



Chicken Zen

Poultry farming comes to roost in Mountain Brook

By MELINDA RAMEY THOMPSON Photos by DAVID HILLEGAS

Although backyard chicken farming is a thing now—you can't walk down a block in Crestline without hearing a few cackles—chicken keeping has been around for centuries. These days, many families are increasingly thoughtful about the food they eat. Controlling what goes into the hens, how the animals are treated, and how eggs are cleaned is a no-brainer for those who are moving toward a hormone free, self-sustaining, eat-local lifestyle.

A quick Google search reveals chicken boards aplenty, self-proclaimed chicken gurus, veterinarians who specialize in treating suburban chicken ills, and backyard aficionados who have crossed the line from charming hobby to fanatical obsession. In fact, there is about as much online advice about chicken-raising as there is about child-rearing.

Regular folk like you and I are often lured into the business by romanticized photographs depicting colorful, exotic birds and bowls filled with differently hued eggs. We envision ourselves gathering these eggs every morning, preferably using hand-woven sweetgrass baskets from the Charleston city market. We design aesthetically appealing coops that cost more than a beach condo to build, stock, and integrate into our gardens.

Before you rush out to the closest feed-and-seed store to stock your first coop, there are a few realities you need to ponder. First of all, chickens poop about every 15 minutes. That's a lot of poop, and it has to be cleaned up regularly. You have to be willing to clean out the coop on a weekly basis, and about once a month, you have to do a super-duper, company-is-coming hard clean.

Chickens require daily food and water, medical care, time, and attention. Also, it's not easy to sex chicks. You might accidentally get a rooster. Roosters are noisy. Unlike hens, they are restricted in the city limits, and unless you want to raise chicks—a whole other level of time, attention, and expense—you want hens in your backyard.

On the upside, according to those addicted to backyard chicken farming, nothing is better than eating eggs from your own hens. Don't be misled into thinking these are "free" eggs, however. By my estimate—most chicken folk are reluctant to confess how many times they've dipped into their kid's college fund to maintain their feathered darlings—a dozen organic, free-range, homegrown eggs costs about \$40 a dozen.

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“Hens have different warning clucks for hawks, dogs, and snakes. After six years, I can recognize them.”

—MARION WEBB



Hens are entertaining. I observed that for myself when I spent an afternoon with Marion Webb and her hens of Cluckingham Palace for a chicken tutorial.

The most interesting thing I learned about Marion's hens is: “They have tons of different notification sounds. When they lay an egg, they sing an egg song. They are loud and proud and belt it out. Hens start laying at about 6 months to a year old. As they get older, they may not lay as many eggs, but the eggs get larger until they peter out. In ideal conditions—perfect diet, no stress, just-right humidity—a hen lays an egg every 25 hours.”

Marion buys large, hardy hen stock to survive the heat down here. When she has a surplus of eggs, she sells them at Little Hardware.

“Hens have different warning clucks for hawks, dogs, and snakes,” Marion explains, “After six years, I can recognize them.” One summer, a hawk almost wiped out her flock. Marion nicknamed the hawk Jaws because he

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TOP RIGHT: HUT as aut quod ut et qui omnis eos aut laccum num lmi, vidu**

returned again and again to try to pick off her hens. One day the hawk flew into the chicken coop where the hens roost. The hens ran out, and the door slammed shut. The hawk was locked in! Because hawks are protected animals, Marion could only shoo him away.

I was surprised when Marion claimed: “All my hens have different personalities. They all have names, and I don't name them until I get to know their personalities. They can recognize up to 100 different faces of humans, dogs, and predators. They know our old golden retriever is not a threat, but our bird dog is. When they see me, they recognize me and come running.”

A particularly interesting tidbit is that Marion's hens have a favorite color: red. When offered the same object in red, green, or yellow, they always pick red, no matter how she



mixes the items up. They go for freshly painted red toenails, too, Marion warns.

The “pecking order” expression is not a myth—it's absolutely true. There is a dominant hen, and hens bully one another. “The low hen on the totem pole can get pecked to death,” she admits.

Marion says, “Hens are like goats. They eat anything. I buy about 200 pounds of feed per month at the tractor supply company. A 50-pound bag is about \$13. They also eat our overripe bananas, leftover rice, and fruits and vegetables. Crestline Bagel gives me leftover seed in exchange for eggs, and Whole Foods saves some produce for me. My hens free range all day and then get shut up at night. (Marion's hens have lots of real estate, unlike factory chickens, where the hens are so crowded together they can't walk.) When I researched chicken factories and how we get our eggs, all the chemicals they use to clean them and the way the chickens are kept, I could n't stand it.” Hens aren't exactly pets for enthusiasts like Marion, but they aren't strictly farm animals either. When asked if she eats chicken, Marion admits, “I can't eat chicken with a bone anymore.”

Marion adds, “It's a myth that chickens decrease the value of your house or those around you. I did my research, and there is not one iota of evidence to prove that. And it doesn't hurt that I give my neighbors eggs.”

I got to hold Wheat Thin, one of Marion's favorite hens. She was heavier than I expected and a bit prickly, like a feather-stuffed pillow that occasionally pokes you in the cheek during the night. Wheat Thin didn't smell unpleasant at all, a little dusty, perhaps, and she was clever enough not to peck the hand that was writing about her.

Smart hen. ■