

“Eggtivists” Advocate for Raising Chickens at Home

By David Goldstein, VCPWA, IWMD

Chickens can be friendly pets with benefits. Chickens provide eggs, fertilize gardens with their poop, and they eat insects, weeds, and food scraps. Keeping chickens also teaches children about our food sources.

Chickens in urban areas can also pose problems if managed improperly, including making noise, creating smells, breeding flies, and attracting coyotes. Bill Mattos, President of the California Poultry Federation, warns diseases can spread from badly managed home flocks to commercial operations, telling me, “Wild birds are the potential conduit for lice, mites, or disease from backyard operations to commercial poultry businesses.”

To many “plucky” chicken advocates, called “eggtivists” in their on-line communication, the benefits of keeping chickens outweigh the risks, according to Jill Richardson in a Grist.org blog first written several years ago and now once again being circulated via email links. She notes those with illegal operations “walk on eggshells” trying to keep their chickens in a “don’t ask, don’t shell” situation, which could be ruined if the chickens are noticed by anyone who might complain. She advocates what she insists is not a “bird brained scheme” to relax rules regulating backyard operations.

Using more puns from Richardson, “eggtivists” in Ventura County are currently “cooperating” to promote the success of their existing operations, telling city officials and those interested in raising chickens, “Don’t fear the cheeper.” A Facebook page called “Ventucky Chicken,” administered by Eric Werbalowsky, is one of the electronic gathering places for those advocating “chickeneering.”

Another “eggtivist” is Pat Browne, a registered nurse with an additional degree in animal science and seven years as veterinary technician. She raises chickens on one third of an acre in Camarillo, where she says residents can keep up to five hens without a permit and up to 10 with a permit. Over the past two years, her chickens have recycled 4,200 gallons of kitchen preparation area food scraps from a local restaurant, helping her add 12 inches of high-quality topsoil to her garden.

Following the Hill and Woolsey brushfires, Browne reports she and other local chicken owners collected hundreds of pounds of expired or inedible food donated to first responders, helping avoid what would have otherwise been a disposal expense and inconvenience. She plans to start a Citizens Environmental Academy, teaching small scale individual solutions for the environment, including raising chickens in operations like hers, which she reports generates no odor and keeps birds and eggs healthy.

Browne points out the example of Belgium, which implemented a European Union program involving subsidies to residents of certain cities for purchasing up to two birds and a coop; those receiving funds must promise not to eat the chickens in the first year.

Jan Dietrick, who with her husband owns and manages and Rincon-Vitova Insectaries, has also raised chickens and ducks for many years. She says the practice of raising “egg producing poultry” can “point people in the direction of deep wholistic thinking,” suggesting feeding chickens and ducks kitchen scraps with “natural biochemistry” rather than herbicide residue or other contaminants.

The County of Ventura and each of the local cities have rules limiting where and how many chickens can be kept. The County’s Non-Coastal Zoning Ordinance for properties outside city limits determines the number of chickens allowed by considering zoning and size of lot. As currently noted, the minimum lot size for any “animal husbandry” is 10,000 square feet in most areas; 20,000 square feet in areas zoned for both residences and offices; chickens are totally banned in R2 zoned areas; but chickens are allowed, without lot size restrictions, subject to other restrictions, in R1 zoned areas. However, even if your lot size and zoning allow you to have chickens in parts of the county outside cities, the setback requirements may still pose a barrier. The County ordinance requires chickens to be kept at least 40 feet from any neighbor’s house.

City of Ventura rules are less complicated, but the setback requirement is stricter, prohibiting “domestic fowl”... within 35 feet of any “place of business... (or) dwelling unit... other than any dwelling units on the subject site,” according to Ventura Municipal Code. Additional rules in Ventura and other jurisdictions include minimum lot size requirements, limitations on the number of animals, completion of a neighbor consent form, and regulations governing the size and construction of chicken coops or other structures.

Five years ago, Linda Harmon developed a table, published in *Edible Ojai & Ventura*, summarizing regulations for all 10 cities. Most notable are 40-foot setback requirements in Moorpark and Thousand Oaks, and 25 foot setbacks in Santa Paula. With additional restrictions, Fillmore allows up to three hens in their low-density residential areas, Ojai allows hens in all areas except multi-family homes, Oxnard allows up to 25 hens in both residential and commercial areas, and chickens are allowed in Simi Valley only in an area designated “animal overlay zone.” Only Moorpark, Ojai, and Simi Valley allow any roosters, with additional restrictions.

On the net:

<https://www.facebook.com/VentuckyChicken>

<https://www.backyardchickens.com/>

<http://edibleventuracounty.ediblecommunities.com/things-do/raising-chickens-resources-and-ventura-county-chicken-regulations>

<https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/what-you-need-know-about-egg-safety>