



Hens on the Hill!

A Surging Interest in Raising Chickens in Our Backyard

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY CHERYL CORSON



TOP TO BOTTOM:
Leah Silverman (6) with Mary, and neighbor Thonya Nelson
Lightning, a Buff Orpington (left) with Nelly, a Speckled Sussex (right)

I named my baby chicks, “Number 1,” “Number 2,” and “Number 3,” in a vain attempt to keep from getting attached. Now 14 months old, they endear and amuse, while each laying one jumbo brown egg a day. If you’ve never eaten an egg laid minutes or hours before, think of the first time you ate a freshly picked tomato - different, wasn’t it?

Surging interest in the small backyard flock relates to the organic, local food movement, food safety concerns, and possibly the sluggish economy. In recent weeks alone, the Washington Post, The New York Times, and NPR’s “All Things Considered” have featured the trend. Martha Stewart raises chickens, or at least her people do. Backyard Poultry magazine (a full color bi-monthly) boasts over 100,000 subscribers (www.backyardpoultrymag.com). Websites such as www.TheCityChicken.com advise urban newbies on small scale poultry keeping. Chickens have become, well, tres chic.

Hill Hens of Yore

One hundred years ago, when large scale poultry farming in places like Petaluma, California, and Vineland, New Jersey, was still in its infancy, one of every two city dwellers kept chickens. Senior Capitol Hill residents such as Charles Harris recall, “We used to have chickens in the backyard when we were growing up, and I remember going out and getting the eggs in the morning.”

Will Hill says that when he moved to the Hill 50 years ago, “everyone had chickens. Some used to hop over the fence into my yard.”

Live chickens ready for Sunday dinner were also in full view on the Hill. At 900 South Carolina Ave. SE, The Corner Store, now an art space, used to be Cuozzo’s Grocery, where shoppers could select a live bird from a coop kept on the front sidewalk and come back an hour later to pick it up ready for roasting. Live chickens and ducks were sold and slaughtered

at Eastern Market.

Most of us are no more than a generation away from relatives who either kept chickens, knew someone who did, or bought freshly slaughtered chickens at local markets. Scratch a little, and chicken stories are just below the surface.

Chicken FAQs

Here are short answers to some questions people often ask about chickens. For more, read "Keep Chickens!" by Barbara Kilarski (2003, Storey Publishing).

Q: Are chickens mean (stupid, noisy)?

A: Most animals kept in poor conditions will get ornery. My chickens are sociable. They run up to me when I enter the yard. They like to be held and petted. They make cooing noises and are silky soft to the touch. They know how to hide from hawks. They find lots of bugs to eat. Hens (females) are quiet. Roosters (males) are noisy.

Q: Don't you need a rooster to get eggs?

A: No. Hens can do it all by themselves. You need a rooster to produce fertile eggs, necessary to hatch more chicks. Store bought eggs are unfertilized.

Q: How long do they live? How many eggs do they lay?

A: If things go really well for the chicken, she can live 8-10 years, and 15 years is not unheard of. Starting at about 21 weeks, they lay about one egg a day for two years, then gradually slow down production.

Q: Are they smelly and dirty?

A: Like any domestic animal, they need to be cleaned up after. The payoff is that chicken poop is black gold for gardens. I mulch with their old straw bedding and add their poop to my compost. Cleaned weekly, coops and chicken grazing areas do not smell. Chickens like to clean and preen themselves as much as cats and love taking dust baths. The dry dirt cleans their pores and helps keep them free of parasites.

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Q: How do you buy them, and how much space do they need?

A: Commercial hatcheries sell day-old chicks for a few dollars each. They come by express mail, which is fine because they do not need food or water for their first 48 hours. Once grown, they need no less than 2 square feet each in the henhouse, plus 4 square feet in the chicken yard.

Q: What about winter?

A: Chickens fare well in the cold, as long as they are dry. Keep the coop dry and protected from wind, and they'll be fine. In every season they need ample fresh drinking water.

Q: Do they fly?

A: Except for the smaller bantams that do fly, chickens do a cute fly/run/hop routine. With determination, they can clear a 42-inch-tall fence. Clipping the ends of their wing feathers prevents fly-overs.

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Cheryl Corson with Number 2, a Plymouth Barred Rock hen. [photo by Kris Swanson].

