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The urban farmer's almanac

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The backyard of this downtown Toronto row house looks like many, with a small patio and a rectangular lawn adorned by perennials along the border. But at the far end of the yard is the not-so-regular sight of a fenced-in wooden chicken coop.

Red, Ramona and Daisy, three 18-month-old hens, spend their nights in the enclosure and their days nibbling and digging in the yard. They eat a mixture of chicken feed, grass and kitchen scraps (the house's green bin goes out nearly empty) and provide their owners Chris and Cara (who asked that their last names not be used) with three humongous brown eggs almost every day. His hens utter the occasional cluck, but their poop fertilizes the lawn and the neighbours, far from offended, show up at Chris and Cara's front door with empty cartons.

"There's really nothing to it," Chris says as he eats his fried egg sandwich for breakfast. "You wouldn't believe how good the eggs are."

So why isn't everyone living this locavore dream of having organic, free-range eggs for nearly nothing, right from their own backyard? Well, for one thing, it's illegal.

But as the local food movement becomes more popular, city dwellers such as Chris and Cara are questioning the rules against urban farming. City chickens can give us eggs and, when the laying years are over, meat. Backyard goats can yield milk, meat and weed control; bees in rooftop hives can both feed us and help local flora; and fish in unused swimming pools or water filtration plants can give us a supply of lean protein.

It's the logical extension of the proliferation of backyard, rooftop and communal gardens

that grow tomatoes, lettuce and squash. After all, we eat more than just vegetables. But to get more livestock feeding hungry urbanites on a truly local level, bylaws, attitudes and farming models will have to change. Or, more precisely, revert back to what they once were.

As recently as the 1980s, chickens, goats and rabbits had homes in many Toronto backyards - as they still do today in many cities around the world. Up until the late '60s, live animals were kept in Kensington Market; you could pick the chicken or duck you liked and have it killed and cleaned on the spot. But then we started to think of cities as clean, concrete jungles - no place for the dirty business of farming. About 30 years ago, Canadian cities started enacting bylaws to limit the kinds of animals one could keep at home and to stipulate that they could only be killed in slaughterhouses. (Toronto did so in 1983.) Stricter provincial rules for slaughterhouses led to the closure of small and urban abattoirs (local pressure to get their stench out of town didn't help), leaving only big slaughterhouses doing business with large-scale farms. Urban Canadians lost their livestock-raising skills. They would now like them back.

Rising food prices, meat contamination and a growing sense of concern about where our food comes from have put urban meat back on the table.

"The whole thing is taking off," says Wayne Roberts, manager of the Toronto Food Policy Council. He recently visited the University of Pennsylvania, which is on the cutting edge of food policy research, and all anyone could talk about was city farming. "It's an idea that's exploding," says Rhonda Teitel-Payne, urban

agriculture manager for The Stop Community Food Centre, a nonprofit organization that does food security work. "People are looking for answers and are not happy with what they're finding."

Whether animals and their byproducts are raised in backyards or in communal settings - for sharing or for profit - city animal farming has big benefits. Besides being easily traced to its source, urban farm products save on fuel. City beasts such as chickens, goats and tilapia will eat orange peels and wilted lettuce, and this "upcycling" can help reduce garbage. Since farming takes a lot of land, using corners of backyards, rooftops and disused pieces of the city for animals could prevent more greenbelt from being razed for farms. City land is pricey, but since animal products garner more than produce, it makes economic sense to raise livestock instead of veggies on urban land.

And animals raised on a small scale are yummier. "Anyone who's ever eaten a pig that has been fed a variety of foods and been outside where it can root around [knows] the taste of the meat is entirely different than what you buy from stores," says Christie Young, executive director of FarmStart, a Guelph-based organization that helps people launch farms.

The urbanization of agriculture starts with chickens. They're inexpensive, require less work than a dog and give you daily, delicious eggs and eventually meat. They eat bugs, chew up rocks and irrigate the soil when they dig, making them a common fixture in apple orchards.

Chickens are legal in Niagara Falls, London, Victoria and numerous U.S. cities (Seattle reportedly has 1,000 coops in backyards). Waterloo, thanks to pressure from a group of citizens called the Waterloo Hen Association, has re-evaluated the public health risks of backyard birds and may change its bylaw

as early as next month.

Here, a group called Toronto Chickens has put together a 600-signature petition, which it plans to present to city councillors soon. Councillor Joe Mihevc, who just a year ago was against chickens being raised in urban areas, supports them now. "I went to a home where they had illegal chickens and was shown that they can be grown, and the impact on neighbours was non-existent and frankly had no negative impacts," he explains.

Eletta Purdy, manager for Toronto Animal Services admits: "We do need to look at our bylaw. We'd like to update it to address the current day's needs." She says the city may review rules for chickens and exotic pets next year.

