. Could it be called Volume 4 of the trilogy? Or do they have to all be changed to a tetralogy, quadrology, or whatever one calls a set of four. The smart thing would have been to simply call it a series.

If you haven't read Volume 1, let me tell you that amongst the high ratings:

- One woman read 116 pages the day she received it and finished it the next day.
- A man said he got up in the middle of the night to read some more chapters.
- Another woman cancelled a hair appointment so she could keep reading.

Foregoing a hair appointment is just about the highest praise a book could receive. In any case, if you're unfamiliar with these books and now curious, you can peek inside on www.sandyspen.com.

Winter Garments

November

Our "citrus grove" has its winter cloak on'





“Grove” is stretching reality a bit. It contains one lime tree and one Safsumi mandarin orange which the nursery claimed was sufficiently hardy for our location. I doubt that. In an effort to prove them right, this gently heated eyesore will make an appearance each winter and be removed when the frost season ends. Of course, windstorms like we had on Monday may well end its life prematurely.



Here it is up close before the side panels were added, showing our two little friends. The roof is needed to handle a significant snowfall. Notice it's tied on with short pieces of rope. It's easy to remove, as are the end panels and the side panels roll down when the cold ends – or a windstorm is forecast. In summer, there's a relatively inconspicuous pipe skeleton that holds up the deer fence.

Yes, it's a way too much work for a few lemons and hopefully delicious oranges. But who can ignore a challenge? If you hear nothing about our citrus grove next year, you'll know I failed and planted potatoes instead.

PS: Almost missed a "forest fire in the sky" sunset last night:

