

Let's hear it for the Girls!

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I'd had chicken envy for a while. I felt an intense pang of longing a couple of summers ago when, driving to an outdoor flea market, we passed a pretty stone house just as a brown hen hopped onto its porch. I really, really want a hen, I thought.

Then, March Break of this year sealed the deal. The dive resort we stayed at in Honduras had a resident rooster and two hens who spent all day wandering the property. It was incredibly relaxing to watch them strolling the grounds, pecking at insects, relaxing under trees just steps away from the Caribbean Sea. "I really, really want a hen!" said our six-year-old daughter.

We'd gone mostly organic as soon as she was born, so boosting our commitment to local food appealed to my partner and me. (A 100-mile diet? Try the 10-metre diet!) In fact, it was our daughter who'd first inspired us to find alternatives to big-box groceries: We didn't want her eating pesticide residues, we didn't want her peers in other countries breathing in said residues and we didn't want to leave her generation with a legacy of depleted soil and toxic runoff just to save \$50 on groceries each week.

Additionally, we'd been hit with a barrage of farm imagery. Ever notice how practically every single baby or toddler book has some farm element to it? They're idyllic yet productive farms where cows graze, chickens peck at the dirt and pigs loll in outdoor pens.

I realized I couldn't lie to my child. If she believed our milk, eggs and meat came from humanely raised animals, reared by family farmers, well, that's what we'd have to buy, not products from animals raised in abject misery on increasingly corporatized livestock operations, prevented from roaming, medicated to counter the effects of stressful living conditions.

As we became more engaged with our food supply, we wanted to produce some of it ourselves - albeit a teeny-tiny amount in our teeny-tiny yard.

Being vaguely aware that, in Nova Scotia, a woman named Louise Hanavan was being ordered by the City of Halifax to get rid of her trio of backyard hens, I did a cursory search of the bylaw situation in Hamilton, where we'd been living for the past 18 months. I couldn't find any info on whether pet hens were illegal, and decided not to draw attention to myself by phoning the city.

"Let's just cross that bridge if we come to it," said my partner. "Surely Hamilton's more laid back than

Halifax. No one's going to rat us out for having pet chickens."

Besides, our research had told us that The Girls (what we came to call the birds) would be quiet, docile and clean. They'd eat our leftovers, wander the garden and eliminate pests, and provide both eggs and valuable waste for our composter. We'd feed the hens, and in turn, they'd help feed us.

So that's what brought us to Farm Depot one cold March morning for the year's first shipment of baby chicks: an interest in opting out of the grocery-industrial complex in a small but symbolic way, and a desire to let our child nurture fluffy little baby chicks to adulthood.

Weeks later, we carved out a couple of raised vegetable beds. My partner built the hens an indoor coop, added an outdoor run along the side and started letting them out all day to roam the yard.

And so, this was our summer of homegrown eggs, eggplants, tomatoes, potatoes, snow peas, rattlesnake beans, red peppers and raspberries.

We loved to see The Girls basking in the sunshine on the pea gravel path, or looking at themselves in the flea market mirrors we placed under the rose and lilac bushes. They'd come running whenever they heard the back porch door open. They loved to be petted on the back. They were named Twyla, Rose and Buttercup, and they don't live with us anymore.

We had to relocate them last week, after Animal Control ordered them moved, thanks to Hamilton's bylaw against backyard hens (yep, it exists).

"You should really get your councillor here to see this place," the Animal Control officer had said that beautiful September morning as he issued the order to remove them. Gazing at the hen that had come running up to him like a puppy, then around the yard at the Japanese maple, the rose bush and the koi pond, he added, "I don't think the bylaw was designed to ban this sort of thing." (Unlike Toronto's anti-hen turned pro-hen councillor Joe Mihevic, my councillor wasn't interested in exploring the issue.)

Backyard hens harm no one - they're quiet, they're clean and they're an eco-friendly way to eliminate yard pests. And even if the ban were lifted, it's not as if everyone would be running out to buy hens overnight ("Honey, put down that Wii, we need to get to Farm Depot to buy some chicks to raise!"), the concentration in the city would likely be small enough that there'd be next to nil increased danger from diseases such as avian flu. While in Asia, avian flu has been tied to flocks of hens living in close proximity to their human hosts, with children playing in infected feces and adults being exposed to the virus during slaughter and de-feathering, this seems unlikely in the context of pampered big-city Canadian hens. Furthermore, limits on the number of birds kept in a household would prevent urban hen farms from springing up.

Given that many consumers are looking for solutions to the mess we are mired in: rising grocery costs, unsustainably harvested crops, inhumanely treated livestock, food shortages and a generation of kids in danger of being completely disassociated from the links in our food chain, it seems insane to me that productive family pets like hens are being chased out of our cities.

We miss our Girls.

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