



Simple, with Tsh Oxenreider

Episode 206

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## Segment One

Tsh: [00:03](#) This is Simple; I'm Tsh Oxenreider.

Hey friends! We are wrapping up our summer series called My Good List where I've asked a few people I find interesting to chat with me about what four things in their life are making everything better right now. Categorized into a thing, a habit, a work of art, and a philosophy. In this episode I'm chatting with Summer Rayne Oakes, a Brooklyn resident who has over a thousand house plants in her apartment. She's written a recent book called *How to Make a Plant Love You*, and her Instagram account is a thing to behold. She even has a pet chicken in her apartment. Yup. It's pretty wild and it's delightful. Let's get right into it. Here's Summer, sharing with us her good list.

[00:54](#) Summer, you are here to tell us about your good list. The four things in life that are making everything a little sweeter. We always start off with a thing, which is something big or small. It's everything from your favorite mug to some app on your phone you really love to your favorite jeans to a pen, whatever it is. What's a thing in your life right now that's making everything a little bit better?

Summer: [01:16](#) This may seem a little bit ridiculous I think to most people out of context, but I would say I have this 150 foot expandable hose in my house. I find it to be so helpful just because I have so many plants in my home and the watering can really just doesn't cut it. Having this expandable hose actually does make my life better because it allows me to be efficient in watering my plants, which is something that I really like to do, but not so efficient that it takes the joy of watering my plants out of the context of my life.

Tsh: [01:54](#) To give context, you have more than a few houseplants. You have almost a thousand house plants in your little apartment?

Summer: [02:02](#) Yeah, it's about a 1100 house plants right now. It does take some time and effort but for me it's like a moving meditation. It just goes to show you how much an expandable 150 foot hose could change your life.

Tsh: If I can ask, how big is your apartment?

Summer: It's actually 1200 square feet, which I think is quite sizable for a New York City. I think part of that has been I've lived here for 15 years in an area that has become extremely trendy now, but 15 years ago was not being looked at by most people. I wasn't one of the first movers, but I was definitely a mid-tier mover in the area.

Tsh: [02:43](#) You got in at a good time.

Summer: I did.

Tsh: Tell me more, this sounds weird, we're going to deep dive about a watering hose, but tell me more, because most of us don't have a hose inside our house. How does that work for you?

Summer: [02:55](#) Basically there's a lot of things that you can plug into the pipes in your sink. I have actually another line to my sink that is connected to a sub-irrigation system and a sub-irrigation system is essentially just watering from underneath that waters the roots of plants as opposed to the top of a plant. I have that for a green wall in my home and then the other hose actually is in the lower part of the sink. Some people will ask whether my hose like goes up to my actual sink spout. That would be disaster because there's a lot of pressure buildup that happens. You really need to do it into the incision, into the pipe of the sink so that there's not a lot of pressure differential there. That's basically how it works, you attach this to the actual sink and there's an on off spout, much in the same way that you would have on your sink as well. That controls like whether water goes to the hose or not, but typically when you're putting water in the hose, all the other water pressure in your house goes down.

Tsh: [04:02](#) Okay. That actually makes sense. I can visualize very much what you're saying and that makes a lot of sense. Maybe you'll get into this, but I'm just curious before you move on, when you talk about wanting to actually water the plants versus come up with a system that takes away from the rhythm of that, do you go around and water each plant by hand?

Summer: [04:23](#) Yes, more or less. I will take the hose, and in some cases my watering can because I usually take my water and can during every day. I water my plants every day but usually it's only a 10 to 15 minute chore or task every day because I usually just see which ones might have dried out over the course of the evening or a couple of evenings. Then on Sunday that's my more ritualistic watering where I could be watering generously and repotting plants and trimming them and doing all sorts of different projects because obviously they need a little bit more upkeep in some cases than if you're doing outside plants because indoor plants are completely reliant on, or somewhat, almost directly reliant on you for their watering needs and along those lines.

