

Urban Agriculture Conference – November 19, 2016

Afternoon Breakout Session Notes

The Role of Animals in Urban Agriculture

1. Introduction

- Topic: The role of animals in urban agriculture
- Speakers: Lorraine Johnson (Edible City Toronto) and Celeste Lemire (Urban gardener)
- Facilitator: Susan Ratz
- Note taker: Anna Waz
- Location: Tonda Room, 1:00-2:00pm

2. Narratives

- **Concerns/fears over backyard chickens**
 - Concerns include: noise, smell, pests, disease
 - Most concerns are myths, or can be managed:
 - Noise: you don't need a rooster present with backyards hens, and hens are not noisy
 - Pests: only become a problem with improper food maintenance, for example leaving grains on ground overnight, or poor coop maintenance
 - Smell: keep housing clean
 - Disease: reduce risk by using enclosed pens to protect from wild birds; proper food handling and preparation is also important
- **Advantages of backyard chickens**
 - Can control the animals' environment: e.g. free run lifestyle, organic feed, GMO free feed
 - Nothing is more local than your own backyard
 - Food democracy
 - learning to feed yourself
 - provides control of food and where it comes from
 - can help with the problem of food deserts
 - provides a form of food security
- **Animal welfare of backyard chickens**
 - Can be both a concern and reason for backyard hens
 - Some people may oppose backyard hens because they are afraid animals may be mistreated
 - Alternatively, people want backyard chickens so they can ensure the animals are treated well (especially due to the prevalence of factory farming methods)
 - Hen security in yards does require management, as they can fly and escape, and also be vulnerable to daytime (e.g. foxes, other birds such as Cooper's hawk) or nighttime predators (e.g. raccoons), as well as pets such as dogs.
 - Management measures include clipping flight features on hens, covering and securing the perimeter of coops
 - Winter weather
 - Coops can be protected with bubble wrap as insulation, and reptile bulbs can be installed when needed

- Hen health and vet access
 - Access to professional veterinary care is much harder in urban centres far from agriculture. The solution: make friends with a farmer, such as during a farmer's market
 - Keepers need to have a plan in place in case a bird does get sick
- **Animals can do more than provide food**
 - "Chickens are the new green bin": can feed chickens a lot of kitchen scraps including things like spoiled milk, fats, oils, and grease
 - Goats are used in cities such as Paris, Chicago, and Washington for lawn maintenance of parks and airports
 - Goats have also been used to treat invasive species such as *Phragmites*
 - Bees as pollinators
- **Policies**
 - Backyard hens currently illegal in London
 - OMAFRA does have some regulations regarding urban livestock, for example, their slaughter must be performed on the producer's premises, for the consumption of the producer or their immediate family on the producer's premises.
 - Many questions remain:
 - Should change be at the provincial or municipal level?
 - This is a very hot topic politically, which means councillors and politicians are not likely to show support, afraid of the blowback
 - Should people be allowed to sell their products?
 - Should different animals be treated separately by policies or together?
 - Seattle has tiered allowances based on property size

3. Personal Stories

- Lorraine emphasized that people need first hand experiences with backyard hens to reduce the myths surrounding them, such as smell and noise. Pilot projects can be a great way to allay people's concerns.
- Bylaw enforcement is often complaints driven, and can sometimes be used as a tool to fight other battles between neighbours
 - In Lorraine's neighbourhood, she was honest with her neighbours about her "backyard surprise". One day she saw a bylaw enforcement officer in her neighbourhood who was busting someone else down the street with chickens. Her neighbours knew she too had chickens, but she was not being investigated, suggesting complaints can be used to fight other grudges.

4. Big/Unanswered Questions

- Why is there such an urban/rural divide?
 - Some people may argue that backyard hens don't belong in a city
 - Our image and outward appearance seems to be an underlying cause
 - The idea of backyard hens can be seen as going backwards rather than progressing forwards
 - Why is there this embarrassment of our roots and where we come from?
 - An audience member suggested: "We don't want to look like a bunch of country bumpkins"

- Even racism and the fear of immigrants may play a role, with urban agriculture sometimes associated with immigrants, outsiders, and hippies

5. Recorder's Notes

- The issue of backyard chickens is often presented as a “hot topic” with many people strongly in favor or against, and politicians afraid to approach the topic for fear of “blowback”. But I wonder how much evidence is there that people actually oppose backyard chickens? It’s a chicken, is it really that much different than your pet bird or dog? Is this just a myth that has been sticking around too long?
- There sometimes seems to be a sentiment that vegans or vegetarians are likely to oppose backyard chickens, and proponents may be worried that these groups will be hostile towards the idea.
 - As a vegetarian myself, I find the opposite to be true. I support backyard hens because you do have control over how they are treated and can make sure it is ethical.
- GMO was a hot topic during the question and answer segment during which a farmer commented regarding a recent stand by scientists supporting GMOs, that they are not as bad as they are made out to be, to which Celeste responded regarding evidence on the negative effects of GMO soy.
 - This seems like a topic that can create tension and conflict between urban and rural farmers, pitting them against each other
- In the context of urban agriculture, I think it is really important to discuss the full life cycle of a chicken, which urban farmers are not likely to be familiar with. How long do they live? When do they start laying eggs? What kind of environment do they need? How often do they lay eggs? And what are your options when they stop laying eggs?
 - While Celeste did touch on the butchering of chickens for meat, I think the reality of end of life (whether butchering or other options) needs to be considered upfront.