

Ruffled feathers: the debate over backyard chicken coops

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by Jessica Wong, *CBCNews.ca*

Having spent my whole life in Toronto, I haven't had much opportunity to encounter live chickens, but the idea of keeping a few hens in one's urban or suburban backyard fascinates me.

Vancouver is the latest city to tackle the issue, with city councillors voting last week to [study the situation and draft a bylaw amendment](#), but the concept that residential chicken coop-proponents and opponents have been fighting over for years — from [Summerside, PEI](#) to [Halifax](#) to [Chicago](#).

While some backyard coop fans cite the recent trend of eating locally as their impetus, the current recession also provides a thrifty new argument for keeping a few hens kicking and scratching out back.

Still, concerns over noise and predators (having lost many a battle for backyard dominance to aggressive Toronto raccoons), are valid. And, come winter, is it simply [time for chicken stew \(or a roast dinner\)](#)?

Would you consider installing a backyard chicken coop? Why?

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Ken Johnston

Toronto

While the idea of a back-yard coop sounds romantic and fun, the reality is probably less so. Especially when you have to consider, what do you do with the really smelly poop.

Posted March 11, 2009 01:13 PM



Currently, Vancouver residents can raise chickens in their backyards if they own a minimum one-acre property. (CBC).

John

Edmonton

Growing up on a farm, I certainly appreciated the availability of fresh eggs and meat from our chickens. Recently I have been wondering about the ability to keep a few chickens, but haven't pursued it. My friends, of course, laugh at the suggestion, but the benefits keep adding up. Besides, there are plenty of less healthy habits to keep!

Posted March 11, 2009 09:17 PM

tina

You bet I would! There is much to be learned from raising chickens....and eating them! They recycle alot of kitchen scraps...provide eggs (and eventually meat)and are a means to teach our children how to raise their own food! It is something we are all going to need to do if prices keep increasing and wages don't!

Posted March 11, 2009 09:48 PM

Celeste Sansregret

Winnipeg

One of my favorite photographs from my childhood is a picture of Baba - my great-grandmother standing in the front yard of her house in Point Douglas in Winnipeg in her vegetable garden with an apron full of chicks.

Urban chicken coops were commonplace in the Chinese, Greek and Portuguese neighborhoods of Toronto when I first moved there 25 years ago, There were live chickens in Kensington Market too. The old man next door on Clinton had a rooster who awoke half the street at dawn. Toronto changed its by-laws and the chickens disappeared.

I miss those chickens - and the thrifty, practical old country people who kept them. I'm not sure what my landlord would say about a chicken coop on the balcony though...

I'd be quite happy to see chickens and chicken coops in the city again. If people are doing it for environmental reasons maybe city garages could stop housing the car and start housing a few hens and a few bicycles instead.

Posted March 11, 2009 11:18 PM

Paul Hughes

Calgary

A couple years ago when my son was 4, he watched over 20 hens & roosters for the winter and summer, collecting the eggs and feeding/watering them twice a day. He loved doing it and he is excited we may have chickens again.

Posted March 11, 2009 11:47 PM

jeff costello

I grew up in Toronto but now live on the frontier's edge in Prince George on 5 acres. six years ago we built a little coop for a dozen hens. Now we have over fifty!! They're kinda cute in a dorky sort of way. They'll trim your grass, eat bugs (ours loved pine beetle larvae) and most egg layers will give you one nifty egg a day. They'll eat all you compost too. A warning....chicken wire stops chickens....not the neighbour's dog as we found out. That's when you find out just how territorial you are. I awed that Vancouver had the nerve to do this. Two or three birds would be great for a family....up until that first -10c. Then the question is to heat lamp or not to heat lamp?

This is a great idea.

Posted March 12, 2009 01:51 AM

Paula Shackleton

Whistler

We have an Italian neighbor in Vancouver who kept voice-less chickens dating back to 20 years ago. He also grew all his tomatoes for the year's supply of pasta sauce, the ubiquitous broad bean teepees, a fig tree, and garlic. Unfortunately the city outlawed his chickens (which were no bother to anyone) but he kept on with his garden. It covered his entire yard with the exception of the boulevard swath out front of the house, but every other square inch had something edible growing. He sadly had an accident one frosty morning and fell off his roof and sustained a head injury and has never quite been the same old Dominic. But the garden grows - bring on the chickens, Dominic!

