

Workshop Title: Keeping Chickens in the City

Speaker(s) & their titles: Louise Hanavan

Executive Summary:

The speaker is informing and empowering individuals to begin 'keeping chickens in the city'. She tells of her experience with urban chickens, a background of urban chickens and provides information necessary to start out.

Detailed Notes:

Louise Hanavan kept chickens in her backyard in Halifax for 8 months, from 2007-2008 before they were evicted in 2008. While she had them, she found that chickens are hilarious animal companions, and good entertainment.

As a first-time homeowner she thought, "I have some land, not much, but I want it to produce food for me and my family." This led to plans and dreams of a garden and chickens. And then she had chickens! With no previous experience raising them.

-Raising chickens is pretty simple, as their needs are simple.

[Slide of Louise's backyard coop]

Her coop was a box with a run, home for her 3 Rhode Island Red crossed with Barred Rock Hens.

-Shortly after developing this, she received a letter from the city saying to get rid of the chickens. She thought, "How did they know? What law is this?"

Louise went to the media, which led to a giant public discussion on the role of producing food in the city.

This got Louise and the public engaged.

[Slide of a great slogan image]

-Chickens have the same appeal as any pet and also produce delicious, fresh eggs.

-Chickens are part of a larger system, a biodynamic/organic farm system/permaculture applied in backyards. Chickens eat weeds and scraps, as well as produce manure and eggs.

NYC- Rooftop chickens in Brooklyn. People have been keeping chickens in NYC for years.

-Urban-chicken keeping is allowed in Victoria, BC.

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-In 2005 Seattle allowed up to 3 chickens per household, was upped to 8 per house last year.

There has been a growing movement for urban chickens across North America. Across the continent there are different restrictions, permits, distance allowances and numbers of hens.

Activism in Halifax

-It started in 2008, when a couple groups got thousands of signatures on a petition. This started the Peninsula Council who took 1 year to write a report. Upon receiving the report the City Councillors said to write another report.

-The second report also took 1 year, and determined in a survey that 84% were in favour of urban chickens and that most concerns are related to animal welfare. The recommendation was not due to animal welfare concerns.

-But these concerns are already covered by provincial laws that deal with animal welfare.

-Vancouver has had similar concerns but the city has only had to respond to one incident, and that was a rooster at large in Stanley Park. Otherwise, it hasn't been a problem.

-In Halifax, they screened the documentary 'Mad City Chickens', where there were protests and demonstrations. The movement has had many different approaches, but so far nothing has come of it.

Fred's Approach

-Fred is an outspoken advocate for urban chickens. He built a palatial chicken coop that houses 6 hens in the north end of Halifax. He has refused to get rid of his chickens and said to the city, 'just come arrest me! I'm going to continue doing this anyway!'

-Louise's approach was to be patient, sit back and wait. After 4 years, she thinks that Fred's approach is not so bad, as it's raising awareness.

-This lecture is meant to empower you to just go ahead and do it. You will only get in trouble if your neighbours phone and complain.

-Louise knows only the very basics, from her 8 months of experimental experience.

Chickens need...

- Shelter. The shelter design can be really simple.

Ex. Chicken Tractor, which can be picked up and moved along the grass. Triangle house with a nesting box (needs to be quiet and dark) and a roost up high for the chickens to perch on a night. The minimum needs of shelter are the roosting box and roost.

-Bedding, of wood shavings, straw or shredded newspaper.

-Insulation for windows.

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[Chicken shelters can be simple or fancy (image of chicken condos in Seattle), but chickens are resilient and don't mind either way]

-Food & Water. A steady supply of water is really important, especially in winter. This can be achieved below zero by circulation or regular refill with hot water. Chickens need grit to help them digest food. Kelp is good for them, calcium builds strong egg-shells. You can even feed them egg-shells or oyster shells finely ground up. You can buy feed and supplement with kitchen scraps (Louise used to take scraps from a local grocery stores compost bin). Chickens love eating slugs (good protein for them). Recommended to buy prepared chicken feed, unless you have a good recipe with the right mix of nutrients in it.

-Chickens need dry litter.

Mission: Address the worries!

[At this point the lecture is opened up to general discussion and anyone can input their answers] Questions and solutions are varied.

Will chickens cause too much noise?

