

BACKYARD CHICKENS

Ann Brown

Chickens are many things, but one thing, they're not is dull. Three weeks ago I went out to collect eggs, and there was Snowy hanging upside down, toenail caught in the chicken wire fence. She looked like she was ready to be plucked. I assumed she was dead, but then she moved slightly. How long she hung upside down, I can't say, but as soon as I freed her, she shook herself off, limped momentarily, and then resumed digging in the dirt. Ho-hum! Just another day in the life of chicken tending.

I should've realized that backyard chicken keeping would be exciting when my family and I attended the free chick raising seminar at Olsen's Grain and Food. Experienced flock owners were sharing bizarre stories and misadventures with their chickens. Naively, I assumed that these stories were rarities. Our chickens, of course, would be free ranging in our garden, peacefully nibbling on weeds, grasshoppers, and other malevolent bugs and giving us oodles of tasty eggs.

To be fair, eight chickens do give us oodles of tasty eggs, and they happily free-range in our yard, eating grasshoppers, weeds, and other

malevolent bugs. They don't have the ability, however, to discern between bindweed and beans and love a garden tomato as much as the rest of us. They are incredibly voracious eaters. I bet that in two hours, unsupervised, the garden would be gone. Worse yet, I also would give them about two hours before they pecked me to death if I became unconscious in their pen.

Strangely enough, I adore them. I wasn't expecting that either. I've always had a soft spot for characters and chickens are characters! Snowy is the Houdini of the group and will escape at any opportunity. Fluffernutter loves to sneak up and peck you. It doesn't take much to confuse Fluffy. Mrs. O acts as the surrogate rooster and fiercely protected the whole flock from a visiting raccoon the other night. Her shrieks could have roused the dead.

Brownie, usually our most docile hen, decided in June to 'get broody.' For about 21 days she attempted to hatch her eggs (we have no rooster.) She changed from our most docile hen to a fierce pterodactyl mom who hissed at any one who came near the nesting box. This caused a multitude of problems. There was a back-up in egg laying as all the other hens use that same nesting box. We began to find eggs in odd places around the coop. This also made collecting the eggs from

under Brownie a formidable challenge. Try taking eggs from a fluffed up pterodactyl! Ho-hum! Just another day in the life of chicken tending.

Living with chickens has increased my understanding of common English phrases such as hen-pecked, pecking order, and coming home to roost. Somewhere around the dead of winter, Trixie began to get pecked and not just a little. While a little pecking among hens is considered normal, Trixie was sporting bare shoulders and eventually a bare neck. The bare red skin seemed irresistible. Once there is bare skin showing and the potential for hens to draw blood, it is termed cannibalism. The peaceful coop can turn real ugly, real fast. Ho-hum! Just another boring day in the life of an urban chicken keeper.

After trying many different things to stop the cannibalism, we finally found a product called “Rooster Booster” that we paint on Trixie’s wings. With a violet color it tastes yucky to chickens. Happily she is now growing back feathers and looks much better.

There are some obvious bonuses to keeping chickens besides the eggs. Among them are that we have an infinite amount free manure for the garden and compost. They eat most of our scraps and love it when I toss them succulent weeds. Just watching them provides entertainment.

Like many things in my life, my expectations were far different from my actual experiences, especially in raising chickens. Instead of a uniform, placid flock, we have a lively crew of messy characters. I owe my chickens a word of thanks for adding more spice to my life.

Ann Brown is a Master Gardener who is married with two daughters, a dog, a cat, and 8 chickens and who has a passion for herbs. Dana Prom Smith along with Freddi Steele edits Gardening Etcetera, blogs at <http://highcountrygardener.blogspot.com>, and emails at stpauls@npgcable.com.