

Moncton program allows city homeowners to keep chickens

MADELAINE KEENLYSIDE

Times & Transcript

March 12, 2015

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Three of Alya Nouasri's four hens tend to stick together - her hens have a pecking order, and one is left out of the social scene at times, Nouasri says. Photo: CONTRIBUTED

Alya Nouasri is a relative newcomer to the world of raising chickens, but she has quickly become part of the urban chicken flock.

Ever since February 2014, when bylaws changed to allow for chicken coops within Moncton city limits, she has been raising chickens for eggs in her backyard.

"In the summer, every day I get four eggs," Nouasri said, adding she gives some of the extra away to friends. "They taste great."

She's heard that chickens are about as smart as a three-year-old, she said.

"They know their names, they recognize me, they know when it's time for food, and they follow me around. And they have social hierarchies. ... They are self-aware."

Nouasri, an instructor in business at Oulton College, is also passionate about gardening, food security and sustainability.

and you can have a maximum of four hens at a time, Nouasri said.

"You're also not allowed a rooster, first of all because of the noise and second of all because you can't have fertilized eggs. What would you do with all those chicks running around?"

Sebastien Arcand, an urban planner for the City of Moncton, said that last year the city reviewed its entire municipal plan and bylaws, and there was a push to allow for backyard chickens, he said.

"We haven't heard any issues from it; no complaints so far. It seems to be positive, and I think as word is being spread, a lot of people are asking about it."

Arcand said in his personal opinion, there's a renewed interest for going back to the basics.

"And I think a lot of the younger generation, though not only the younger, are more conscious about things like where their food comes from."

When writing the bylaw, the planning committee looked at what other municipalities were doing, took bits and pieces of what was happening out there, and fit it to Moncton, Arcand said.

"The last thing we wanted to do was to have it be a free-for-all. This respects the neighbours who don't want (to be disturbed by chickens)."

Nouasri said she really hopes urban agriculture becomes a bigger part of our communities, especially with children.

"In schools these days, you can ask a child what their favourite vegetable is and they might not even know what a vegetable is.

"Chickens are great way to explain where eggs and meat come from. You have to care for it, make sure it has water. It teaches a lot of responsibility."

There's an element of pride to being able to provide your own food, but it's also sustainable, Nouasri said.

"As a country we import so much more food than we actually produce. For every apple we export, we import six. Instead of importing why don't we support local farmers, and invest in them instead of investing abroad?"

Stephanie Brown, director of the Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals in Toronto, cautions against the practice of urban chicken farming.

"We do not think that having hens is really workable, or that they should be in the city," she said. "They're totally subject to attack by cats, dogs, raccoons or other critters that live in the area and they're vulnerable. They're fragile."

The coalition is a federally registered non-profit organization. Founded in 2002, it connects livestock welfare groups across the country, and promotes humane treatment of farm animals.

Generally, people are not aware of how to care for a chicken, Brown said.

"If you have an injured hen, what are you going to do? Take her to a veterinarian to have her fixed up? It can be expensive. And unfortunately, I think people may not be willing to have a hen fixed."

Hens only produce eggs steadily for about a year, Brown noted. "I can see the point of having community gardens (for food security), but if you think you're going to have a sustainable supply of eggs by having some backyard hens, you should rethink this."

Nouasri, however, notes that while commercial hens can produce eggs for the first one to three years of their lives, backyard hens can produce for five to seven because their lives are much less stressful.