

# Urban chicken farmers appreciate fresh eggs, feathery antics

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A chicken walks around the Bowles' backyard Thursday in Columbia. The Bowles started raising chickens about 18 months ago. | Yi-Chin Lee

Two years after an ordinance amendment allowed Columbia residents to keep chickens in city limits, an increasing number of people are opting for do-it-yourself poultry and eggs. | [Yi-Chin Lee](#)

BY [Jennifer Liu](#)

COLUMBIA — Mary Stilwell's favorite dish is simple: add olive oil and a sprinkle of black pepper to scrambled eggs.

The accountant-turned-chicken-enthusiast didn't always like eggs. But after she helped amend the 2010 city ordinance allowing residents to keep chickens within city limits, she began to reap the rewards of fresh eggs. She also is enjoying providing community education and finding endless entertainment in her backyard.

Tips for raising chickens

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*Mary Stilwell offers the following advice about important aspects of raising healthy chickens: feed, air, water and space.*

**Feed:** Chickens eat fruits and vegetables, bugs, worms, seeds and nuts.

**Air:** Chickens need good ventilation at all times, especially in winter, when they spend time in more confined spaces.

**Water:** Clean water helps chickens thrive and stay cool, especially in summer.

**Space:** Adequate space reduces conflicts.

*Stilwell answers her three most frequently asked questions:*

### **Do hens need a rooster to lay eggs?**

No. Females of almost every species across the planet produce eggs without the need for a male and that includes chickens.

### **What do you do when your hens get too old to lay enough eggs to justify feeding them?**

There are a variety of options: culling for stock or soup, finding a farm to retire them on or contacting the Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture or me for other re-homing options.

### **What do you do when you go on vacation?**

The same thing anyone else with animals does, cultivate good relationships. I always have three to five neighbors and 10 to 12 friends who I can ask to do my hens' chores.

*For more tips and information on raising chickens in the city, [read Stilwell's Mary's City Chickens blog](#).*

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Starting in October, those interested in learning about raising chickens can take classes from Stilwell at the [Columbia Area Career Center](#).

In October, she will be teaching two workshops, an introductory course called Urban Hens 101 (starts Oct. 18) and another about chicken health and care (Oct. 29). She will teach a third in November about coop construction (Nov. 6).

Residents can now own up to six hens in a maintained coop per household. Prior to the amendment, all chickens were banned inside city limits. Roosters are still outlawed.

### **A family affair**

Suzanne Hansford-Bowles grew up raising chickens with her family in Kansas. When the ordinance was amended, she took the opportunity to share that experience with her daughters Lydia, 7, and Ella, 10.

"We started planning to get them (chickens) right away," Hansford-Bowles said. "They're really a great backyard pet for kids. They're easy to maintain, and they're fun."

Teaching her daughters the responsibility of caring for small animals such as chickens was one of her main objectives.

"They're a caged animal, and they're completely dependent on you, so that is what I think is the most important thing for kids to know," she said. "They (my daughters) were at the right age for that kind of thing."

Melissa Quast of Bourn Feed & Supply said she has seen an increase in customers interested in raising their own chickens since the ordinance was amended.

"In the past three years, it's become really trendy, especially for people with families who want to give kids that experience," Quast said.

"If they live in town, they can do it in their own backyards now and help teach them responsibility and how to care for the animals."

### **A growing trend**

When she started teaching urban chicken workshops a year ago, Stilwell taught one workshop to a group of a dozen people.

"The longer it's gone on, the more obvious it's become that the city does need someone with answers," she said. "So as time has gone on and things have gotten bigger, I've offered more and more classes."

Initially, she shared information about raising chickens at the annual Sustainable Living Fair and with the [Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture](#), a nonprofit organization that promotes sustainable local food.

After helping amend the ordinance, she started a blog, [Mary's City Chickens](#), to field questions about raising chickens.

At first, the site would get a hit every couple of weeks. Last year, traffic rose to an average of one view per day, and the site now attracts at least 13 views daily.

"As the word gets out, the audience grows because there are more people to tell the tale," Stilwell said.

Daniel Soetaert, staff member at the Center for Urban Agriculture, helped launch the effort to pull her into the classroom.

"She pretty much knows A to Z about chicken home care, so it made sense for her to teach the classes about it," Soetaert said. "She's very easy to work with and gets along with a wide variety of people, which is really important in community education."

The rules for keeping hens are specific. The animals must be kept within an enclosed pen during the day and a hen house at night. The hen house must have a roof and doors that lock, acceptable materials (no scrap metal), adequate ventilation and a way to impede predators.

"Mary Stilwell was probably the most pivotal person in the process of getting the ordinance changed," Soetaert said. "When she wants to do something, she puts her mind to it and gets it done."

Stilwell said the change wouldn't have been possible without community interest and support.

"There were a lot of people involved," she said. "I had a whole bunch of people come and support it. You

can bring a lot of voices to the table, and the government likes to see that."

### **A new backyard project**

Stilwell acquired her first batch of chicks from Bourn Feed & Supply in spring of 2010.

"It's like being a kid in a candy store," Stilwell said. "You're presented with all these varieties, and it's very hard to choose."

Despite the wide selection, Stilwell settled on a batch of standard Orpingtons, which are known for their docility and winter hardiness.

After she had her batch, she gathered the routine of poultry maintenance from neighbors and friends. Once she mastered the basics, Stilwell found raising chickens to be rewarding.

"It's like chicken TV," she said. "I could spend hours watching them. They're just goofy."

Along with entertainment, the chickens provided Stilwell with a taste for eggs.

"I didn't like eggs before I got chickens. I thought they were terrible," she said.

"When I got my first egg, I was so excited and so happy. A week later, I had five or six of them, and then I thought, 'Oh goodness, what am I doing to do? I have all these eggs, and it's not going to stop.'"

### **Smooth transitions**

Stilwell said four of the 52 houses in her central Columbia neighborhood have added coops and acquired chickens.

"I am really surprised at how well it has gone," said Molly Aust, the animal control supervisor of the Public Health and Human Services Department, which oversees the enforcement of the ordinance.

"We have had very few complaints, and of those, it has mainly been for roosters," Aust said.

Determining the sex of chicks at an early age can be difficult, but an owner who discovers a chick to be a rooster must remove it from the property.

Aust said everyone she has visited about the problem has been receptive to immediately addressing it.

"We have not issued any summonses for violations under the ordinance, so I think it has been a great addition to the animal control ordinances," she said.

In the future, Stilwell says she hopes to see the community become more aware about how easy it is to feed themselves with the resources around them. Teaching chicken-keeping workshops is one way she's helping to promote that vision.

*Supervising editor is [Jeanne Abbott](#).*

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