Ada Silverman (4) with Mary, an adolescent Ameraucana that will lay blue eggs.



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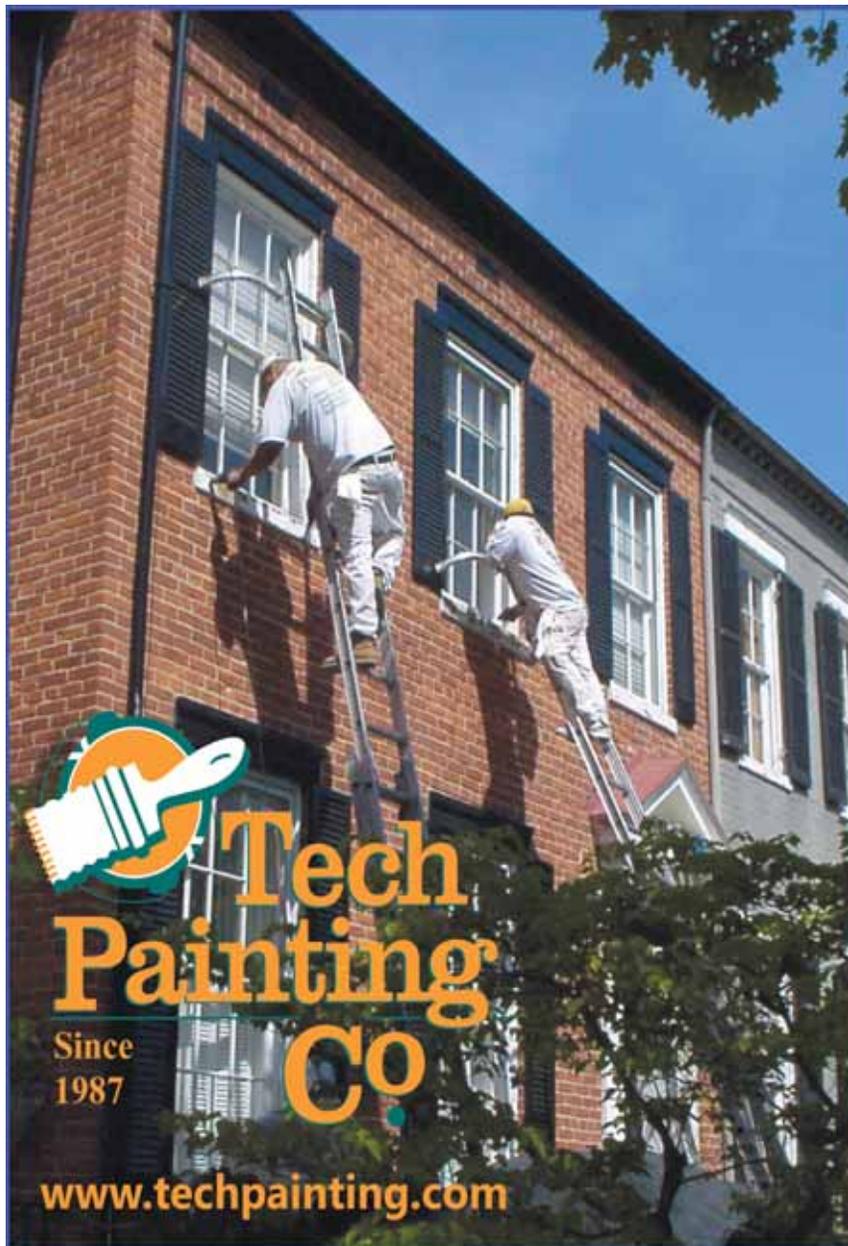
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There Ought To Be a Law

Do you need an act of Congress to obtain a chicken permit in DC? No, but you need to know about the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations, Chapter 9 on Animal Control, Section 902 on Fowl (http://os.dc.gov/os/lib/os/info/odai/title_24/title24_chapter9.pdf).

Don't let the police or any animal control officer tell you that chickens are illegal in DC. Section 902 spells out the conditions under which a permit may be granted. The DC agency responsible is the Bureau of Community Hygiene at the Department of Health. Odds are no one has applied for one in a long time.