Posted March 12, 2009 04:16 AM

C J Sheldon

I am contemplating a backyard chicken coop. The reason would be my demand for and the increasing general demand for pasture-raised chicken and eggs. I hear on the Farming Today program in the UK that demand is outstripping supply in this country. This means that chickens are raised in barns, with access to the outdoors, but they often take little advantage of the rainy field available to them because food is plentiful in the warm dry shelter. Thus (1) land is being devoted to chickens which could better be devoted to growing grains and vegetables; and (2) "pasture raised" may not live up to the name.

Lawn raised will do for me. A Dutch friend lets his chickens of their large coop a couple of hours before dark. They charge all over the lawn eating grass and bugs, never getting as far as the vegetable garden where they would wreak havoc. They put themselves to bed when the sun goes down.

Posted March 12, 2009 04:19 AM

ben sanamimorrill

Yes absolutely! I have been all over the world for example in China I often hear about people saying they respect farmers but in theory only. If you ask them what do they think if their children became farmers they protest - no way. Most people - anywhere would never think of getting their hands "dirty" farming and would prefer the "easy" "office" over "hard" "dirty" manual labor. I think it is very sad to hear children growing up today thinking that rice is polished and from a bag, vegetables/fruit washed and bagged, meat comes from the supermarket all wrapped up in plastic, meat and fish with the head, tail chopped off and guts stripped and washed de-boned and de-skinned. This is not food. When I hear Canadians/Americans in China or Japan they get sick when they see the head on a fish. Fortunately, the world is not like the typical Canadian/American and can eat fish with the head on etc. I believe for my children's own learning needs I will definitely keep chickens/ducks anything small. After all my parents as well as my wife's parents (from

China)had chickens, rabbits, goats and a large garden so we knew where things came from. My wife often asks me why do Japanese and Canadians don't like chicken de-boned and de-skinned? Well how can I answer this question except say I don't know. I really enjoy hearing and seeing animals in the city - we are animals too we have to learn to co-exist with our food, with nature. Anyone who says animals are noisy, then what about automobiles - they stink, pollute and are noisier than a few chickens. Grow locally eat locally. Know where your food comes from.

Posted March 12, 2009 04:53 AM

mrssauga

I've often thought that having some chickens in a coop would be a great thing. We love to eat eggs and to know what feed the chickens are getting, etc., would be an asset. As far as killing them, I don't at the moment have the stomach to however what I would likely do is pay a local farmer to kill and clean them for me. That way they make some money, we get our chickens. The killing of livestock by neighbouring farmers is not an uncommon practice at all.

Posted March 12, 2009 05:52 AM

Theresa Smith

Yes, of course I would have laying hens in my backyard. I recently rented out my house in town and rented a farm house outside of town in order to raise laying hens without "ruffling any feathers" among my town neighbors.

As to the rodent/predator argument, in town my cats would leave dead rats in the yard, after 5 months in the rural area, no dead rats in the yard. This is with open grain storage in the barn.

Posted March 12, 2009 06:30 AM

Christy Gain

Yes, I would like to have hens. I lived on a hobby farm near Nelson BC, where we had meat birds. Our neighbour had hens and roosters. The roosters were loud. The hens made sweet little noises, accept when laying then they made loud bock bock bocks. I think that as long as it doesnt bother the neighbours then it should be allowed. It is a good idea if the neighbours are tollerant of the odd little farmy noise, and the chicken owners keep the manure cleaned out of the pens and composted properly (layered with carbon material) so that the smell would be minimal. I for one would love to have my own eggs to eat.

Posted March 12, 2009 08:46 AM

PHI

Toronto

There will be complaints of sanitation, animal welfare, disease transmission such as avian flu. Who will monitor these backyard coops? Most properties in Toronto and too small to have a coop that won't affect neighbours with noise, odour, and sanitation. Its difficult with all the barking dogs and their waste that the owners don't clean up as often as they should...now add chicken poop and cockadoodledoing!