There's ways that I've like developed some efficiencies. Sometimes I'm not watering each individual plant. But in the case of, I'm thinking of my closet garden, I have a lot of my plants in terra-cotta pots on top of water reservoirs, which work by capillary action and they pull water up from the base and so I'm not actually watering each individual plant, I'm watering the reservoir, which again eliminates the need to water each and every plant and allows me to have a more pleasurable time and is part of the way that I'm able to keep so many plants. It's finding these ways to develop efficiencies without being too efficient because I think so much of our society is focused on efficiency, but we don't really realize that in the pursuit of efficiency, we actually take out some of those more humanistic rituals that make us human and make us actually happy.

Tsh: [06:17](#) Sure. You actually get into that about your book that it's not a 101 on how to take care of houseplants. You actually talk about how taking care of plants makes us better people basically.

Summer: For sure. I think *How to Make a Plant Love You*, when I started writing it, it's almost in a way a precursor for people who want to bring plants into their lives. For those of us who have plants in our lives to be able to, I think what I like about books is that sometimes it helps us articulate what we've always felt, but we've never been able to put it into words and then be able to project and apply that into our lives or just have a new way of looking at plants that we may have seem to miss because we are so focused on the prettiness of an Instagram or Pinterest board and we feel like we wanted that, but we missed out the whole process along the way of what makes that, meaning the end results so amazing in our lives. I think that part of this book is dialing it back and stepping back and taking a look at a new way of looking at plants and realizing the role that they have in our lives and the role that we have within the greater community and outside of our four walls.

Tsh: [07:36](#) That makes sense. I also have to ask before we move on, you mentioned a closet garden and most of us do not have that. I picture, you don't have a window in your closet, right?

Summer: [07:50](#) The funny thing is that there's this closet of mine that I have that is facing perpendicular to a southwest facing window. For folks who are a little bit more sensitive to the direction that light faces, especially here in the northeast, obviously I'm in New York, I'm not on the equator. Sometimes you get light in all directions when you're on the equator. But when you're in the northeast, southwest facing window means generally if you're not blocked by a building or trees or anything along those or scaffolding, you will have a lot of intense light. I had my closet there and I always had to have a curtain over the closet because it would bleach your clothes. I started to begin to look at my house in ways where why do I have a bookshelf here because the books are getting bleached or my

my clothes are getting bleached when this could be really great opportunity to actually grow some plants.

I didn't really have that initial idea myself, but a magazine a long time ago contacted me and they really wanted to actually create kitchen grow gardens in people's closets as an experiment. I got really excited about this and I was talking to the editor and I was really proactive and got so excited that I packed up some of my clothes and I started giving them to Goodwill and I got an armoire off of Craigslist and I put the remainder of my clothes in the armoire and I was like, okay, I'm ready and here's some of the plan that I think we could do. Then they just fell off the radar and never did it. I was here with this empty closet, and I was like, oh, I really want to do this.

But it took about, I would say a year and a half to two years for me to actually then do that myself. That's where the seed of the idea, every pun intended, actually got started and it was a really good investment for me because my dad came over and we do a lot of like father daughter DIY projects, which if you were asking me back in the beginning when you're saying what are those four things and I think you had mentioned art as well. One of the amazing things of art in my life that I feel like I've done is with my father. My dad and I weren't necessarily really close when I was younger just because he was always working. It was that generation where it's like, I'm going to work really hard, I'm going to put food on your plates, roof over your head and that's how I express my love to you. But as a child you're just like, well, my dad's never around. We probably had a little less than a close relationship. I wouldn't say it was a bad relationship, but it was just not a close relationship as I had with my mother growing up. But my dad and I have become super tight now and I think I have a better relationship with my father now than what I had when I was younger. Part of that is the DIY projects that we do together.

One of my favorite pieces that I've done with my father is actually a mason jar kitchen garden. I think that part of the art that I have in my house, all of my art is either brought in and pretty much done by local artists or also just living art, which I consider part of the plants that I have in my home is my humanistic expression of nature. But in my house and that mason jar garden that I did with my father in the kitchen is still one of my favorite projects that I've ever done.

Tsh: Very cool. That sounds fantastic. I think I've seen pictures of it on your Instagram. We'll put a link to that in the show notes.

