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Shattering seven urban myths about raising chickens

by Patricia Foreman

The local foods movement is not only gaining ground, it is here to stay; and that includes family flocks of chickens. Chickens are the mascots of local foods because of the many talents and skill sets they innately bring to small-scale food production. These skill sets include being pesticiders (eating mosquitoes, ticks and fleas), herbiciders (by eating and clearing unwanted vegetation), and organic fertilizer generators (that can help create and enhance garden soil). The trend for backyard flocks is so strong, that in the past two years, over 500 towns and cities have revised their laws to allow urban folks to keep their own chickens.

Along with the re-emergence of backyard chickens across the country, have come great numbers of misconceptions, false beliefs and downright prejudice surrounding the keeping of micro-flocks of chickens. As the co-host of the Chicken Whisperer Backyard Poultry and Sustainable Lifestyles Talk Show, I have heard it all.

There are seven main concerns that routinely surface when the topic of city chicks is discussed. These are: 1. disease, 2. noise, 3. waste, odor and flies, 4. predators and rodents, 5. property values, 6. appearance, and 7. What will neighbors think? Let's look at the facts behind each of these concerns.

Myth 1. Chickens carry diseases communicable to humans. ***Fact:*** The truth is that small flocks have literally no risk of avian flu transmission to humans. The 2006 Grain Report states: "When it comes to bird flu, diverse small-scale poultry is the solution, not the problem."

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) states on their website: "There is no need at present to remove a (family) flock of chickens because of concerns regarding avian flu."

Avian flu has been in the press as a concern to commercial poultry production where birds are raised in monster-size flocks confined in over-crowded environments. This causes high stress and compromised immune systems in the birds. Any sign of disease, including a sneeze, could result in a huge number of birds getting sick; and this puts at risk a large amount of profit. As many experts have stated publicly, the solution to avian flu is in small-scale poultry.

Myth 2. Chickens are too noisy. ***Fact:*** Laying hens—at their loudest—have about the same decibel level as human conversation (60 to 70 decibels). Hens are so quiet that there have been cases of family flocks being kept for years without the next door neighbors knowing it.

To some, noise is a concern with roosters and their pre-dawn heralding of sunrises. Many urban codes ban roosters, or allow them to be kept only with special permits. The noise level of a rooster's crow is about the same as a barking dog: 90 decibels. But there are ways to keep roosters quiet throughout the night. Many folks regard crowing as a pleasant sound.

Myth 3. Chickens cause waste and odor. ***Fact:*** A 40-pound dog generates more solid waste than 10 chickens. To be more specific, one 40-pound dog generates about .75 pounds of poop every day. Ten chickens generate about .66 pounds daily poop.

The advantage to chicken poop is that it can be used as valuable, high-nitrogen fertilizer. Unlike dog or cat poop, chicken poop can be combined with yard and leaf waste to create compost. Just as valuable, about 40 percent of the chicken manure is organic matter necessary for building fertile, healthy topsoil.

Chicken manure is so valuable that there is a product called Cockadoodle Doo. What is Cockadoodle Doo made of? You guessed it; dried chicken manure. A 20-pound bag sells

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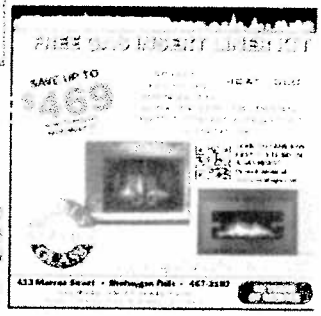








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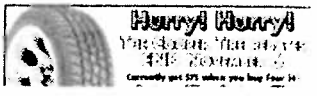


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November 6, 2012
4:00 pm - 7:00 pm
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Children under 4 ..... FREE
Carry Outs Available
St. Thomas is located on the corner of N and M... Just off Hwy 28 near Waldo



for $15. That's 76 cents a pound for chicken manure! Let's take the stakes even higher. Where does most commercial fertilizer come from? Think oil. Can chickens' services and products help us decrease our dependence on oil? Yes, in many ways and on many levels.

Myth 4. Chickens attract predators, pests and rodents. ***Fact:*** Predators and rodents are already living in urban areas. Wild bird feeders, pet food, gardens, fish ponds, bird baths and trash waiting to be collected all attract raccoons, foxes, rodents and flies. Modern micro-flock coops, such as chicken tractors, arks, and other pens are ways of keeping, and managing, family flocks that eliminate concerns about predators, rodents and other pests.

Indeed, chickens are part of the solution to pesky problems. Chickens are voracious carnivores and will seek out and eat just about anything that moves including ticks (think Lyme disease), fleas, mosquitoes, grasshoppers, stink bugs, slugs, and even mice, baby rats and small snakes.

Myth 5. Property values will decrease. ***Fact:*** There is not one single documented case that we know of about a next door family flock that has decreased the value of real estate. On the contrary, local foods and living green is so fashionable, that some realtors and home sellers are offering a free chicken coop with every sale. An example of this can be found at www.GreenWayNews.com.

Myth 6. Coops are ugly. ***Fact:*** Micro-flock coop designs can be totally charming, upscale and even whimsical. Some of them are architect designed and cost thousands of dollars. Common design features include blending in with the local architectural style, matching the slope of the roof and complementing color schemes. For examples go to www.MyPetChicken.com.

Myth 7. What will neighbors think? ***Fact:*** You can't control what anyone thinks, much less your neighbor. Once folks gain more experience with the advantages and charms of chickens, most prejudice and fear evaporates; especially when you share some of those fresh, heart-healthy, good-for-you eggs from your family flock.

There is one huge advantage to family flocks that is often overlooked during chicken debates. That is their role and value in solid waste management systems. Chickens, as clucking civic workers, are biomass recyclers and can divert tons of organic matter from the trash collection and landfills.

Chickens will eat just about all kitchen "waste." They love people food, even those "gone-by" leftovers that have seasoned in the refrigerator. Combine their manure with grass clippings, fallen leaves and garden waste, and you create compost. Composting with chicken helpers keeps tons of biomass out of municipal trash collection systems.

All this can save big time taxpayer dollars, which is especially valuable in these times of stressed municipal budgets.

There is precedence for employing family flocks as part of trash management. It is being done very successfully in some European towns. One example is the town of Deist in Flanders, Belgium. The city buys laying hens to give to residents who want them. The chickens' job is to divert food waste from the trash stream and eliminates having to be picked up by workers, transported, and then disposed. The savings are significant.

May the flock be with you...and to quote the Chicken: "evermore."

Patricia Foreman is the author of several books including City Chicks: Keeping Micro-flocks of Chickens as Garden Helpers, Compost Creators, Biomass Recyclers and Local Food Suppliers, and Chicken Tractor: The Permaculture Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil, available from Backyard Poultry's online bookstore at www.back yardpoultrymag.com.



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