Look at all the complaints about people keeping and feeding pigeons! Keep chickens on the farm!

Posted March 12, 2009 09:01 AM

adem

calgary

very good idea,fresh eggs,yummyyyy

Posted March 12, 2009 10:41 AM

Steve

Vancouver

It will really get interesting when the next bird-flue outbreak comes along.

AAAaaaAAaaaChoooooCluck

Posted March 12, 2009 11:30 AM

Asha

Vancouver

I do support the idea of people keeping backyard chicken coops, but I think that the Vancouver needs to put in some rules to protect both the animals and neighbours from unprepared and/or irresponsible would-be farmers.

First off, there should be a maximum number of chickens allowed. Let's be honest, how many chickens can even a family need?

I would like to see a simple required permit for setting up a chicken coop. If I have to get a permit to park on my street, then I don't see why it should be a big deal for someone to pay a \$30 fee to get a permit for a chicken coop.

Also, there would need to be some simple and clear rules about issues like noise and smell. Chicken manure smells bad and a improperly kept chicken coop smells worse. I don't want to have to deal with the smell of a pile of chicken manure wafting over from a neighbours yard in the middle of summer.

Lastly, there should be some measures put in to push those that neglect or abandon their chickens.

If the city can enact some simple & clear by-laws to help make this easy for everyone to deal with, there won't be a problem.

Posted March 12, 2009 12:22 PM

Dimitrios R

Great idea,,fresh eggs and the occasional fresh chicken and what a better way to wake up in the morning than to the sound of a rooster.

Posted March 12, 2009 01:37 PM

Anjohl

NFLD

Sure, why not? Anything that makes people more self sufficient is for the better.

The gasoline-powered lifestyle we have grown used to has a half-life...

Posted March 12, 2009 02:11 PM

Aga

Toronto

I would personally love to install a chicken coup on my 2000 square foot Toronto backyard. There are folk living in my neighbourhood (about 10-15km from City Hall) that keep them in their homes. However just buying a fancy chicken dome (which is advertised as being predator-proof) I'm aware that there are some other issues... Namely chicken health. What do you do if your chickens are sick? Would you even know? Would my dog/cat vet know how and when to vaccinate the birds? I would hate to spend the money on the gear only to end up with a bunch of dead birds in my yard.

Posted March 12, 2009 02:39 PM

BokBokBok

I think having backyard chickens are a great idea! Victoria has allowed backyard chickens, with several rules albeit, for years now. It's been a very successful program. The chickens keep the yard clean, their droppings can be used as fertilizer and composted, and their eggs are always appreciated. They also connect a neighbourhood. Children are fascinated by them. The chickens can be used as an education tool, connecting kids with their food and the agricultural significance of them. Opponents shouldn't knock it until they've tried it.

Posted March 12, 2009 03:04 PM

Jen

Quebec

While I don't disagree with the idea in principle (some folks feel it might put them more "in touch" with nature; some folks might do it to eat organic meat), I wonder how many city folks would be willing to properly educate themselves about the proper care the animals should receive. It seems that many dog and cat owners don't even bother to educate themselves about the true responsibility of keeping animals; I can only imagine what might happen if backyard coops are allowed. (I would love to have one, but I'm not up for that responsibility...I think it's better left to the pros - the smaller-scale farmers).

Posted March 12, 2009 03:15 PM

sarah

Halifax

I would love to have a few chickens in my backyard - in fact, this summer I am moving to the country to do just that! If we could have a few chickens (and a larger size yard), we might stay in the city.

I think that the idea of eating fresh eggs and meat coming from chickens that were fed from your own hand, not full of chemicals and hormones, that you know for a fact lived a happy, healthy life is a wonderful thing!

The 100 km diet is a great idea - I grow most of my own food in the summer, and buy the rest from local producers whenever I can. The coffee and orange juice have me stymied though - can't grow that locally! And I can't seem to give those up.

