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The charm of chickens

Urban gardeners are letting hens range free in their own backyards

By Pedro Arrais, Times Colonist April 3, 2010

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Marilyn Murphy holds Buffy, a chicken with light brown feathers, while behind her a black hen stalks from the coop to check out the rhubarb patch.

Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

The Easter egg hunt could be a bit more exciting for children if the hunt is held in a backyard equipped with a chicken coop.

Local urban gardeners seeking organic food self-sufficiency are increasingly turning to raising egg-laying hens -- without running "a fowl" of the law.

Backyard chicken owners don't expect to scratch out a living raising hens, but there is a payoff. While many people start out with the aim of putting fresh eggs on the table, they find themselves revising their thinking once the hens have been pecking around the garden for a while.

"They animate and add life to the yard," says Travis Young, who has three Red Rock Cross and three Barred Rock Cross birds. "They all have different personalities."

He says that Cheesecake, Chicken Little, Spider, Ginger, Betty and Veronica (the last two named because they look alike) will follow him around whenever he is working in the garden. They help keep the garden free of bugs and slugs. Although he doesn't have children yet, he has seen how kids are drawn to the birds.

Most bylaws prohibit the sale of the eggs, but that doesn't mean they can't be given away. "I never connected with my neighbours until I went over with some eggs," says Young, who is a manager at the Saanich branch Buckerfield's. "Now I know everybody."

While they are raised for eggs, chicken are also beneficial for gardens. Chickens eat commercial chicken feed -- which costs between \$11.60 and \$20 for a 20-kilogram bag -- but they also consume kitchen scraps including most vegetables, fruit and meat. Young's six chickens go through a bag of feed every two or three weeks -- a bit more in the winter. Young collects their manure and mixes it with the compost, producing a rich soil that he tills into his garden.

Most municipalities in Greater Victoria allow chickens in the yards of single-family homes. But urban chicken fanciers live in closer proximity to their neighbours than their rural counterparts. Keeping chickens in the backyard can ruffle some feathers. Animal control officers get involved only when neighbours get into a flap over such issues such as odours and flies.

Ian Fraser, the senior animal control officer with the City of Victoria and Oak Bay says the best recommendation he can give is for prospective homeowners take the time to build a suitable chicken coop.

"I urge people to use common sense," he says. "Don't locate it too close to your neighbour's fence and build it large enough to be able to enter and clean it."

Marilyn Murphy must have taken his advice to heart. While some chicken coops are not much more than a few pieces of cardboard placed together, Murphy's girls rule the roost in a custom coop designed and built by her ex-husband, a master carpenter.

"He had a real eye for the design," says Murphy, who has been keeping chickens in her Fairfield backyard for 25 years. "It's pretty deluxe for a chicken coop."

Chicken coops should be a secure and sheltered place for chickens to roost overnight. Victorians won't find any foxes in the henhouse, but raccoons are just as bad and will abscond with the birds if given the opportunity.

Owners might also want to have some sort of screen or other deterrent above the chicken run to prevent predation from eagles, owls and ravens. A net might prevent birds from flying the coop, but determined hens have been known to scale a six-foot fence.

But an occasional errant bird doesn't ruffle a lot of feathers.

"I just throw them back over," says Lorne Kirby, who lives on Dallas Road beside a house where four chickens have the run of the property.

"I come from a farm, so I don't see any problem with having chickens. I'd rather have them than pigeons. Compared to the last tenants, the new neighbours [who have the chickens] are really nice."

But some commercial farmers think those keeping backyard hens are just a bunch bird-brains.

"It's just a fad," says Gordon Galey, owner of Morning Fresh Farms, who has 6,000 laying hens. "They don't have safeguards so sooner or later they will attract rats and neighbours will get upset."

His free-run chickens are safely contained in a building, which protects them from the weather, predators and direct infection. Commercial farmers in British Columbia produce 60 million eggs per year. There are 18 commercial egg producers on Vancouver Island.

Getting started is simple enough. Businesses such as Buckerfield's sell chicks every season. Vaccinated chicks -- ready just after Easter this year -- sell for \$3.99 each. Customers buying \$75 worth of equipment and feed from Buckerfield's will even get six free chicks to start.

A laying hen will generally produce one egg a day -- fewer in the winter -- for about five years. Hens have been known to live up to 18 years, but longevity varies with the breed.

"Chickens are generally low-maintenance," says Malcolm Macartney, a veterinarian and owner of the MacKenzie Veterinary Services. "I usually get calls to deal with parasites, such as mites. If they get infections, antibiotics work well."

He suggests people interested in getting eggs avoid raising chicks and buy "point of lay pullets," birds about five months old that are about to start laying.

Murphy, who has exotic breeds such as Bantam Old English hens and Sumatra chickens, agrees buying older birds is more efficient, but points out hens will turn out friendlier when handled more often when they are chicks.

"When you raise them from chicks, you effectively become mom in their eyes," she says.

EGG FACTS

There are about 129 egg producers in B.C. who raise about 2.4 million layer hens.

They produce 60 million eggs per year.

There are 18 commercial producers on Vancouver Island.

Egg farms raise an average of 17,000 hens.

Producers who have more than 99 birds are required to register with the B.C. Egg Marketing Board. Producers are issued with a quota.

The majority -- 88 per cent of the hens -- are housed in cage systems in large, climate-controlled structures.

The remainder in other flock management systems -- free run, free range, certified organic free range (includes some with specific feed requirements).

Source: B.C. Egg Marketing Board

ROOST RULES

Bylaws governing keeping chickens in a residential neighbourhood vary by municipality. It is recommended interested parties contact their municipal hall or local animal control office. Roosters are not permitted in any urban municipality.

CITY OF VICTORIA

No limit to size of flock

Eggs for personal consumption and cannot be sold

SAANICH

10 chickens on land 1,114.8 square metres to 1,858 square metres

30 chickens on land lots between 1,858 square metres and 0.4 hectare

No limit on land more than 0.4 hectare (or one acre)

ESQUIMALT

Four chickens on any parcel of land zoned for single family residential use

OAK BAY

Requires a poultry-keeping permit

Five chickens on land greater than 745 square metres but less than 1,858 square metres

Eight chickens on land between 1,858 square metres and 4,047 square metres

10 chickens on land greater than 4,047 square metres (or one acre)

NORTH SAANICH

10 chickens on land 12,000 square feet to one acre

20 chickens over one acre to two acres

30 chickens over two acres

CENTRAL SAANICH

No more than five chickens on a parcel of land less than 1,858 square metres

No more than eight chickens on a parcel of land greater than 1,858 square metres and less than 4,047 square metres

No more than 10 chickens on a parcel of land of 4,047 square metres or more

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