Summer: I have a DIY as well on my YouTube channel. Because everybody always asks how do you do this? I tried to put that stuff up on my blog and my YouTube channel because part of it is empowering people to do this for themselves. That's one of the things that I've tried to overcome is that people become really

fascinated with your home but they don't know how to get from point A to point B. Part of that is helping guide people so that they can find that inspiration for themselves and bring it into their lives.

## Segment Two

Tsh: [14:54](#) We're going to move on in your good list. The second one is a habit you've adopted. This can be anything from some huge workout regime, but everything to reading an audio book as you commute home or going to bed a few minutes earlier. Anything big or small, what's a habit you've adopted that's making your life sweeter right now?

Summer: [15:17](#) I wish I had more of a workout regime like I used to have. I started to work so much that I haven't built that into my life again recently, but I volunteer every single day, several times a day when I'm in New York City, when I'm not traveling. Part of that manifests itself in two different ways. One is with volunteering at the chicken coop at the senior citizen service center. I'm there two to three times a day and I have a pet chicken myself. I board her there for the day and then I come and take her home at night and then I take care of the other chickens who are also there. I'm on a chicken schedule. That's my daily routine and ritual. Part of that is quite lovely. There's obviously things that people probably wouldn't consider lovely, like cleaning up the chicken poop. Part of that is very grounding as well. I work at my community garden, so I'm there probably three to four days a week taking care of not only my garden plot but the rest of the garden. That is a really wonderful feeling to be able to develop those routines and rituals in my life and to really feel like I'm part of a larger community.

Tsh: [16:37](#) When you go to these places as often as you do, I presume this is all local within your neighborhood, right?

Summer: [16:42](#) Yes, this is all within an eight minute walk of where I live.

Tsh: [16:46](#) Nice. That's cool. I know everyone's thinking, chicken in a Brooklyn apartment. Has that been a challenge?

Summer: [16:54](#) Yes, it's definitely a challenge and I don't really want to totally glorify it because, and I didn't plan on it, for sure. It was completely unplanned and looking back on it, I wouldn't change anything but looking back on it, I would've probably thought through it a little bit better. I definitely leaned into taking on the chicken, but it happened in the way that I was at the community garden and somebody had put out an inhumane rat trap and that caught a song bird, unfortunately. An inhumane rat trap, it was one of those glue traps. I took the bird up to the rehabilitation center and while I was waiting for the prognosis on

the other bird, I had a little chicken jump on my lap, who happens to be Kippy, my chicken now. The rehabilitation center always has too many animals and birds on their hand to take care of. They tried to convince me at that moment to take her to foster her. But I had been on my previous book tour and I was like, I can't really do it, I'm on a book tour. They were like, well, maybe after your book tour? For a couple of weeks, I had been really thinking about this little chicken who eventually, her name is Kippy, "kipacha"(sp?), which means little chicken in Dutch. I really was thinking about her and then I went back to see if I could foster her and they're like, oh, I think somebody else took her. I felt so sad at that point and they're like, oh wait, no, no, no, she's here. Okay, I'm going to take her. I thought I would foster her to a certain extent and I grew up with chickens, as well. It was something that I was somewhat familiar with. I just got really attached to her and she got really attached to me because chickens are very social creatures and it was very challenging really to give her up afterwards. Over the course of months I was trying to find a chicken coop that I could maybe build in the community garden or find one. Somebody from the community garden Green Thumb NYC, actually tipped me off to the senior citizen service center that was nearby, that had a chicken coop that you can't really see from the road because it's set back and said here's this place with a chicken coop, maybe you could do something there? When I went, it was a really bad chicken coop and it was very old and it was disheveled and falling apart. We ended up raising, crowd funding some money for it from the community and the plant swaps that I was doing, the first plant swap that I did, the funds were raised from there in order to be able to build out the coop and the garden area and provide a place not only for Kippy but some of the future hens there.

Tsh: [19:40](#) That sounds really cool and interesting and just something I wouldn't have thought of based on where you live. It's fun to hear just how city dwellers connect with the natural world, not only with plants, with things like animal life that way. It's very cool.

