

MARCH 2010

Pecks in the City

A slow-in-building fascination with urban chickens proves one writer is anything but

SQUARE PEG

AMY SEIDENWURM



I have chicken fever. No, I don't need to run to the doctor—I am in love with chickens. But it was not always so.

I joined a local beekeeping collective with my husband, Russell, and in the past six months, we've made lots of bee friends—many of whom keep chickens. I loved hearing their poultry tales and seeing their chicken enclosures. But these folks were a bit more environmentally conscious than we were: They have worm bins, concoct solar-cooking devices, ride their bikes *everywhere*. I'm pretty sure they don't use deodorant. They're crazy about their chickens, yes...and a bit crazy overall. I have a full-time desk job. Animal husbandry really

didn't seem to be in the cards, but I was intrigued.

I went to an urban-farming workshop to see what it takes to raise poultry and immediately saw they are filthy creatures who are cruel to one another and need a lot of care. They must be locked in their coop at sundown and let out at daybreak. This was just not feasible. Plus, our Silver Lake neighborhood is lousy with predators: hawks, raccoons and more, all ruthless in their hunt for a fresh chicken dinner. To an animal lover, this sounded brutal. Case closed—no chickens.

Enter my friend Sue. She has chickens in Echo Park and sets up an egg stand on her porch every Saturday at 9 a.m. These eggs are rich, earthy and unlike anything in the markets. Sue's stand is popular—one morning I showed up at 9:25, only to find the bin empty. When I whined, she asked why I didn't just get my own chickens. I listed my excuses. She gave me a look that made me feel lazy and uninspired...and chickens became a maybe.

I started asking around. Our friend Kelly suggested minimizing the drain on my time with a chicken door on a timer. Lora showed us her Echo Park yard, and her chickens seemed pretty clean and well behaved. Mark said his didn't stink up his home in Studio City. But these are our hard-core DIY friends, who seem to gravitate toward daunting projects.

I found some folks who don't have a lot of free time either. Linda Daly is involved with various large-scale charities, is a mother of two, a contributing editor for this magazine and still has 50-plus chickens in Calabasas. She's especially fond of the Maran breed, which lays dark-chocolate-colored eggs. The friends she gives them to will no longer buy eggs in a store, saying, "They just don't taste right."

Natalie Blake is a trial attorney and mom in Mandeville Canyon. She is so attached to her dozen chickens she goes straight from court to her henhouse, pausing only to put on galoshes. "I talk to them," she says. "It's a good thing to be closer to the earth."

Actors William H. Macy and Felicity Huffman got six chicks for their daughters. "Now we're all in love—it's been a family affair," Macy says. He recalls frantically searching one morning



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after a chicken went missing from the coop, only to find it asleep in his daughter's bed. Macy echoes the mission of all urban farmers: "We could grow a lot of food in L.A. if people took responsibility for themselves. I ate an apple the other day that was shipped from Israel. That's a long way to send an apple when we have apple trees right here in California."

An accomplished builder, Macy crafted a gorgeous henhouse and now rationalizes the time and expense involved in the setup: "I figured out the cost of chickens plus coop plus feed. If we get four eggs a day from six chickens, they will cost us \$85 each. And they'll be worth every dime." I was burning with chicken fever now.

I challenged Russell and our superhandy friend Wes to build us a coop that rivaled Macy's. They found (and then modified) coop plans on the Internet and scouted the yard for drainage and shade, while I made lunches and tried to keep them focused.

I was on my way to owning chickens—but what kind and how many? I discovered the Los Angeles Urban Chicken Enthusiasts, a mixed bag of established and aspiring chicken lovers. I learned neighbors tend to complain only when an urban flock includes a rooster and that hens will happily lay up to five eggs a week without one. But they said it's near impossible to determine the sex of a baby chick, so we should get "started" chickens to be sure we have only ladies. I found out the best breeds for laying and which are friendliest. I was getting used to the idea of moving between the disparate worlds of a civilized marketing job and a pseudo barnyard.

Next was the poultry show in Ventura, hosted by the aptly named Seaside Feather Fanciers, where we got lost in a swirl of exotic specimens: every kind of chicken, along with game birds, ducks, geese and turkeys. It was akin to hitting the Westminster Kennel Club dog show to find a golden retriever—a wee bit of overkill for beginners. For now, we would focus on the henhouse.

Russell and Wes took three months of weekends to build a veritable chicken palace. It was a sight to behold, complete with insulation, rain gutters and, yes, a motorized door on a timer. There is an outdoor run that no animal other than a bear could breach. I have lived in crappier apartments. We were ready—bring on the birds!

Some Internet research led us to Blue Hill Farms in Ventura, where proprietor Kim Hamilton handed us chickens to inspect moments after we arrived. Neither Russell nor I had ever held a chicken, and we tried to act casual as the birds flapped and squawked. We nodded our approval, crammed four into a cat carrier and headed home, wondering what we had just gotten ourselves into.

Once inside our coop, the ladies stood petrified, and we saw why people use *chicken* as an adjective. We urged them to explore their pen and have some nourishment, but no go. Only after we placed them next to the food and water did we see they were indeed famished. They also needed several days of coaching to climb onto their perches at night, even though this should have been a natural behavior.