Posted March 12, 2009 03:50 PM

John Wiens

Marpole

If I had a backyard I would definitely keep a halfdozen laying hens. I am an avid gardener and you can't beat fresh day old eggs. Along with a chicken permit a short course would probably be a possible suggestion to allay neighbour concerns and "chicken abuse"

Posted March 12, 2009 05:54 PM

CMacK73

There is absolutely no reason why 4-6 little heirloom hens in an aesthetically-pleasing, well-kept run should be offensive in any way. Roosters in town are obviously a no-no and there's no need to have a large flock. Look after your birds and keep the run clean clean clean and you should have healthy, happy little ladies and fresh eggs to boot. I do agree that neighbours with pets that are noisy, smelly, and kept in unsightly and/or unhealthy living conditions are very undesirable and should be controlled through enforced bylaws. I'd rather have the neighbour with chickens as per my comments above than those with a large barking dog kept in a stinky run all day.

Posted March 12, 2009 06:33 PM

Hersh Seth

Definitely! We've lost touch with what life -and the art of staying alive- really is in these fast-food, everything processed, packaged times that we live in. Live off the earth, don't take more than you need, and respect the labor involved in producing the life we take for granted. I don't think there is anything wrong in people wanting to work a little for their food. If you have enough room in your backyard (and size of the backyard should be the only debate), then why not?

Posted March 12, 2009 06:43 PM

Cara

Yes. I would love to have a chicken coup within municipal boundaries. Eating organically, locally, and the ethical treatment of animals are all motivating factors. Food sovereignty may become a worldwide issue in the next few decades and this could be a good step to ensure ours for the future. I like to know how my food was raised, treated and killed; if I can do all this myself I will be sure the life and death of the animal are up to my standards.

Posted March 12, 2009 07:09 PM

Evelyn

London

Most definitely...I would love to have a few laying hens. Unfortunately I live in London and it will never happen here. God forbid if we had a few hens in the backyard "scratching a living" and giving us in return organic fresh eggs and chicken manure. As for neighbours who complain about the noise of a few chickens....I would much rather listen to the cackling of a few happy hens than the screeching of the neighbours kids morning, noon and night.

Posted March 16, 2009 09:42 AM

Henryck

ottawa

I thought about doing it myself, but the municipal gov. is will not allow it. Too bad, I remember when I was young, we use to go and get the eggs each morning in the backyard. Now I have to buy those eggs at the store, but if you know what it is to pick up fresh eggs, you know that there's nothing really fresh at your local store! To me it seems like a yok in water!! yark!!!!

Posted March 16, 2009 10:32 AM

Greg

Junction

My brother keeps 3 hens in his back yard, and I have seriously considered it, having been brought up on a farm myself. I believe, within reason, that we should be able to keep chickens in our back yards. People might then have a more visceral connection to their food. Hens are quiet, (except when laying and egg!) and eat all the compostable table scraps reducing your feed cost and consuming a waste that has to be hauled off.

Posted March 18, 2009 12:38 PM

T Cobean

I am planning to have some hens this summer. A friend of mine has been raising them in Ontario for two years now. Five minutes a day, some feed and he has more fresh eggs then he knows what to do with. he has eight. I plan to have four or five. Looking forward to it as I live in zoned "rural" area and my nearest neighbour can not see my property through the forest. Perfect for eggs!

Posted March 19, 2009 06:33 PM

Molly (undercover name)

Calgary

I am in full support of a change to the bylaws in support of backyard chickens. Bylaws need to reflect the actual risks and problems associated with keeping animals. These risks and benefits need to be assessed against documented issues that relate to current realities. For example, most current bylaws that relate to urban livestock are decades if not centuries out of date.

I have three chickens in my back yard as we speak. They are easy to care for, eat my garden pests, provide hours of entertainment for family, neighbors and myself and provide us with all the eggs we need for a family of 4. My chickens cope with winter very well but are anxious for spring like the rest of us.

Posted March 24, 2009 10:16 AM

Old Guy.

The issue isn't about chickens but about responsibility of the owners. Chickens like any other animal require maintenance. They can be a benefit but an owner must care for them. Feeding, watering, sheltering, keeping the pens clean and above all protecting them from the many predators they will attract. Mice, rats, skunks, racoons, possum all these can be a problem. This all takes commitment. Which generally appears to be lacking today.

Posted March 27, 2009 08:13 AM

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