

REAL ESTATE

Heard on the Street: E-I-E-I-O

New York City Backyards Welcome Chickens and Bees

By RONDA KAYSEN JULY 25, 2014



Ruth Harrigan’s modest backyard in Douglaston, [Queens](#), is a testament to efficient use of space, packed with an ambitious vegetable garden, a drum to collect rainwater, a compost heap, a picnic table and a well-loved swing set. And then there are the four chickens and a rabbit named Sugar Daddy.

“I named Marigold,” Ms. Harrigan’s 6-year-old daughter Riley announced, clutching the caramel-colored bird to her chest one recent morning. Marigold and the other hens, Oreo, Eggy and Red, share a cedar and pine coop. It was a sweltering day, but the birds were busy roaming the 1,200-square-foot garden, clucking and pecking at the ground, liberating the lettuce and kale of bugs.

“Even a small little patch, it’s more than enough for a family of six,” said Ms. Harrigan, 49, who lives with her husband, Matthew, 51, and their four children in a three-bedroom house in this leafy neighborhood of Tudor-style houses with tidy lawns.

Ms. Harrigan is among a growing number of New Yorkers who are turning their personal plots into micro farms. In a metropolis where “back to the land” does not usually apply as a descriptor, New Yorkers are raising hens for eggs, rabbits for meat and [bees](#) for honey. They have turned tiny slivers of open space into productive vegetable gardens that often also capture rainwater and compost waste.

These residents are depending on their own yards for sustenance, embracing an ethos that calls for local, sustainable agriculture to lessen impact upon the environment. But for many, the real reason is far less lofty: They find it endlessly entertaining.

However, finding a landlord willing to accept a brood of hens or a hive of honeybees can prove challenging in a city where even a garden-variety house cat can be a lease-breaker. This decidedly un-urban hobby can also rankle neighbors who do not welcome livestock at close quarters.

A seller might worry that his neighbor's preferred hobby could deter potential buyers. "When you're selling a property, the wider the audience, the higher the probability of getting a higher price," said Jonathan J. Miller, the president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel. "For every person that loves the chicken coop and the garden, there are people who are neutral to it or who think there's got to be vermin or some other negative."

Supporters of urban farming, however, see these agricultural projects as an asset to properties and neighborhoods, creating pockets of green in a city of concrete. Some brokers say that a well-maintained urban farm can add to a property's value.

"Chicken coops, if they're kept up and aesthetically pleasing, should be fine for buyers," said Peggy Aguayo, a broker with Halstead Property. "Look at Martha Stewart, she collects name-brand chickens. If Martha Stewart can do it, anyone can do it." Vegetable gardens, she added, tend to enhance a property's value.

Lily Kesselman's yard in the South Bronx is a definite eye-catcher. "People are really attracted to our yard," she said. "We have fruit trees, we have food. Looking out, our yard is a nice little bright light out there."

Two years ago, Ms. Kesselman's husband, Donald Dunn, drove to a [Connecticut](#) farm to retrieve four pullets. In anticipation of their arrival, he had built a small cedar-shingle coop in their 672-square-foot backyard.

"It was so much fun," said Mr. Dunn, a lawyer. "It was such a relaxing change of pace."

When Mr. Dunn, 40, moved six years ago with Ms. Kesselman into the three-story brick-front rowhouse on a gritty street in the Mott Haven section of the [Bronx](#), the backyard was mostly paved with concrete. But Mr. Dunn, who as a child toiled in his mother's garden in Youngstown, Ohio, wanted a plot of his own. He rented a jackhammer and spent two days uprooting concrete. While neighboring lots remain paved, the couple's has apple trees, a vegetable garden, compost bins and the chicken coop.

"We weren't thinking about property values," said Ms. Kesselman, 42. "We were thinking about food."

For Ms. Kesselman, a photographer, gardening is an extension of the community work she does in Mott Haven, a neighborhood with scant open space. Four years ago, Ms. Kesselman convinced her community garden to raise chickens. With a grant from [Just Food](#), a nonprofit group that supports urban agriculture, the garden now has a coop with a dozen hens, cared for by 14 volunteers who receive eggs in exchange for their work. Ms. Kesselman also teaches classes on raising chickens and is a founder of the [South Bronx Farmers Market](#).

