

Homes & Real Estate

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Growing your own food? Consider adding animals to the mix

As you may know from the sounds emanating from your neighbor's yard, you can now legally raise small animals in many area communities to produce your own eggs, milk, cheese, honey and even meat and fish.

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Ecoconsumer

Raising your own food can be addictive. In fact, the joys and rewards of edible gardening may make you want to do even more.

In Seattle, "more" often involves animals.

As you may know from the sounds emanating from your neighbor's yard, you can now legally raise small animals in many area communities to produce your own eggs, milk, cheese, honey and even meat and fish.

That doesn't necessarily mean that everyone should do it. But the choices and resources available locally make it easier to decide if raising small animals for food is right for you.

Birds and bees

Just a few years ago, raising chickens or keeping bees in the city seemed exotic. Now your choices for homebody animals for food also include goats, ducks, rabbits and fish.

Before 2010, a resident was limited to three chickens per lot in Seattle. Today, you can raise eight.

How about adding a few quackers? Some or all of your eight friendly fowl can be ducks, under the city's regulations.

Seattle residents can also keep up to three miniature goats (never raise a lone goat, since they are social, herd animals) and three rabbits. If your lot is larger than 20,000 square feet, you can keep more.

Intimately combining the raising of crops and critters might be the wave of the future. With a small aquaponics system in your backyard, you can raise plants in water without soil and keep fish in that same system. The fishes' waste helps the plants, and you can eventually eat the fish.

Most cities and counties have their own regulations for raising small animals, often very specific (such as "male goats must be neutered"). Search online for rules for your community.

The Puget Sound Beekeepers Association provides links to the beekeeping laws in 10 western

Washington cities and unincorporated King County at pugetsoundbees.org/beekeeping-laws.

Watch and learn

Seattle Tilth (seattletilth.org), one of the nation's leading public-education organizations for urban organic agriculture, has become the go-to source locally for learning how to raise small animals for food.

Tilth offers classes and an annual Chicken Coop & Urban Farm Tour. As an indication of the intense local interest, Tilth's next goat-raising class on Sept. 13 filled up weeks ago.

"City Goats," written by the instructor of that class, Jennie Grant, is one of several recent books by Seattle-area authors that provide practical information for aspiring urban animal-raisers. For a broader perspective, also check out the comprehensive "Urban Farm Handbook" by Annette Cottrell and Joshua McNichols.

The most significant breakthrough in urban-livestock education in the past few years is the proliferation of free online how-to videos. You'll probably learn the most from the amateur videos made by folks who just want to help out others, rather than from the slick videos promoting a product or organization.

Homegrown meat

Although the urban-livestock movement got its start with eggs and honey, more people are using their home-raised animals for meat.

Eating your own chickens or rabbits, even if you slaughter them yourself, can be healthier and more eco-friendly and humane than eating mass-produced meat. And many people find rabbit meat delicious once they try it.

This trend doesn't sit well with everyone, of course. An Oakland, Calif.-based organization, Neighbors Opposed to Backyard Slaughter (noslaughter.org), argues that raising small livestock in the city often results in "unnecessary suffering" by animals.

Such opposition helps remind us that keeping living creatures requires a significant commitment of time and attention. Many early urban farmers have stories about how their first chicken coop was poorly constructed, resulting in their chickens being killed by marauding animals who wanted their own chicken dinners.

With a dedicated focus on keeping your animals — and your neighbors — happy, you too can join the legions of urban pioneers who have successfully gone beyond the veggie garden to produce more of their own food.

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