

Columnists

THE BAIRD FACTS: She's no longer scared of chickens

By Esther C. Baird
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BEVERLY, MASS. - Spring is finally in the air and exciting things are afoot on Prospect Hill, four of which are chickens.

I can't say I gave much thought to chickens in Beverly beyond the odd occurrence two summers ago when, in a fit of new-infant sleep deprivation, I imagined the crow of a rooster wafting through our sea-scented air. Other than that, chickens were far from my mind.

But recently that changed.

Enter Althea, Beatrice, Delores and Eunice: stars of the Beverly Chickens Blog. Sue, and her initially chicken-reluctant partner Naomi, have raised the hens from mere chicks. Two years later they both have embraced the in-town, chicken lifestyle complete with fresh eggs, free bug control and plentiful, err, compost.

What's not to like?

I could think of a few things. What about all that clucking and bucking and feathers and droppings? It did not a beautiful backyard make in my mind. It sounded hectic and messy.

But Sue, who wishes more people would consider raising chickens, invited my two girls down to visit her girls and see for ourselves.

It turns out that Sue and Naomi live just a few blocks down from me, in a house that I have fostered a wee bit of garden envy for over the years. Sigh. And, as we met Sue, I saw that their back yard was even more lovely and peaceful than their front. It was full of early-blooming flowers, including my horticultural arch-nemesis the pansy. Double sigh. And in the back of the yard, looking neat and tidy, stood the chicken coop.

Simply put, it's a great coop. It had a forest-green metal roof over the traditional wire mesh corral and included a chicken ramp up to a classic red barn enclosure where the hens nested. The barn-coop had an exterior door allowing Sue easy access to the nest for the all important egg retrieval, and it had a window for the hens to gaze out from their cozy beds. The fact that the chicken's window had a painted window box with blooming pansies didn't faze me at all.

Seriously.

Sue opened the door and let the chickens out.

Loose chickens! But they didn't scatter or run. They merely clucked about scratching at this, pecking at that.

"They love earth worms. Once they even got a snake!" Sue said as she discussed how easy it was to raise chickens.

I eyed the chickens as my girls casually followed them, meandering over to this bush, exploring that clump of flowers, and stepping over blooming crocuses. I'll just go ahead and admit that it was neither hectic nor messy; in a word it was bucolic. The chickens brought it all together into a happy, self-sustaining - at least egg-wise - plot of lovely land.

"And your neighbors?" I asked imagining the Beverly Chickens free-ranging about Prospect Hill.

"Well, I had to ask all of my abutters before I was able to get a permit, but they agreed and the girls don't tend to stray much. It was only a little horrifying when, two summers ago, Cora turned out to be Carl and started crowing. You aren't allowed to have roosters in Beverly, and we sent him back to the farm."

Aha! I hadn't been delirious and dreaming up imaginary roosters after all - I knew it all along.

Carl was replaced with Eunice, a specialty hen complete with her own high-strung, specialty personality and she was not one for holding. But Beatrice was, and Sue held her for my girls to pet. They took turns stroking her soft, orange neck.

"I'd let them loose more often, but Naomi prefers that they stay put so that she doesn't have to chase them. Of course when they do roam, you have to clean up after them because, you know, chickens don't have sphincter muscles."

Huh. I didn't know that. Well. On the other hand she was the one with the lovely yard and real, live, growing plants.

Sue told me a bit more about the cycles of egg production - the girls aren't laying much right now, how they fared this long winter - they huddled against the porch for warmth, and their health inspections - they all wear official ankle tags.

It all sounded manageable - perhaps even enjoyable.

And that is exactly Sue's point as she promotes her poultry message. "I've even thought about hosting an open house to showcase how simple and rewarding chickens can be."

I nodded. I imagined she might have many converts. That said, for now I'll probably stick to enjoying chickens, and pansies, vicariously.

Check out Sue's blog at: <http://beverlychickens.blogspot.com/>

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