

Let's play chicken

There has been a rush of chickens at the Odd Pet Vet this year. It is always a curiosity what triggers such rushes. Is it because an outbreak of a disease strikes a particular species of animal? Or is it because people suddenly develop an interest in owning a particular kind of animal?

In the case of chickens it is definitely an increase of ownership. There is a wave of micro-flock chicken raising sweeping America. It goes hand-in-hand with the loca-vore food movement and the onset of the Great Recession.

“If we raise chickens we get free eggs,” some say. Never mind that a dozen eggs in the grocery store runs about \$2.74 a dozen, and that to feed a dozen chickens probably costs the same amount. There is the added benefit of available meat, but I have yet to encounter a client who is eating her chickens. I say “her” chickens, because I have only women clients who raise chickens. The men, it seems, stay out of this arena.

“So, why do you raise them?” I asked Janice Schembari of Hanover, the owner of a micro-flock of chickens for twelve years.

“They lower your blood pressure,” she says, “and the eggs are great.”

“Why don't you eat the chickens?” I ask, knowing she has a strong enough flock to sustain a “chicken in the pot” once a week.

“All my chickens have names.” She says. “You can't eat an animal with a name!”

Well, then, why do you... Well, you know what? I agree!

It turns out there are 15 billion chickens in the world. That is 2 ½ chickens for every man, woman and child on Earth. Here in the United States it is even greater. Here they out-number us 3 to 1. Hard to name 15 billion chickens.

Historically, the American tradition has been that most homes had chickens in the yard for the eggs and meat. Whether they named them, I don't know. The only thing new about the resurgence of family flocks is the suburban flock. City flocks and rural flocks have been with us for a long time. It is only since the 1930's that large central flock farms have gotten a foothold. And the suburbs came after the factory farms.

The micro-flock is filling something more than the frying pan. Shirley Ritchie of Weymouth keeps three chickens, and why? “Because they are fun!” she says with enthusiasm.

So what makes a local chicken farmer come to the Odd Pet Vet? Here is a list of what we have seen so far this year: leg mites, bumblefoot (infections of the foot and leg), feather lice, trauma (broken legs, animal attacks), gastroenteritis, and upper respiratory infections. Although not part of micro-flock we treated an exhibition chicken with ulcers, an esophageal foreign body, and an

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egg yolk induced metritis (uterine infection). This did not all happen at once. This particular chicken is always getting into something.

If you want to learn more about raising chickens there is a great new book on the market entitled *City Chicks: Keeping Micro-Flocks of Chickens as Garden Helpers, Compost Makers, Bio-Recyclers, and Local Food Producers* written by Patricia L. Foreman.

How much do you know about chickens? Try your hand with this True-False quiz.

1. If you have an inordinate fear of chickens it is called alektorophobia
2. Egg color of a hen can be told by the color of the chicken's ear lobes. White predicts white egg color; red predicts brown egg color.
3. White meat of the breast is fast twitch muscle that helps a chicken fly away from danger. Dark meat of the legs and thighs is slow twitch muscle that helps a chicken run around gathering food.
4. The chicken's wattle refers to the way the chicken walks and bobs its head.
5. The chickens you eat from the grocery store are only seven months old when they are butchered.
6. A "layer" is a female chicken that lays eggs.
7. A hen has to be bred by a male before it can lay eggs.
8. An average hen lays 3-4 eggs a day.
9. The natural life span of a chicken is over 10 years of age.
10. If there is no rooster in a flock a dominant hen will step up and takes its place.
11. The average chicken that you eat is allocated a space smaller than the size of this newspaper in which to live its entire life.

Answers all are true except: 4. the wattle is the hang down structure directly under a chicken's beak. 7. Hens are programmed to lay eggs with or without a male. 8. a typical hen lays 3-4 eggs per week not per day.