Roosters are noisy and often by-laws rule against roosters. Chickens make little chuckles, which can contribute to the sound-scape of the city. It is relative to what is a normal sound and what is a peaceful sound.

Will chickens smell?

If their home is kept dry they won't smell. When you keep any pet you need to change their litter regularly, chickens are no different. Their litter and manure create good compost.

Should we worry about avian flu?

There are vaccines against it. It breeds in wet places, so make sure you have a well-drained yard. Avian flu travels through feces and can come into your flock from wild birds if their feces fester in a wet chicken yard, so keep your chickens in a well drained, sunlit yard. Have special shoes for handling or cleaning and wash hands well to make sure not to spread disease.

Avian flu comes up in large industrial operations, not backyard flocks.

Can chickens survive Atlantic winters?

-Suggestion to use special heating tape in the water.

-Make sure chickens stay dry over winter (don't let them step in water).

-For a large coop have a heating lamp. Small coop that is well insulated, a light bulb will provide heat.

-You need to extend their working day, With fewer daylight hours hens sleep more and egg production declines or stops. Lightbulbs are used to signal days.

-Chickens keep each other warm.

Urban Chickens Day

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-A.M.: Open the door to the yard so that chickens can get in and out of the coop. Give the chickens food and check the water. Ensure that the chickens have some protection from neighbourhood predators.

-P.M. At dark the chickens go home to bed and you shut the door.

Getting neighbours on board

-We still need a policy change. You are still in a vulnerable situation, non-immediate neighbours can complain, there is always a risk.

-Fred made a stand by not paying his fines and keeping his chickens.

-First you get a letter, no immediate fines, and then you make a decision to keep or get rid of your chickens. There is a fine between \$250 and \$5000 for this by-law infraction. You could always just move your chickens to a different yard if you have enough people on board.

Predators for Urban Chickens?

Dogs, raccoons, foxes (in the daytime), cats (danger to chicks but not grown chickens). You can always get an electric fence for daytime protection.

[Q: Do you raise chicks or get adult chickens?

A: Grown chickens are easier to keep, you just need one set-up. Chicks can be sent in the mail, but you can also get them from farmers around here. There are Carpenters, chicken and feed suppliers in or near the city. You should get your chicks or hens in the spring. In Halifax a girl in the audience is breeding bantam cochins, 'starlight cochins' – Siena can be reached at djans@nncweb.ca

Will chickens attract pests?

-You have to deal with pests anyways, due to compost, bird feeders, etc.

-Make sure you rat-proof your feed, keep it in steel containers.

-Keep feed off the ground, chickens can still peck into it. (Scratch goes onto the ground, but feed shouldn't).

-Secure your coop with hardware mesh around the perimeter. Put a top on your chicken run. Use electric or substantial fencing. Take measures to prevent burrowing.

-Don't overfeed and feed chickens daily, this will ensure there are no leftovers lying around.

Will I go to jail?

-It seems unlikely... If the chickens get evicted, you get a letter with a deadline at which you will also get a fine. There is a network of support, a loose working group through the Ecology Action Centre (EAC), facebook groups, youth chicken group.

-They are putting together a resource web page where one can find networks and suppliers.

Is there enough space for hens?

-It is easy to look up the organic standards for square footage per chicken– the likelihood is that you'll have more than enough for a few chickens.

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- Guidelines and recommendations exist, also for how many nesting boxes you'll need.
- If you are using a chicken tractor you need to research how long grass needs to regenerate.

IDEA- Create a chicken bike trailer, take them out to visit the commons, a friend's house, etc...

Where can I find supplies?

- You can build your own or mail order. Walker's Feed Supply in Dartmouth has feed, straw and oyster shells.
- If there are enough people in the city participating in urban chicken keeping, start a co-op to save on large food orders. Organic feed in Nova Scotia is up to 50% more expensive than bulk ordered organic feed, but you then have shipping fees and need a large storage space or people to share the order.
- Louise got hers from a farmer at the market and only needed one bag every few months.

Finally: Connect with farmers! Share info and learn from one another. Don't be afraid to ask for advice and use library books, online resources.

How can farmers contribute? -By raising hens, building coops, and running workshops in the city.

Louise can be reached at lugekaz@gmail.com

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