Summer: [19:57](#) The point is you really have to look for it. I meet a lot of people because I carry the chicken around everywhere and I meet a lot of people who say they want it, but you have to make the effort in order to be able to do it and really show up consistently. That's often hard for people to do, especially nowadays, but mainly in cities, especially like New York City where you're just always being pulled to many different events and responsibilities that you'd never thought you would have.

Tsh: [20:31](#) Sure. You alluded to this already a little bit, but I'd love to get into a work of art. You mentioned your thing, which is the expandable hose and the habit you've adopted by just the various ways you have volunteered in your

neighborhood. Let's get into a work of art. This can be anything from an album to a TV show to something literally hanging on your wall to something you've made. What's a work of art right now that's making her life sweeter?

Summer: [20:57](#) It's what I mentioned before with my father, the mason jar herb garden that hangs on my wall. That to me is really a living art piece where you get to see it grow and shift and change and when the plants outgrow their containers, putting that back and like I said, you had asked me about like a work of art and I think that one is really the one that really resonates with me because it symbolizes not just a really beautiful living art piece, but also something that I've done with my dad as a DIY project. That to me was a very special project because it was the first DIY project that I ever did with my father.

Tsh: [21:36](#) How long has it been in your apartment?

Summer: [21:39](#) Oh boy. I would say now maybe six or seven years, but I'd have to look back because I documented it quite a while ago. But I'd have to look back on the time. But it's been a while. It's probably been seven years, I would imagine.

Tsh: Okay, so it's lasted quite awhile then?

Summer: Yes. It's permanent and always changing.

Tsh: [21:58](#) Very cool. I like that. The fourth thing in our good list is a philosophy. This is obviously really broad and somewhat vague, but this can include everything from a way of thinking that you've adopted over the years to a bit of wisdom you got recently from somebody smart in your life that you're now trying to incorporate more into your daily life. What's a philosophy that's making your life a little sweeter right now?

Summer: [22:23](#) There's two things that I could think of and I think that the first one that really comes to mind is something that I've always abided by, and that is the world doesn't say no unless you let it. I really do believe that if you have a passion and you really think through what you're doing and you take sensible risks that there are ways to incorporate the things that you want to see in the world, into the world. Maybe that's not just through yourself, but it's through inspiring others. The idea of maybe that door closes and somebody tells you no, but then you go in the back door and then you try to see if that so open. If that's not open, then you metaphorically check the windows and if the window is not open, maybe you break it. Not realistically speaking, but metaphorically speaking. Just that idea, that concept that you're not letting people get you down and that you find the ways to do the things that you love.

The second one that really resonates with me is with my dear friend Alan, who I've been working with in Mozambique now since 2004 is when I met him and then I went to Mozambique in 2009. He does sustainable development design, and he's got a philosophy all his own and is very uncompromising and I think it has been important to me to have really uncompromising people in my life. People who won't budge when it comes to their beliefs and their passion. I think that there's something to say about that.

The other day we were talking and I was with one of my friends who had mentioned that he grew up a little differently and had different perspectives in life and his family thought that he should go and see a therapist, which never really worked for him just because he had different views. My friend Alan said, I always wonder why people should be well adjusted in a, I'm not gonna say what he said, but in a non-adjusted world? How can you actually be so well adjusted? How can you try to be so well adjusted in a world that is so screwed up? I thought that was really an interesting philosophy that like really made me think, because so many of us think that there's something wrong with us that because we feel sad or don't know how to deal with our sadness or that we have these existential struggles or that we feel a certain way about the politics or the social life, that we immediately think that it's us and that we need to fix ourselves and therefore going to something like therapy.

I'm not knocking on therapy because I think a lot of folks find solace and help through that. But the fact that you're not necessarily a destroyed human being or somebody who's struggling through something, you might actually be a sensible person and it's the world that seems crazy and we just have to figure out ways to deal with that and to use our energy and the strength and the responsibilities that we have to change our lives. I guess this goes back to my book in a certain way because I encourage people to look at you create the communities that you really want to live in. If I look at even the story that I just told you with Kippy, it started with one thing and became much larger.

