

Backyard bonanza

JODI KERR Special to the Statesman Journal
January 23, 2009

When most people need eggs, they are content to walk to the refrigerated aisle in the grocery store, check a 12-pack for cracks, place the carton gingerly into the cart and head home.

But more often than ever, other people head out to the backyard coop, grab a few eggs from under a warm hen and shuffle back to the door in their slippers for some truly homemade breakfast.

Can you do it?

Raising backyard chickens is a cinch in many parts of Marion and Polk counties, including Keizer.

Jim Hermes, Oregon State University Extension Office Poultry Specialist, said most cities allow four to six chickens for backyard egg production; roosters are not allowed because of the noise.

Salem residents in areas zoned Residential Agriculture are allowed to raise chickens, as well.

People living in the Salem city limits not zoned Residential Agriculture are out of luck for now, but there's a continued movement afoot to change that.

Salem's Chickens in the City group is pushing for residents to be allowed five hens as long as they are enclosed and cleaned up after.

"People have been raising chickens for years in the city," said Barbara Palermo, who lives in West Salem. "They are even allowed to raise chickens in New York City."

CITY started in August and has grown to 45 members with interest building and petitions circling. So far, the Salem City Council is listening, but no change to the law is planned.

Bird basics

If you are allowed backyard birds, chicken basics are pretty straightforward.

First of all, you don't need a rooster. Hens lay eggs, and roosters make babies. So if you want a small flock for eggs, stick with the ladies.

Some say chickens make good pets, some say they don't.



Kobbi R. Blair | Statesman Journal
J.D. Remy, 10 (left) and Ethan Lawton, 10, feed chickens at the Lawton home in Turner.

Changing laws

Want more information on raising chickens or changing Salem's fowl policy?

Check out www.backyardchickens.com. There is quite a bit of activity on the message boards about chickens in Salem.

Coop basics

You need:

- Adequate floor space per bird
- Dry with good ventilation
- Temperature control
- Protection from predators
- Clean location
- Fresh, clean water available

More egg info

Interested in egg delivery or finding where to purchase farm-fresh eggs?

Visit www.laterravita.com

Hermes said he sees no difference between a chicken and a dog or cat as far as living in the city, but they are pretty low on the cuddle factor, and you can't train or housebreak a hen.

Lucie Gouin of La Terra Vita in Scio grows organic vegetables and sells organic eggs. On Gouin's farm, about 100 free-range chickens peck the ground for fresh herbs and insects and flap their wings every now and again.

"We feed our chickens organic scraps, and they come running when they see us," she said. "They peck at our feet looking for something to eat. It is so sweet."

Hermes said it takes about 4.5 pounds of food to make a dozen eggs, and feed is expensive.

Most nonorganic store-bought eggs are about \$1.60 a dozen. Gouin sells her eggs for \$5.75 a dozen.

Backyard chicken owners can reduce costs by feeding the hens table scraps. All vegetarian scraps are safe for chickens, but stay away from raw potato skins. Also, garlic and onions have been known to flavor eggs, so feed those sparingly.

Dan Rosato of Oak Villa Farm in Dallas cares for about 90 chickens and sells the eggs at farmers markets for \$3.50 a dozen.

"My eggs are not organic. The feed is just too expensive," he said. Organic chicken feed is organically grown, and the largest portion is corn.

Benefits in the garden

By using table scraps to feed the chickens, collecting their manure and maintaining a healthy compost pile, Rosato is able to make a difference in the garden.

"I compost the (chicken) manure and put it directly on the soil and till it into the garden," he said.

Rosato said chickens eat too much to allow them into the garden, but he does like his chickens to be out of the pen for a few hours a day to help with bug control.

"In the winter, they are really helpful in getting the bad bugs that winter over and cause damage in the garden in the spring," he said.

What's inside

Hermes said the only difference between an organic and nonorganic egg is personal preference.

