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Raising Chickens at Home

One family's adventures in local eating and animal husbandry

Originally published April, 2009

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Photo by Michael Alberstat



With some trepidation I held the first egg: "You try it." "Yes, daddy, you try it," said our six-year-old, Esmé.

My partner took a big bite of the boiled egg. I wasn't willing to do the honours because I was expecting a sort of—how you say—"fuller," "earthier" or "more wholesome" flavour. Kind of like how switching from conventional to organic dairy took me some getting used to.

"It's good!"

Esmé and I took little nibbles. It was good.

our brood

At about three months of age, Twyla, Rose or Buttercup (we weren't quite sure who) had laid her first egg. In the weeks to come The Girls each settled into the routine of laying an egg a day, grown fat and lustrously feathered thanks to their diet of organic veggies, pasta, chicken feed, bugs and garden snails. They'd grown tall and muscular, bigger than our cats, and roamed freely through our tiny urban backyard. They adored nesting under

the Japanese maple, grooming themselves by the mirrors we'd set out under the lilac and rose bushes, walking the perimeter of our koi pond.

Their eggs were the prettiest things, pale brown, sometimes speckled, sometimes with a lone bit of fluff stuck on top. The yolks were the richest buttercup yellow. We scrambled them up into tortillas, enjoyed dipping toast into them sunny-side up, toted them on hikes—hard-boiled with sea salt—and gave extras to our neighbours.

It all ended in autumn when our next-door neighbours—who had originally said they were fine with our hens—changed their mind and called Animal Control after a disagreement that started over a parking space, fence and 150-year-old tree.

"That sucks," said an audience member when I spoke at a Hamilton Eat Local presentation on urban agriculture some months later. "Downtown Hamilton's very *laissez-faire*. I have backyard hens and none of my neighbours care. Everyone knows hens aren't allowed, but many of us have them. In fact, if you moved, I'm sure your new neighbours wouldn't mind at all, if you stayed downtown."

Just my luck. In fact, we'd moved from Toronto to Hamilton in 2006 so we could live more simply and cheaply, and I could quit my day job and work from home, spending more time with Esmé, growing our own organic vegetables.

A trio of hens complemented that idea. And our tiny yard certainly was a pretty sight in 2008, with heirloom peas spreading across the fence, deep purple eggplants, a crazily bushy row of potatoes, a container garden of zucchini, and a mess of tiny red currant-sized (and aptly named) currant tomatoes. The hens would wander their domain, running up to me as I sat on the deck, their formidable claws crunching the pea gravel path as they came in search of a tickle or a bowl of yogurt.

"I'm sorry, but there's a bylaw," said the Animal Control officer as we stood in the yard one autumn morning. "Your yard is clean. The bylaw was put in place to prevent people from having big, dirty coops and disease and so on. That doesn't apply here, but my hands are tied."

a locavore trend

This is the scenario a Toronto mom, whom I'll call Cara Williams, wants to avoid (hence the pseudonym). Toronto also has a bylaw against city hens, and Williams has had three for the past two years.

"When I found out that it's illegal to keep hens in Toronto, it made no sense to me. It goes against what I believe is our basic right to pure food," she says.

Although her neighbours are fine with the hens, Williams doesn't like knowing her hens' wellbeing hinges on their whim. She's started an online petition at torontochickens.com, and has a city councillor helping to advocate against the bylaw. She's hoping Toronto City Council will vote on the issue this year.

Williams' hens roam in a prefab Eglu (omlet.co.uk). Her two teenage sons take turns rounding up The Girls at night. "My sons have learned a lot about responsible pet ownership through chicken husbandry," says Williams.

Other parents see backyard hens as an opportunity to help their kids nurture other living creatures, as well as experience field-to-table eating firsthand.

"Backyard farming is a wonderful opportunity for kids to learn about the biology and beauty of food," says Matthew Bailey-Dick, father to three kids aged 6, 3 and 1, member of Waterloo Hen Association, a citizen's group that's lobbying city council for a pro-backyard hen bylaw. Waterloo, Ont., currently has no ban as such, but Bailey-Dick says many city workers are under the impression there is one, so a pro-hen bylaw would send a clear message.

Bailey-Dick has raised hens in his family's backyard. "Not only can we eat the eggs, but the hens provide fertilizer for our compost pile, which then goes into our garden." Bailey-Dick and his partner, Nina, have vegetable gardens on their property, and in fact, she started a local food-buying club in Waterloo last summer.