Many cities have laws or regulations that provide for the keeping of a small number of hens with certain caveats – no roosters, no more than four birds, adequate enclosures, etc. But there are two provisions in DC's regulation that are more stringent than most cities. Section 902.7a stipulates that, "the proposed location is not within fifty feet of any building used for human habitation." Section 902.7b adds that if the proposed (chicken) location is within 250 feet of a property line, written consent of all residents within 100 feet must be obtained by the applicant.

On Capitol Hill, Section 902.7b seems reasonable, but Section 902.7a looks like a deal-breaker. Given the stringent requirements, it would not be surprising for some urban chicken lovers to avoid the permit process.

Enter the Silvermans

When sisters Ada and Leah Silverman (ages 4 and 6) travel from their Capitol Hill home to visit relatives in Austin, Texas, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, they love playing with their cousins' chickens. Ada and Leah's parents, Josh and Caryn, have helped the Capitol Hill Cluster School obtain fertilized eggs and a loaner incubator. Students hatch and raise baby chicks, eventually moving them to nearby farms.

This spring, the Silvermans

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hatched a small flock of baby chicks for their daughters to raise at their home. The girls learned about heirloom breeds, how to keep the chicks safe and what to feed them. A neighbor offered her side-yard for the pullets (adolescent chickens) to graze in during the day. All was going well until a few weeks ago when somehow the police were contacted, and in turn, an Animal Control officer arrived at the scene threatening to remove the birds. Cooler heads prevailed, and the pullets were left alone that day. But Animal Control told the Silvermans that keeping chickens was illegal in DC, which we now know is not the case. What to do?

Chicken Summer Camp

The Silvermans have decided to tackle the chicken controversy head on. They have sent their birds to summer camp outside town. They are working with Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells' office who has advocated on their behalf with the Chief of the Bureau for Community Hygiene.

Impressively, the Silvermans have garnered enthusiastic letters of support (as stipulated in Section 902.7b) from more than the minimum number of neighbors required. They have tapped a deep vein of support that spans ages and cultures. But the problem remains with Section 902.7a, the "50-foot rule."

Because the animal control standard is a regulation and not a law, it may be amended either by an act of the DC Council or the DC Department of Health. If there are other advocates of small flocks of backyard urban chickens, it would help to let your councilmember know. Tommy Wells can be contacted at twells@dccouncil.us. With more community involvement, DC may be able to join other progressive cities in supporting local food production on every level. And Ada and Leah may be able to bring their chickens home from camp.

Cheryl Corson, a local landscape architect, has kept chickens for the past 3 years. Visit www.cherylcorsan.com. ★



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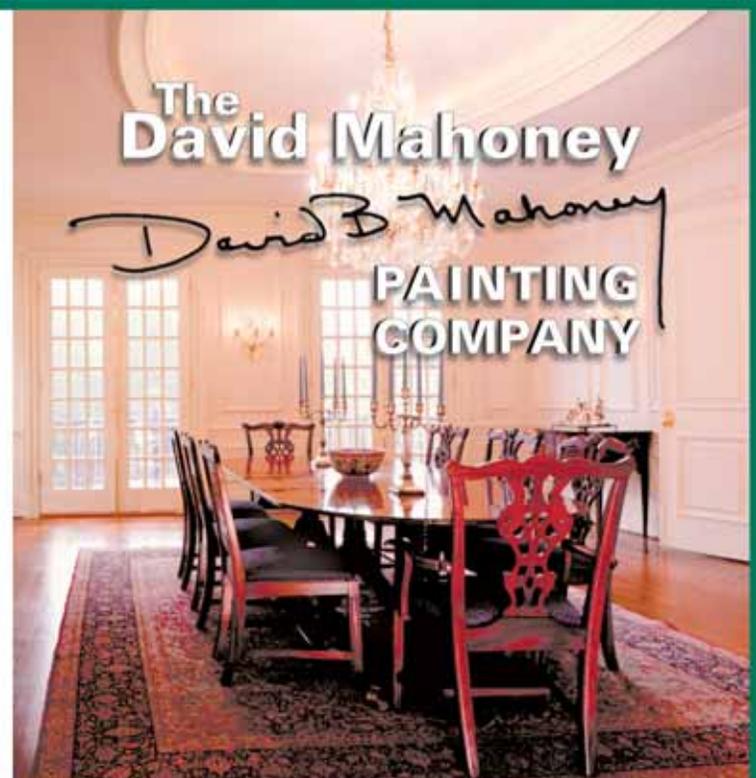
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