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EcoConsumer

Tips for farming in the city

Urban food gardeners here in the Seattle area went through the same drill for decades. We chose our crops from the small list of usual suspects and then hoped for more sun for our tomato plants.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Urban food gardeners here in the Seattle area went through the same drill for decades. We chose our crops from the small list of usual suspects and then hoped for more sun for our tomato plants.

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We still want more sun, but everything else has changed. Innovation and experimentation have overgrown the old limits on raising food in the city. Today we can raise more things using new methods, and our home food production might even involve a kick, a sting or a cuddle.

Keeping bees, chickens, goats and even ducks in the heart of the city no longer gets you labeled as a wacko. You do need to know what you're doing, however, if you want to avoid wasting time and money, alienating your neighbors and making a big mess.

Q: Before I take the plunge, do you have a couple key pieces of advice about raising livestock in residential areas?

A: First check the regulations in your city or jurisdiction. Many cities in the Puget Sound region allow the keeping of small animals for food production. However, rules vary greatly from city to city regarding the number and type of animals allowed and other issues, such as how close bee hives can be to a property line.

Most important, make sure you have a firm grasp of the demands of raising critters for eggs, milk or honey. Keeping your animals healthy, happy and productive requires a significant time commitment.

Q: How do I learn what it takes?

A: Start with a targeted online search for the type of animal you want to keep. Add your city to your search to find local resources. Dozens of urban-livestock pioneers share their experiences in online blogs and videos, and local libraries also offer abundant how-to resources.

This summer Seattle Tilth will provide separate one-session classes on raising chickens, ducks, goats and bees. For details visit seati.ms/k5fzF4.

Q: Didn't the city of Seattle recently revise its regulations about raising small animals?

A: Seattle made a few changes last fall, increasing the number of chickens or ducks allowed per lot from three to eight. They also banned roosters because of noise concerns. See seati.ms/knIAae For a summary of Seattle's rules for keeping bees, chickens, ducks and goats.

Q: Raising goats is trendy now, and Seattle allows three miniature goats on a standard lot. Should I get into goats?

A: Probably not. Goat milk and goat cheese sound great, but goats are arguably the most challenging urban livestock to keep. You need to meticulously goat-proof your yard, and milk your goats daily. Veterinary bills and other expenses can quickly add up. You also have to consider who will care for your goats when you're out of town.

Public Health — Seattle & King County offers useful and sobering information on raising goats at seati.ms/liH94V.

Q: What's the buzz on bees?

A: Also rising in popularity, beekeeping makes sense for a greater number of people because it doesn't always require a daily time investment. In addition to making delicious honey, bees help pollinate flowers and food crops. If you don't want to do all the work yourself, consider partnering with a local beekeeper to host a beehive on your property.

Q: Since so many folks raise chickens now, I can easily trade with my friends for chicken eggs. But I'd love to have my own fresh duck eggs. Do ducks need a pond?

A: A children's wading pool where your ducks can take a dip will do just fine. Change the water regularly, and place a board on the side for them to use as a ramp. Some ducks get noisy, so try to choose a fairly quiet breed of ducks for the city.

Producing food with your own animals has bountiful environmental and health benefits and can be profoundly rewarding. As long as you always remember your responsibilities to the animals, and to your neighbors, your little mini-urban farm will be something to cluck about.

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