Bees, meanwhile, are governed by provincial laws, and can be kept in town. The Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative, a group of 25 volunteers and one certified beekeeper, cares for 21 hives at the Brick Works and three on the rooftop of the Fairmont Royal York hotel. These insects (which are dying off in the wild) produce honey full of local pollen, which acts as an immunity booster for people with allergies. Bees pollinate flowers, everything from daisies to tomato vines, which helps these and numerous other plants grow and reproduce.

Hives take up little space, and require work about once a week (more in the summer during honey harvest). The Royal York got 300 pounds of honey this year from its bees. But the rules say that hives must be kept 30 metres from residences or thoroughfares. "We're looking for more locations," says Mylee Nordin, the cooperative's staff beekeeper. More awareness, understanding and funding for beekeeping could mean more hives on rooftops, in communal gardens or in disused lots.

A rarer city sight are goats, which have multiple urban uses. Annie Booth, a researcher at the University of Northern British Columbia, recently observed 10 goats doing weed control on city lands in Prince George. Except for buying the goats and fencing, this was nearly a cost-free venture, as they chewed on dandelion and thistle all day. "Working with goats is like dealing with large cats with hooves," says Booth of the friendly animals, which are easy to herd. Small breeds such as the pygmy goat can live in backyards and provide both milk and meat.

Similarly, sheep make excellent lawnmowers, and some people recall an old North York oil refinery using them to cut its grass as recently as the 1980s. We could try out sheep at a few city parks, and Scadding Court Community Centre executive director Kevin Lee thinks urban shepherding has potential as a profession for the city's at-risk youth.

The compact Dexter cow needs a big yard, or could graze with a herd in disused land near railroad tracks or industrial parks. Milk is expensive to transport - it's heavy and needs refrigeration - so a local supply makes sense. Pigs, meanwhile, need little space and eat bugs.

Fish have great city potential, too. Every June for the past seven years, Scadding Court has drained and

dechlorinated its pool and filled it with fresh water and a thousand trout for community members to fish. While designed to get urban kids in touch with their food, Lee wonders why his idea can't be spun out to feed more people. "The city has a number of outdoor pools that are only used for eight weeks of the year. You could stretch a plastic tarp across these pools, and it's a greenhouse that fish can live in," says Lee. Tilapia is the best city fish: It can exist in kiddie-sized pools, as long as they're kept warm; they reproduce like mad and eat mainly kitchen scraps.

Yet, the numerous reasons for driving animals out of town years ago still exist. Clucks, oinks and bleats can disrupt city streets. Manure piles can attract flies and rodents and lead to conflicts between neighbours. Sheep and goats doing natural lawn work could escape from their confines and spook people or get run over. E coli and other bacteria from manure can get into the water or soil, while city chickens could spread avian flu, as they have in parts of Asia. Backyard farmers might be tempted to sell their wares outside the food system, which means the meat or milk would not be tested, putting others at risk. No city bylaw would be able to ensure city livestock got regular vet care. "You could be eating a sick animal," says Jim Chan, manager for Toronto Public Health's food safety program.

If problems in the food system reach a more critical state, these risks may become worth it. But more limiting to the growth of animals in town are our own rules and attitudes. Right now, people with chickens, goats, pigs or sheep in their yards in Toronto can be fined \$240 and up to \$5,000 if the case goes to court. (It's legal to keep as many as six rabbits in a house or yard. "I know someone who tried going into the rabbit business," Booth says. "But in the end couldn't bring themselves to whack the rabbits.")

It's also illegal to slaughter most animals at a residence, and finding an abattoir willing to slice up single a chicken, goat or cow is next to impossible under current guidelines.

Cities can issue permits for pilot projects and studies, but they rarely do.

"Everyone just thinks inside the box and brings up barriers," says Lee, whose fish farming and urban shepherding have met with resistance from city officials. A proposal to turn the Etobicoke Sewage Treatment Plant into a tilapia fish farm years ago went nowhere. And although Booth showed that weed control with goats was cheap and effective, the City of Prince George didn't want to take over the flock when her

research project was done.

We require new farming models to really bring animals into the city in a way that's safe, profitable and helpful. As the trend spreads and more researchers such as Booth and groups like FoodShare and Scadding Court test out new ideas, we may see the identification of more city-friendly animals, creative ways of repurposing land and new models for working together for both sharing or profit.

Does this mean, eventually, that every Toronto yard will house a chicken? Hardly. You need a sizable

yard, time and a real passion for local food to endure bee stings, manure on your shoes and late-night calls to the vet.

"You have to care for these animals, keep them clean, feed them the right things. There will always be issues, and it's not for everyone," Young says. But for lovers of backyard eggs, pristine bacon, local honey and milk from the source, the fight for these types of animal rights will surely continue.

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