

## Small flocks have risks

*What prospective small flock egg farmers need to worry about protecting hen and human health*

**R**aising livestock in Ontario typically requires agricultural property zoning but some municipalities are pilot-testing the raising of egg-laying hens in any residential environments.

Proper care of chickens requires some physical adaptations to a typical backyard, a daily time commitment to caring for the hens 365 days-a-year, a lot of preparation, and a great deal of expertise.

Local health units should always be consulted. Most have serious disease-related concerns about hens in residential areas. These are heightened by animal-human disease transmission related to many of the serious human outbreaks in history.

Most humane societies also have increased animal welfare concerns about backyard flocks and should be consulted.

If you are considering having a backyard flock of your own, here is an example of a Top 10-style chore list you could use as a starting point.

### Did you know?

- A hen excretes about 1 kilogram of manure every week. It adds up!
- A hen can appear healthy, but can be laying eggs to the detriment of their own health if not receiving proper diet and care.
- Laying hens need feed that is especially high in protein and calcium. The high calcium level that a hen needs in her diet would be toxic to other animals such as a cat or dog.

## Dr. Mike's Top 10 Hen Chores

*The challenges of keeping hens healthy and alive in urban settings*

- 1 Chicken feed must be purchased from a specialized supplier. Pet food stores are not known to carry the feed hens need.
- 2 To be comfortable, hens need shade for hot days, and a heat source for cold days.
- 3 Be sure to lock up the chickens at night to keep them safe from skunks, rats, raccoons and neighbourhood pets who will try to eat the hens and their feed.
- 4 Failing to provide clean water every day can lead to hen infections and illness.
- 5 Eggs are porous and can absorb invisible harmful bacteria if not handled properly.
- 6 Educate yourself on the different warning signs that indicate a hen is ill. Hens require vaccinations and health care from a qualified veterinarian.
- 7 It is not appropriate to compost chicken manure due to the high level of minerals (especially phosphorus) in the manure, which can stop the composting process in typical backyard composters. Develop a plan for how to dispose of your chicken manure.
- 8 All livestock including chickens can be carriers of diseases which can be transmitted to humans who are in close contact with them including children. It is important to learn how to handle and care for hens without accidentally exposing yourself to an animal disease such as Avian Influenza.
- 9 Hens can live to be 7-10 years old. An older hen needs to take a break from egg production periodically. Going out of production is termed molting, and occurs naturally, and is necessary for old hens to remain healthy.
- 10 Any area where animals live will become increasingly contaminated the longer animals are housed there. Plan to have "down time" when no poultry live in the yard, which will give you a chance to decontaminate the area, and break the life cycle of the bacteria and viruses.

Being an Urban Egg Farmer can be a rewarding experience and a great source of pride. However, failing to do these daily chores can severely affect hen health, hen welfare, egg quality, and consequently, human health.

**Dr. Mike Petrik, DVM, Poultry Veterinarian**

*This list of Top Ten Hen Chores was prepared by Dr. Mike Petrik, DVM, on behalf of Egg Farmers of Ontario.*