"There is nothing inside an egg that we can measure and say that one is different than another," he said.

Cackleberries in Dallas sells free-range eggs, (503) 623-9688.

The outdoor Saturday markets are closed for the season, but the indoor Public Market is open 8:30 a.m. to 1p.m. Saturdays. Many farmers bring fresh produce and eggs. The public market is at 1240 Rural Ave., Salem.

That's a good egg

- A dirty shell is not a dirty egg. As long as the shell is intact, the egg itself is sterile.

-Refrigerated eggs in their shell will keep virtually forever, but eventually they will dry out.

-Backyard eggs are teeming with bacteria, so the shell must be washed.

-Egg color makes no difference; it is just a genetic mutation that causes one chicken to have a brown or even green or blue egg, not just white.

-What the chicken eats can cause the taste to change in an egg. That is why commercial eggs taste different than farm-raised eggs.

-A healthy egg should have a deep yellow yoke that should stand tall and be domed.

-The white should have two distinct parts: one that's thick and viscous and another that's thinner on the outer edges.

-The egg should have a firm shell that takes a good knock to crack.

Laying hens

Araucana

Barred

RockBuff

Orpington

However, many egg sellers say organic eggs are higher in Omega-3 acids as a function of what the hens are fed.

Gouin said she doesn't remember what a store-bought egg tastes like.

Entrepreneurs' advice

J.D. Remy, a fifth-grader at Cloverdale Elementary School and proprietor of J.D. Remy Farms, started his own egg business on his parent's acreage.

"My parents bought the chickens," Remy said. "I bought the other stuff, and my grandfather and I built the coop. We asked people to save their egg cartons."

He started out with 12 chicks, a few of which ended up being roosters — it's a myth that they crow only in the morning.

For Remy, the egg business wasn't too time consuming, and he was able to keep up with orders. He ended up with about 60 chickens, and that was enough for about eight or nine dozen eggs a week.

If you want to purchase chicks, Wilco in Stayton orders about seven different varieties of laying chickens. But be aware that there are meat chickens and laying chickens. Laying chickens can be eaten, but the meat is tougher and more gamey, Gouin said.

The chickens at Wilco are sexed, but there is no guarantee they all are female. The average price per chick is about \$3.

Gouin said that when chicks are about 6 months old, they start laying eggs and will produce for about two years. Chickens lay an egg or two every three days in their natural environment and more in the summer than the winter.

Family time

For some, backyard birds are a family hobby.

The Lawton family in Marion County raises chickens in the backyard, and family members share the responsibility of taking care of them.

Ethan Lawton, a fifth-grader at Turner Elementary, said everyone helps with the hens.

"My mom sells the eggs at work for \$1 a dozen," he said.

Both Remy and Lawton buy their nonorganic corn meal at a local feed store.

"Raising chickens isn't hard for kids," Lawton said.

Remy estimates cleaning the eggs and the coop took an average of 30 minutes a day.

Realistic expectations

If you are thinking of raising chickens to save money, you will be disappointed.

"Eggs in the store are going to be cheaper because they buy feed by the train-car load, not the 50-pound bag," Hermes said.

But Palermo of CITY wants to raise her chickens organically and believes she will save money

Rhode Island

Red

Black Sexlink

Gold Sexlink

White Leg Horn

in the long run.

"I don't think they are too expensive to keep," she said.

Another expense in addition to the feed is shelter. Chickens need protection from the elements and a clean, dry place to lay their eggs.

Stores such as Wilco carry ready-made chicken coops.

A 4-foot-by-4-foot barn houses six chickens and sells for about \$390.

Making your own coop is not difficult, and many chicken coop plans are available free on the Internet.

Coop keepers say the key elements in a good coop are ventilation, ease of cleaning and protection against predators.

Keeping chickens is part science and part backyard nature lesson. If you'd rather get your eggs from a nest than a foam carton, see if raising chickens is what it is cracked up to be.