"We're interested in local food for a variety of ethical, economic, spiritual, and health-related reasons," he says. "It's becoming more and more of a no-brainer. With global warming and economic changes, there's no longer a choice: we have to build a strong and resilient food supply, and it will have to be local to a great extent," he says, adding that their foray into vegetable gardening has helped turn his three kids into veggie fans who love to munch peas, tomatoes and green onions straight from the garden.

Another parent who's hoping bylaw amendments will allow her to raise her own hens is Sonia Lo of Surrey, B.C. Surrey like Victoria and London and Niagara Falls in Ontario, is one of the few Canadian cities that allow backyard hens. Unfortunately, says Lo, the bylaw permits hens only on properties of one acre or more, meaning she, her husband, and six-year-old-daughter Amélie, are out of luck.

"I think healthy food selections should be available to everyone," says Lo, who buys as much organic food as her family can afford on one income. Lo eats local and says the slew of tainted food news that has filled the news pages the past few months has made her very concerned about the safety of the mainstream food supply.

The anti-hen bylaws flummox her. "If our grandparents could do it—they didn't have such bylaws back then!—why can't we?" she asks.

just laws?

Certainly one of the things that frustrates urban hen enthusiasts is the fact that the very bylaws that were enacted to prevent overcrowding and unhygienic conditions in backyard coops currently exist in factor farms. (Go online for ample evidence of the conditions in modern factory farms. The Canadian

Coalition for Farm Animals' humanefood.ca is a useful site.) What we want is a homegrown alternative.

We agree bylaws should ban noisy roosters, limit the number of hens, outline set-backs from residential buildings, regulate hygiene standards, and have a mechanism for handling community complaints (just as neighbours can complain about unleashed or neglected dogs).

So what's the big deal?

Twyla, Rose and Buttercup now live on a forested country estate, roaming the grounds freely with six feathered friends, and a big, watchful sheepdog. They get healthy treats galore, all the chicken feed they can eat, and go to bed in a beautiful, Hobbitsy little heated henhouse at the end of the woods. (Thank you, Pavkovic family!)

But you know, I look out on our forlorn potting shed/indoor coop and I think, I miss the hens.

There's something wrong with a system where tainted food outbreaks, pollution and cruelty to animals are accepted, and humanely and hygienically raising three hens is not. Where cramming multiple hens whose beaks have been cut off with a red-hot blade are stuffed into a cage that's too small for them to move around in, where they'll live their short lives covered in fecal matter from the cages stacked above theirs, with oozing sores and eye infections, is acceptable, but letting them bask in the sun in a fully fenced urban backyard, or dust-bathe under a dogwood tree while their owner hand-feeds them is not.

Our food system, and food values, are broken. When local governments take notice, will it be before or after a global food crisis has already struck at the heart of Canadian food security? Ask your city councillor.

While caring for the hens, writer Yuki Hayashi removed waste from the coop daily and replaced straw and raked out the run every week.

hen facts

How many eggs?

On average, three hens will lay two eggs each day through spring and summer months. That adds up to approximately 366 eggs per year; more than enough to share with hesitant neighbours!

City limits

It is legal to keep backyard hens in only six Canadian cities, but a whopping 82 cities across the United States. Even more American cities allow hens on large lots. Roosters are generally not permitted.

the zero-mile diet

Victoria-based horticulturalist, author and backyard hen enthusiast Carolyn Herriot teaches a course called The Zero-Mile Diet, which shows city slickers how to grow their own food, from organic veggies to backyard hens. The author of *A Year On The Garden Path: A 52-week Organic Gardening Guide* (Earthfuture Publications) says interest in urban homesteading has made the jump from camo-wearing survivalist types to the Pilates mom next door.

Why? Because "disruption from climate change, peak oil, population growth and food contamination [show] we can no longer depend on cheap, mass-produced food transported all over the world," she says.

What you need to start your own flock:

- If you plan to go under-the-radar, be absolutely sure your neighbours are on board before you get started.
- "A small flock of hens requires a daily commitment to opening and closing the coop, watering and feeding," says Herriot. "If the coop is cleaned out regularly, you keep the chickens disease-free."
- Ready-made henhouses and coop plans can be found online. Herriot built a 1940s-style henhouse using \$50 worth of recycled decking. "From November to March, I let them free-range in the garden. They put themselves in at night, so all I have to do is close the door after them."
- Check out Herriot's website at earthfuture.com/gardenpath.