I've always loved Silver Lake because it feels like a small town. I know many of the restaurateurs and shopkeepers, and they were eager to hear about our project and even contribute to the effort. Intelligentsia gives us coffee chaff for coop bedding. Village Bakery in Atwater Village gives us day-old bread and crackers, and Hollywood farmers' market vendors are happy to unload bags of unwanted carrot and beet greens. The community has embraced our hens.

So have we, as their personalities have started to show. One was named Lillian after my paternal grandmother, who was so timid she stopped driving when it proved faster to walk; the bossiest chicken had to be Pauline, my maddening cardsharp of a grandmother; and the other two—named from Russell's more balanced side of the family—are Nell and Mary. The brood isn't exactly affectionate.

They cluster when we bring them treats, but they don't like to be touched. Pauline will eat out of your hand, but only if you bring her something special. We've even installed a Webcam so we can watch them at work. I don't have the kind of from-the-gut attachment to them that I have to our other pets, but I will likely explode with joy when we finally get an egg out of one of them this spring.

Our dog, Walter, is the family member most thrilled about the ladies. He stands outside the coop for hours rapturously observing his harem. I'm not sure if he wants to kill them or marry them, but he's definitely got the fever, too. So now we have 40,000 bees, four chickens, an obsessed dog and a feral cat. Our journey toward self-sustainability continues—we've

been making our own vinegar, soy milk and root beer lately and composting any kitchen scraps the chickens won't eat. I love seeing firsthand where our food comes from and being responsible for at least some of it.

Our friends want to know what's next. Goats? Candlemaking? Snake handling? Beats me, but I'm sure it will seem like a bad idea at first.

5 THINGS I LEARNED


- A chicken's ear shade often determines its color.
- Hay and straw are not alike: Hay is food—straw is bedding.
- Chickens love to eat worms, raisins and stale Cheerios.
- Chickens have a pecking order—and those at the bottom indeed get henpecked.
- Chickens are sweet but really, really dumb.

AMY SEIDENWURM *would rather do something and regret it later than not do it at all.*

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COMMENTS

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Amy: Nice piece. Please consider buying the chickens from local "fresh" slaughter places, like the one I wrote about: http://www.jewishjournal.com/foodaism/item/pidyon_hahen_20090924/

Posted by: [rob eshman](#) | [03/09/2010 at 05:18 PM](#)

Ear shade often determines EGG SHELL COLOR... just saying.

Posted by: [Tony Black](#) | [03/10/2010 at 06:06 PM](#)

Chickens are not dumb, they just take after their owners. Actually, they have extremely short attention spans. That doesn't mean they are dumb tough.

Posted by: [Dave](#) | [03/11/2010 at 07:32 AM](#)

I moved to a rural area 7 years ago, and the property included a large coop with 2 hens and a rooster.

The hens have since died, and we got 2 more to replace them. The rooster, who is around 9 years old, was quite happy to get two new hens. I joke that it's like Hefner getting two new Bunnies. ;)

Posted by: [Monica](#) | [03/11/2010 at 09:06 AM](#)

I love going to Blue Hill Farms in Ventura - Kim is very knowledgeable about all kinds of animals, farming and growing healthy vegetables and more. She actually holds classes too on various topics and loves to be able to teach "newbies" about the farm. I especially love her chinese chickens and the little pygmy goats.

Posted by: [Kirstin](#) | [03/12/2010 at 10:50 AM](#)

You have got me thinking.....

Posted by: [jeanne](#) | [03/19/2010 at 04:14 PM](#)

So why didn't you post pictures of your coop? I want to see this fancy chicken palace!

Posted by: [Sheri Powell-Wolff](#) | [03/22/2010 at 07:48 AM](#)

If you get chicks from the feed store, and handle them, they can be quite affectionate and

calm. Standard sized varieties can be "sexed" at hatching with 90% accuracy, so hens would be almost guaranteed. Then to wait 5 months for eggs.... And yes, a sweet Nigerian dwarf dairy goat you can walk on a leash is in your future.

Posted by: Juliana | [03/22/2010 at 10:05 AM](#)

Major FAIL on the "chickens are dumb" comment. If you don't "get" the intelligence of birds, you're missing the best part of the experience! Then again, I have mostly mutts, so maybe it's a purebred thing. (My one purebred-cross is easy to take care of but definitely not the brightest bulb.) My advice: get yourself some REAL chickens! ;-)

Posted by: [feralchick](#) | [03/28/2010 at 07:21 PM](#)

As an urban planner, I have to note that this article glosses over the regulatory issues associated with urban agriculture. Health departments tend not to look favorably at animal keeping in high density neighborhoods and many zoning codes simply will not allow it. I can say with experience that neighbors will complain about the keeping of chickens (even if there are no roosters on site), citing pest issues and avian born illnesses. While I fully support urban agriculture, I must caution those reading this article that it's not as simple as building a coop and heading out to the farm in Ventura to pick your chicks. Anyone interested in fresh and delicious eggs should first check with their local officials to ensure the legal keeping of animals. Consider the call well worth it compared to having to explain to your five year old that Penelope the Chicken can't keep living in your side yard because the zoning won't allow it.

Posted by: courtney | [04/01/2010 at 12:40 PM](#)

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