

## Back to Basics

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**As the economy sours, growing movement looks to gardening, chickens at home as ways to save**

By JASON COX

Of the Keizertimes

As economic conditions project an uncertain future, some locals are recalling the past.

Of course, lots of people garden and plenty have livestock in their yards. But a movement is afoot to bring some of those tried-and-true self-sustaining practices to the urban environment in two ways: Encouraging community gardening and allowing chickens to be kept for eggs.



**Kathy Whittam, an avid gardener herself, is looking to turn part of the park named for her late husband Mike into a community garden. She said it makes sense because the park is undeveloped and she sees a growing need for food.**

KEIZERTIMES/Jason Cox

Community gardening already has a foothold in the area – the Marion-Polk Food Share has several gardens throughout the area. And a Keizer woman is looking to bring the trend to her hometown.

Kathy Whittam, who considers her family avid gardeners, wants to use some of the land in a park named for her late husband for gardening. Mike Whittam Park is a five-acre tract next to Keizer Little League Park that is completely undeveloped.

Whittam works one day per month with her church at a local food bank, and has seen firsthand the dwindling supplies and the growing number of families seeking their help.

"When you see that, you know something has to be done," Whittam said. "It just makes sense – let's use that land, you know?"

She and Mike imbued the love of gardening to their three adult children. One who lives in an apartment in Portland grows produce in containers on his balcony.

And at the Whittam household, produce come harvest time is a normal way of life.

"I grow leaf lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers – I try different things and find out what works and what doesn't," Whittam said.

Two local churches – Salem Mennonite and John Knox Presbyterian – are considering community gardens on their own land.

Paul Morgan, a John Knox church member who also leads the Keizer Community Food Bank, said the desire is there, but the funds for irrigation and preparation aren't in place yet.

Marion-Polk Food Share is involved in more than 30 garden projects throughout Marion and Polk counties. Jordan Blake, community garden coordinator for Marion-Polk Food Share, cited the church gardens along with one at Mike Whittam Park and a fourth as sites that could be up and running this year.

The Food Share's largest garden is about five acres and sits on property owned by Marion County Corrections. That garden, under the food production model, raised 10 tons for families utilizing the food share.

Seven community gardens throughout Salem are divided into plots and can cost anywhere from \$35 to absolutely nothing.

The group also has learning gardens – one is planned for Keizer – to "teach a man to fish so he will eat for a lifetime," Blake said. Eight sites throughout Salem-Keizer will be part of this program, tagged "Grow Organic, Live Deep." After-school sessions and biweekly summer classes are planned.

"For years, I have been hearing comments like, 'Kids just don't know where food comes from.'" Blake said. "And now, as these community programs begin to take root, I see an actual hands on approach to realigning ourselves with core principles of community health, self-reliance and sustainability."

Marion-Polk Food Share is hosting its first-ever spring community garden fair from 1 p.m. – 5 p.m. Saturday, April 4 at Marion Polk Food Share.

## **Chickens**

In Keizer, only areas zoned agricultural industrial allow farming activities. City staff has thus far interpreted this to mean chickens would only be allowed in these zones, and not in residential areas.

But a group dubbed Chickens in the Yard (C.I.T.Y.) is working to change city code there to allow pet chickens to be kept in a common household back yard. In the northwest, Portland, Eugene and Seattle are among the cities that currently allow urban chickens with restrictions.

The proposal currently before the city of Salem requests to amend residential zones to allow up to three hens be allowed in a residential backyard so long as they are fully enclosed, the coop is at least 10 feet from a residential structure and that the coop must be kept clean enough to avoid odors, excessive noise or pests. No roosters would be allowed.

Scott Mack, a Keizer resident who made a proposal for similar rules in the Iris Capitol, said there are clandestine urban farmers now; that is, people illegally keeping chickens in their yards.

He and his family have cared for chickens in the past, and said allowing them would not only provide more eggs than they could eat – it would be a good learning opportunity for his children.

"No slaughters, no roosters – none of the gross or obnoxious stuff," said Mack. "Just some hens for pets and eggs."

Luckily roosters wouldn't be needed for the primary purpose many pro-chicken advocates have been championing: Laying eggs. All a rooster is needed for is fertilizing the eggs to create chicks.

"The roosters are a problem, hence why most places don't allow them," Mack said. "But hens – you've got one dog in your backyard you've got a noisier animal than if you had a dozen hens."

Barbara Palermo, founder of C.I.T.Y., said she began researching the issue about six months ago, and now has 150 or so group members and 700 supporters, if a petition is any indication.

Palermo cited chickens' "broad-based appeal" as a reason the issue has seemed to have resonance with some. Saving money is one reason, she said, while others want to "reduce their carbon footprint and live a more self-reliant life." Still others may want more control over the quality of their food or want more humane conditions for the animal.

"What I like best about chickens has to do with permaculture, an arrangement designed so that one system's waste is another system's energy," she said. "I love the fact that I can take grass clippings from the lawn mower bag, pulp scraped from the squash we ate last night, dandelion weeds and slugs that would otherwise destroy my garden and give it all to the chickens," she said. "Not only will they eat it, reducing the need for pesticides, but within 24 hours they will have turned it into one of two things I can use – eggs or fertilizer!"

Salem may take one of two approaches to the issue: Make it a land use issue, or include chickens among the permitted pets.

"It's time to clarify this by listing permitted pets which should include dogs, cats, rabbits, hens and pot-bellied pigs, for example," Palermo said. "The lack of clarity has been problematic for citizens and code enforcement personnel alike."

She compared chickens as pets to dogs as farm animals, saying both have dual uses.

"People associate chickens with the farm, but they also make great pets because they are small, inexpensive to keep, friendly and provide eggs and garden fertilizer," Palermo said.

City staffers said they're watching how the issue unfolds in Salem, and Kevin Watson, assistant to the city manager, said the issue could be before the Keizer City Council in a month or so.

"Both sides kind of have valid points as far as for and against, but it's a Council decision ultimately whether to allow chickens," said "The fact is that you can kind of grow your own eggs and the chickens fertilize the yard and they also eat bugs."