There is no data tracking how many New Yorkers are tilling the earth — but it's clear which way the wind is blowing. Last year, 5,000 New Yorkers attended educational workshops led by the [New York City Compost Project](#), a program created in 1993. More than 250 honeybee hives are registered with the city, but beekeepers like Andrew Coté, the founder of the [New York City Beekeepers Association](#), suspect the real number is higher. His association has 480 members, up from 25 in 2007.

The city does not track how many New Yorkers keep hens (roosters are illegal), but those numbers may be growing, too. Just Food has 765 members in its [City Chicken Meetup](#) group for enthusiasts. In 2012, the meetup had 400 members.

"My wife's aunt was keeping chickens in Canarsie 40 years ago, and there have been beekeepers in the city on and off forever," said Lenny Librizzi, the assistant director of the open space greening program for [GrowNYC](#), a nonprofit organization, as well as a keeper of chickens and a grower of vegetables and mushrooms. "But there has definitely been an increase. I went to the feed store and they were out of organic feed for the week. The owner says, 'I used to buy 10 bags at a time, and now I buy 100 at a time.'"

Some New Yorkers are not stopping at gathering eggs. They are raising meat for the table.

"We're definitely desensitized to the fact that we're eating meat from an animal. We just don't want to think about it," said Jacques Gautier, the chef and owner of the restaurant [Palo Santo](#) in Park Slope, [Brooklyn](#). "That kind of bothered me."

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So, about six years ago, Mr. Gautier, 35, began breeding rabbits for food on the rooftop of his brownstone, which houses his home and restaurant. Mr. Gautier kept as many as 40 rabbits in the 1,200-square-foot space, which also had a vegetable and herb garden. The city health code does not limit the number of rabbits a resident can keep.

Mr. Gautier's wife, Katie Dunn, who declined to give her age, and the couple's older son Dash, now 2, frequently played with the bunnies.

“I really just enjoyed cuddling them,” Ms. Dunn said. Sometimes, she worried Dash might wonder what happened to his furry playmates, but he never seemed to notice. And sometimes she would lose her nerve. “I would tell Jacques, ‘I don’t think I could eat them again, they’re so cute,’ ” she said. “But then he would make the food and I couldn’t resist. They were delicious, I couldn’t help myself.”

The couple recently stopped raising rabbits and dismantled the garden in order to build a rooftop addition to add more living space for their family. While they had the rabbits, they gave large dinner parties with menus made up entirely of food cultivated on the roof.

Proponents of the homegrown describe the fruit of their labors as sublime. A freshly picked tomato is nothing like its pale, cellophane-wrapped counterpart. Fresh eggs, they say, have a darker yolk and a richer flavor than the supermarket kind. And the flavor of local honey varies as widely as the color, which can range from a light gold to a deep chocolate.

Neighbors, however, do not always share the next-door farmer’s enthusiasm. Mr. Gautier installed a fence on his roof to block the view of his rabbit hutches after a neighbor complained, and out of sight proved to be out of mind.

If bees do not have sufficient water, they can overwhelm the birdbath next door. And if a hive is not positioned properly, a neighbor could find his deck in the flight path of a honeybee colony. Chickens and their feed can attract rats, mice and raccoons. And a clucking hen can wander into a neighbor’s yard for a snack of petunias or a nap on the doormat.

“You might have a little area that’s really cute and adorable, but your neighbors have rats,” said Susie Coston, the national shelter director of [Farm Sanctuary](#), which rescues chickens, among other animals. “Most people aren’t thinking about any of these things until everything goes to hell in a hand basket.”

Complaints in New York, though, remain low. Last year, 22 complaints about chickens and 11 complaints about beehives were reported to the city, far fewer than the 1,012 complaints the city received about dogs in the same time period.

In some cases, an established vegetable garden can be seen as an asset to a property.

In 2011, potential buyers of a three-bedroom co-op apartment on the top floor of a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights often took notice of the chicken coop in the garden apartment below.

“It was very clean, it didn’t have an odor, it was very well contained,” recalled Vicki Negron, the Corcoran broker who handled the sale. The apartment sold for \$1.4 million, \$100,000 above the asking price.

If the property is large enough, a coop can fly under the radar.

