

denver and the west

More cities welcome chickens

Shift in urban pecking order as consumers get picky about food

By Karen Auge
The Denver Post

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Nick Theisen, 30, collects his hens' latest offerings on his 32-acre farm in Laporte. More than 100 cities across the country, including New York City and Miami, have decided in recent months to allow residents to keep chickens on their properties. (Joe Amon, The Denver Post)

All over Colorado, chickens are coming to homes to roost.

In the past year, Fort Collins and Longmont have changed ordinances to allow small backyard chicken flocks. In Durango, they're brooding over whether to do likewise. Boulder, Loveland and, on a chicken-by-chicken basis, Denver already allow them.

Just outside Fort Collins, in Laporte, feed-store owner Greg Michaud offers how-to classes for aspiring chicken-raisers but has had to limit them to 10 to 15 students.

In an otherwise tech-obsessed nation, people are embracing a lowly, dirt-scratching vestige of our agrarian past — the chicken — and seeing in it a path to a sustainable, healthy future.

Nationwide, more than 100 cities, spanning the urban



Nick Theisen 30, leaves his chicken house with the day's eggs on the land he rents in La Porte where chickens have never been illegal. (The Denver Post | Joe Amon)

spectrum from New York to Salt Lake City, from Miami to Missoula, have recently declared

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themselves fair game for fowl.

For this generation of backyard farmers, the attraction is not so much a desire for an endless supply of free eggs or even nostalgia for a lost way of life. Rather, it's driven by growing disgust among a segment of the population for industrial mass-produced food.

"Mostly, it's the opportunity to live more sustainably," said Amy Gates, one of Longmont's leading chicken hawks and a contributor to the Longmont Urban Hens Network website.

It's also a reassuring way to know your food is safe, said Nick Theisen, who two years ago brought home a flock of chickens to the 32 acres he farms in Laporte.

"It's a matter of knowing where your food comes from," he said.

That is important to Durango City Councilman Michael Rendon, too.

Rendon is the instigator of an ongoing chicken discussion in that city, one that has spread from city hall to local airwaves.

During a pledge drive this month, the local public radio station invited contributors to weigh in.

"It was 12 to zero in favor of chickens," said Rendon, who said he's confident the issue will also win a City Council majority.

While classy wooden chicken coops at Michaud's Old Feed Store in Laporte go for \$300 or \$400, most



Chris Kollar 41 of Longmont shakes the hand of city planner Ken Ortiz after getting his Backyard Chicken Hen Permit at the Longmont planning department. (The Denver Post | Joe Amon)

chicken proponents say they expect the movement to thrive despite the wrecked economy.

For one thing, as Colorado State University avian-disease veterinarian Kristy Pabilonia pointed out, chickens are easy to keep.

Still, there are legitimate concerns, Rendon allowed.

One issue is how to curb the enthusiasm local coyotes, raccoons, bears and neighborhood dogs would undoubtedly feel at having an easy supply of ready-made chicken dinners.

There is also the question of what to do with a

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hen once her egg-producing years end.

Backyard slaughtering is frowned upon in most cities that allow chickens, though rules in unincorporated counties tend to be more loosey-goosey.

Even where it's legal, owners can be squeamish about dispatching a hen they've gotten to know. So Michaud said he helps owners get old birds to a processor who will kill, pluck and clean them.

There's a lot to consider.

"But we feel with so many other cities passing ordinances, those things can be dealt with," Rendon said, and Durango staffers have been asked to talk to officials in Fort Collins.

Since July, when that city agreed to allow up to six hens — as in most cities, roosters are *poultry non grata* — it has issued 11 chicken permits.

So far, the chickens have ruffled few feathers.

"I've only gotten one complaint," said Bill Porter of the Larimer County Humane Society. "It was a chicken running at large."

Some city dwellers fear bird-borne illnesses. Vaccinating chickens against avian diseases is one way to prevent that, Pabilonia said. Fears of the deadly strain of avian flu are largely unfounded here, she said.

In Longmont, where a turkey plant has long been

a dominant feature of the downtown landscape, the notion of chickens in town raised a lot of hackles.

But after months of debate, the pro-fowl forces won — at least temporarily.

Until December 2010, Longmont will conduct a chicken tryout of sorts. If all goes smoothly, the chickens can stay.

By sunrise last Monday, more than a dozen people were lined up outside the locked doors of city offices, waiting to get chicken



Nick Theisen leaves his chicken house with the day's eggs. Egg production varies by season. (Photos by Joe Amon, The Denver Post)

permits.

Flock-tending will be new to Jimmy Walker. But after seeing a film on the poultry industry, the 52-year-old carpenter said eating mass-produced chicken and eggs "just makes me feel evil."

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Plus, he said, he was hoping to convince his 4-year-old son that there is life beyond technology.

"I'm hoping for something to compete with Nintendo," Walker said.

By week's end, Longmont had granted 38 permits of the 50 available.

That doesn't mean everybody is on board.

One man who was hoping for a roofing permit and stumbled into the chicken rush said he wanted nothing to do with chickens, fresh eggs or not.

"I'd only have 'em in my freezer," he said.

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Know your chickens

Some useful information for anyone considering raising chickens.

- Baby chicks, available at feed stores, especially in the spring and on numerous websites, are cheaper (about \$3, on average) than mature hens, but they need more care.

- Chicks need a consistent heat source. How much warmth they need depends on their age.

- Some local feed stores, as well as websites, sell mature hens. At the Old Feed Store in Laporte, hens go for about \$20.

- Chickens eat chicken feed, naturally. They also like vegetables (guard your garden), bugs and chicken scratch.

- Hens start laying at about 20 to 22 weeks of age and hit their peak egg production at about a year. After two years, production drops off.

- Egg production varies by season, but on average, three hens will produce two eggs a day.

- Chickens are comparatively low-maintenance. Bedding should be changed and poop scooped about once a month; twice a year, the coop should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

- Everything you could ever want to know about chickens, including where to get chicken diapers and how to measure birds for a proper fit, is on the Internet, at such sites as mypetchicken.com, backyardchicken.com, Livingthecountrylife.com and, of course, chickendiapers.com.

Sources: mypetchicken.com; Kristy Pablonia, avian veterinarian; Greg Michaud, the Old Feed Store

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