http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/sunshine-grass-s5.jpg

The sun's power can be harnessed to provide many of life's essential needs and our natural resources are very much our wealth. Find out what can be learned at the Energy Fair hosted by the Midwest Renewable Energy Association.

ALMA, WI - "Don't you want to sit in the shade?" my sister-in-law asked. "No" I replied. I love the sun. I understand why ancient civilizations worshiped the sun.

Somehow, I think my in-laws, Cindy and Norm, love the sun too.

They just returned from the Midwest Energy Fair in Custer, Wisconsin. The Energy Fair, sponsored by the nonprofit Midwest Renewable Energy Association celebrated its 27th anniversary in June.

With over 200 workshops and roughly 15,000 folks attending, the fair serves as a catalyst for clean energy projects all over Wisconsin.

Norm and Cindy put to work what they learned. Their yard soaked up the energy from the sun in so many ways.

As we drove up to the farm, laundry waved in the breeze on the clothesline. A big jar of rich brown sun tea soaked up the sun on the picnic table.

A large, black box with a slanted clear plastic top sat atop a small table. The "sun-oven" – awash with sun – cooked healthy brown rice.

And there was another contraption in the middle of the side yard. A small wooden shed with no roof and water hoses running to it with a little entry door on the back. Leaning against the shed was a coffin-shaped rectangular container with a clear Plexiglas lid. I peered through the lid and saw 17 black hoses looped the length of the container, which looked much like a nest of black snakes.

“What is this?” I asked. “Our solar shower” was the answer. Right there in the middle of the side yard. Oh, the joys of country living.

“The yard looks like Ma and Pa Kettle,” I joked. But clearly my family loved the sun.

The photovoltaic panels across the field spoke to my relatives’ commitment to the sun. As did all the equipment in the basement controlling both the geo-thermal and the solar panel systems that powered the farm.

“Don’t forget the power of the sun in all our growing,” Cindy told me as I caught up with her early the next day. She was weeding and mulching a carefully tended garden brimming with produce. The fencing and wooden gate were cleverly built to keep out hungry critters.

The garden looked exactly like the picture-book plot that tempted Peter Rabbit in Beatrix Potter’s books.

“Yesterday I had a little rabbit sticking his nose though the chicken wire,” Cindy said. “I felt like Mrs. McGregor.”

“The growing that happened in June was phenomenal,” Cindy exclaimed. “The longer days, so much rain coming at the right time.” She wanted to share the excitement of growing things. “Capture the energy of the sun in the plant growth and feed yourself! Even in a small area. Everyone can grow something; a window box in the city and a small area in the suburbs. When I dig in the garden and am surrounded by green, it brings me back.”

“We need to balance what we are hearing in the news with this optimistic stuff, and then the bad news won’t paralyze us,” Cindy said. “Norm says ‘all we can do is do what we can in our little corner.’ And we can share what we are doing.”

“This year we got two of our friends to go to the renewable energy fair. And I know they will come back,” Cindy noted.

Cindy shared her memory of a speaker from last year’s Energy Fair. “The speaker asked us ‘Does Wisconsin have coal? No. Oil? No.’ He went through a number of things and then asked ‘Does Wisconsin have sun? YES.’ We need to use what’s here. Let’s celebrate what we’ve got and be smart about it.”

“The good food, the flowers, the trees giving off oxygen; we have the sun and the water. We feel good about being in Wisconsin right now, even with all of our challenges.”

As I left, Cindy handed me a bag full of freshly picked baby kale and strawberries. Nature’s bounty, or as Gaylord Nelson once said, “The wealth of the nation is its air, water, soil, forests, minerals, rivers, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats and biodiversity. These biological systems are the sustaining wealth of the world.”