

Backyard chickens find new popularity in suburbia

By [Bill Cary](#)

The Journal News • November 19, 2008

Earlier this year, Liz Sinnott got together with three other families in Pound Ridge to order her first chickens. When the 50 day-old chicks arrived from the Murray McMurray Hatchery, the Sinnotts took home their 10 babies and set about raising them in the guest room.

In no time, the birds were running around the house and ready for the big outdoors. Now they're fully grown and Sinnott has begun to collect as many as six eggs a day from her brood. And she's totally hooked on having chickens running free through her yard. She even started her own blog, meet-the-chicks.blogspot.com.

"I can't think of anywhere I'd move to in the future that didn't have room for a few chickens," Sinnott says. "They're so great to have around. If my day is stressed, I just go out and sit on a rock and watch the birds."

Having your very own backyard chickens is suddenly quite hip. Go to a cocktail party in Katonah or North Salem these days and you'll likely hear chatter about coop size, egg colors, Rhode Island Reds vs. Barred Rocks or grain feed vs. fresh greens - or whispered tips on

which farms will quietly "harvest" and dress one of your birds for Sunday dinner.

So what's all the clucking about? With your own chickens, you get entertaining, no-fuss pets, fresh eggs (and meat, if you're not squeamish) and a constant source of fertilizer for your garden. Chickens are great weeders, too - they love dandelions and Japanese stilt grass - and they're always on the prowl for bugs and slugs.

Backyardchickens.com gets 6 million page views a month, with 4,000 new posts to its online forum each day. Backyard Poultry magazine boasts 50,000 subscribers nationwide. In New York City, an urban farming support group called Just Food launched a City Chicken Project this year to help community organizations raise chickens for eggs for their neighborhoods.

Locally, 13-year-old Clara Zander of Somers has won a steady stream of prizes at county fairs and poultry fairs for the chickens and ducks that she breeds and shows - and her family and friends are crazy about all those free-range eggs.

Lisa Schwartz of Rainbeau Ridge farm in Bedford Hills hosts poultry seminars to teach people how to raise chickens. So does Ken Kleinpeter, the director of farm and facilities at the Glynwood Center in Cold Spring.



"There are a ton more people doing this now," Schwartz says. "I call them closet chicken farmers. I know any number of people who have two to five or six chickens in their backyard. It's incredibly great to have the fresh eggs."

Raising chickens fits right in with all the current flavors in the food and gardening worlds: slow food, locally grown food, environmental sustainability, organic, back to the earth. What could be more local than chickens roaming free right in your backyard?

"I can't go to the grocery store and buy eggs now," says Sinnott, whose flock now numbers 17 hens and one rooster. "Who knows

where they've been or how and when they were collected? Who knows what they were eating?"

Many people decide to get chickens for the eggs but soon realize how much fun they are.

"My whole family loves them," says Beth Lamoureux of Valley Cottage, who got two Black Bettys and one Gingerette last year. "I had no idea they'd be such good pets."

Chicken owners liken it to having their very own widescreen TV in the backyard, with an always-looping Chicken Channel. Chickens are curious and very involved in their surroundings, following humans and dogs and cats around the yard and seeking attention, even a backrub.

Fiona Mitchell says the four hens she got in July for her Bedford Hills yard fit right in with her two dogs and two cats. "Everybody seems to find their own space," she says. "We're one big happy family now."

Demetra and Sal Restuccia couldn't be happier with the five Rhode Island Reds they got last year. "Oh, I love my chickens," Demetra says. "They have such personalities. They're funny - they talk all the time. They'll tell you everything that's been going on for the day. They're hysterical."

They spend most of the day in their coop and enclosed

run, but Restuccia lets them out whenever she's gardening.

Mitchell, a newly graduated master gardener from Cornell Cooperative Extension, also likes to garden with her hens. "They're very good company in the garden," she says. "They coo and fuss - it's like a little ladies' group."

They're also quite loyal and attentive, she says. "They know me as the person who brings them food and things. Whenever they see me, they come running across the yard toward me. It's really quite sweet."

Food and shelter

Unlike fussy cats and dogs, chickens have just a few basic needs: food, water and shelter, with a place to lay eggs and a place to walk around. Coops can be fancy or quite plain. You can convert an old doghouse. Or you can hire an architect to design fancy digs in the same style as your house. Some owners joke about their \$50 eggs after going way over budget on a fence, coop and bedding for their chicks.

The key is to make the coop predator-proof. Raccoons, minks or foxes or even neighboring dogs can kill a flock in a single night. Hawks can swoop down and make off with a small bird in no time. You also need a spot to store their feed that's rodent-proof.

Hilary Dewhurst of Nyack ordered her coop online from

omlet.us and got one of its trademark Eglu coops, which is like a miniature modern house.

"The truly cool thing about the Eglu is how easy it is to set up and to clean," Dewhurst says. "It easily comes apart and you can just spray the whole thing down with a hose."

It even came with two chickens - Gertrude and Alice. (People who raise a flock for eggs are more likely to name their birds than those raising chickens for meat.)

Chickens are not fussy about what they eat. They don't mind kitchen scraps or vegetables well past their prime for the family dinner table.

"Chickens are great users of household waste," says Kleinpeter of the Glynwood Center. "They'll eat almost anything - old bread, vegetables, pasta, rice - they love that kind of stuff."

Most grain feeds are inexpensive. Lamoureux, the Valley Cottage chicken raiser, says she pays \$11 for a 50-pound bag that lasts for three months.

Restuccia, a garden designer, feeds her birds all kinds of weeds, even sod dug up from clients' gardens. "They love a project," she says. "They'll pull it all apart and get the bugs."

On the flip side, chickens on the loose can cause disaster in an orderly garden. "They

can be pretty destructive because they scratch around a lot," Mitchell says. "You wouldn't want them in your garden in spring or early summer."

Fresh eggs

Most chickens lay about five eggs a week, but their production slows when the weather cools.

Every chicken owner will tell you that fresh eggs taste better than store-bought ones, even ones marketed as organic or free-range. They're also likely to have higher levels of nutrients like omega-3 fatty acids. Backyard birds on a diet of grass and other greens produce eggs with a firm bright yellow or orange yolk.

"If the yolks are orange, it's a sign of a happy, healthy bird," Zander says.

Kleinpeter, who oversees 600 laying hens and 1,000 meat birds at the Glynwood Center, highly recommends giving chickens access to pasture or other grass. "Studies have shown that chickens eating the maximum amount of grass produce healthier meat and eggs for people," he says.

Contrary to what many people believe, chickens are neither smelly nor dirty nor disorderly.

They do generate a lot of manure, but it loses its odor quickly, and many gardeners say it's the best possible animal manure for fertilizer

and composting. They mix it with straw or wood chips to help it break down more quickly for gardening.

Richard Henshaw, who is raising 17 chickens with his wife and three children in Waccabuc, says he gives his coop a good cleaning once a quarter and a really thorough scrub-down annually.

"It's really fulfilling to have them," he says. "It helps ground me a little bit. My wife and I are both gardeners, and this feels like having a crop all year round.

"They're friendly, very entertaining and the kids love them," he says. "My oldest son gathers the eggs in the morning, and it's a good way to teach them about responsibility."

Sinnott, meanwhile, says she hopes more people will get interested in raising chickens at home. "Once the seed is planted in your head, you think: 'Wow, it's not such a dumb thing.'

"I can't believe it took me this long to do this - I love it," she says. "Any sort of yard should be big enough for a few chickens."