A person strolling past a stately 6,300-square-foot stucco and fieldstone house overlooking Little Neck Bay in Douglas Manor, Queens, is unlikely to register the chicken coop in the front yard. But tucked behind the arborvitae and hydrangeas is a small, rustic structure belonging to two chickens, Daisy and Bertha.

“I don’t necessarily think that a chicken coop fits in with the aesthetics of the house,” said Karen DiFonzo, 41, a schoolteacher, who lives there with her family. “I definitely like that it’s in a private area. People walk by and don’t see them.”

Ms. DiFonzo’s husband, Michael, also 41, a general contractor, built the five-bedroom house, complete with a marble foyer, a library and a butler’s pantry. But sometimes the family seems proudest of the shingled coop, also Mr. DiFonzo’s handiwork.

Robert McMinn, 47, and Jules Corkery, 48, began having trouble with their neighbors and landlady in 2010, shortly after they brought four miniature [Serama chickens](#) to live with them in their one-bedroom apartment in Astoria, Queens.

One bird turned out to be a rooster, and its early-morning crowing awakened a neighbor, who objected. The couple dispensed with the rooster — giving it away — but soon the landlady started worrying that the fowl would set an overly pet-friendly precedent.

“She finally gave us an ultimatum: It’s you or the chickens,” said Mr. McMinn, who hosts a radio show, “[Bucky Buckaw’s Backyard Chicken Broadcast](#),” which airs in several American cities.

So a year ago, the couple moved to a ground-floor apartment with a more tolerant landlord in Elmhurst, Queens. The one-pound birds still sleep inside the house, nesting in empty clementine boxes. The couple clean up their droppings with paper towels. (For the more fastidious house-hen owner, [MyPetChicken.com](#) sells chicken diapers.)

Despite their affection for the birds, when one became sick three months ago, the couple killed it and buried it. “Don’t even get started unless you’re prepared to kill a chicken,” advised Mr. McMinn, noting that the vast majority of unwanted roosters meet the ax.

Raising chickens and keeping bees are generally billed as low-maintenance endeavors, and neither is a particularly expensive hobby initially, at least compared with a membership in a golf club. A beehive could be established for about \$800. Five hundred dollars might cover building a no-frills chicken coop and buying some chicks. The cost of keeping chickens depends on the size of the flock, whether you go organic and whether you wind up taking a hen to the vet. “We have a joke that we have \$1,000 eggs,” Mr. Librizzi said.

You can, however, spend far more. Neiman Marcus, for example, sells a [Versailles-inspired coop](#) for an eye-popping \$100,000.

Caring for living creatures is no small thing. Chicken coops, which should be built to withstand raccoons and other predators, need to be cleaned at least weekly. Soil should be tested for lead and other heavy metals. And hens are a long-term commitment. You’ll need a chicken-sitter if you go on vacation, which might not be so easy to find. Hens can live for a decade or more, but reliably lay eggs for only a few years. (For those not interested in housing older birds, the meat makes delicious soup.)

Beehives require maintenance, too. They need to be checked weekly for overcrowding and disease. A diseased hive could threaten the health of a nearby colony, and an overcrowded one could swarm.

“A lot of people enjoy calling themselves beekeepers more than they enjoy the hard work, sweat and toil of being good beekeepers,” said Mr. Coté of the [New York City](#) Beekeepers Association.

One way to appease a skeptical neighbor is a gift of fresh eggs, just-picked produce or honey. Ms. Harrigan of Douglaston, a professional beekeeper as well as an amateur chickenkeeper, maintains 11 of her hives in a neighbor’s side yard. A few weeks ago, new tenants, the four-member Dierickx family, moved into the neighbor’s house. Ms. Harrigan promised the family jars of fresh honey and offered to let their 9-year-old son don a bee suit and help.

Her welcome seems to have gone over well. One recent morning, the honeybees diligently departed from the hives, off on a search for pollen. Their daily commute makes for an enjoyable sight from the Dierickxes’ kitchen table.

“Every morning, we’re eating breakfast and really talking about the bees,” said Carol Dierickx, 35. “It’s amazing.”

A version of this article appears in print on July 27, 2014, on page RE1 of the New York edition with the headline: Heard on the Street: E-I-E-I-O.