It was just simply like a kind act of taking an oven bird who was caught in a rat trap to the rehabilitation center to then fostering a chicken to take it off the hands of a filled out rehabilitation center to then trying to give this little chicken a good life to trying to find a coop in the area to raising funds for a coop, to then volunteering every day at the senior citizen service center and having these chickens for the senior citizens who are largely Puerto Rican or Dominican, who have this cultural connection to raising chickens often when they were young in their native countries and native regions. I think that is really wonderful because you in a way are creating these little ripple effects that have positive effects for other people. It's literally changing the fabric of your community by being a active member of the community as well.

Tsh: [27:04](#) It reminds me of that idea that we've heard so often. It's almost cliché, but it still is true. The simple idea of be the change you want to see in the world. I think there is definite merit to self care and self awareness that I have gained personally through things like therapy and part of the process of becoming more whole-ly human, who you were made to be is to do what you're doing by bringing to the table things you would love to see at the table instead of just wishing it would happen.

Summer: [27:39](#) Yeah, exactly. I think sometimes the greatest form of therapy is by taking initiative in your own life and getting out there and sometimes also this seems counterintuitive, but taking the emphasis off yourself and putting it elsewhere. Putting a good step forward into a community or a people within a community that probably need more assistance or help than you. That I think brings a lot of positivity back into peoples lives because it puts your life into perspective of something much greater. We can't always do that because I think that sometimes there's so many demands in our lives that we have to get our things up to snuff before we could all of a sudden start caring about other people. There is two sides of the coin to that.

I do think that sometimes removing yourself, I know in my my own head, sometimes if I get too much into my own crap, I have to take myself out a little bit and reconfigure, maybe take a little bit more of that 30,000 foot approach. I love the philosophy that I think again is a little bit more cliché, but I get it in meditation circles and things along those lines where it's now think about the three things that you feel grateful for at the end of each day. That I think really brings this gratefulness and perspective in your life where you're like, okay, I probably don't have it so bad. You know what I mean? These are the things that really are meaningful to me and that make my life as wonderful as it is. If there aren't things that you don't feel grateful for, then I think part of it is just changing your mindset and then changing that way of life that you have so that it brings, more mindfulness and more gratefulness into your life. It's a good litmus test.

Tsh: [29:34](#) Yeah, absolutely. I'm pretty solid on the belief that gratitude is the best antidote for just about everything in life and to bring it full circle with your book. I can see how taking care of this many house plans or even just starting small with a few really, can be a form of mindfulness and meditation and gratitude in our lives that taking care of something living and breathing like this would just be a simple small act that can seem really therapeutic to me.

Summer: [30:04](#) I think that there is other aspects of it as well. Observation, just being able to observe something that is on a different pattern than you are or a different movement schedule or anything along those lines. These are certain things that I think refocuses people on the process of taking care or observing living things and they don't necessarily need to be in your home. It could be out

on a walk to the park and a chance to just be able to observe something that maybe you haven't observed before. So many of us are face down on our phones, myself included at times, and we began to have this downcast perspective on life that doesn't take the world in. Instead we're taking the world in through a very curated banter on our phones when we have this really big, beautiful textured, tragic world around us. That is like a way for us to be able to have imaginations and come up with things in our lives and develop processes and observational skills and all these other types of things that sometimes we miss. If we could find that through something as humble as a house plant or a plant coming through the crack of a sidewalk or anything along those lines, I think that we're going to be in a much better place.

Tsh: [31:39](#) A big thanks to Summer for taking some time to chat with me. You can find links to all her things in the show notes of this episode at [thesimpleshow.com](http://thesimpleshow.com) where you can also find stuff like links to things we talked about, where you can sign up for my short weekly email called Five Quick Things, how you can become a patron and support the work it takes to create the show for just a few dollars per month, as well as how to connect with me and the people I chat with. The show was produced by Chad Michael Snavely and Jesse Montonya and thanks also to Caroline TeSelle, Andrea Debbink, and my furry intern, Ginny. Thanks so much for listening. I'm Tsh Oxenreider and I'll catch you back here soon.