

Fish Without a Bicycle?

Years ago we hatched our first batch of baby chicks. Eight grew into awkward androgynous adolescents. Portland ordinances allow keeping three chickens on city lots and we planned to take the extras to country friends. Before we could, our three-legged black lab assassinated five in a mad early morning massacre before a six-foot-high, sheet metal-reinforced fence around the run was completed.

We were left with what appeared to be two hens and a rooster. Rooster Boy puffed himself up and strutted around the yard. Xena the Warrior Chicken survived not only the attack by Molly but also a rescue attempt by our hundred pound pitbull mix who grabbed her out of the bushes, carried her to me and dropped her at my feet. Our third survivor was a beautiful black-and-white hen whose tendency to run about screeching in hysterical dismay earned her the name Henny Penny.

Xena was first to climb into the nesting box. After that we received the gift of one beautiful egg every day. We waited—and waited for Henny Penny to begin laying. One morning before sunup, I was awakened by a strangulated cry from the chicken coop. Terrified a predator had somehow gained access to the coop, I jumped out of bed and tore outside in my PJs. As I stared through the coop's screen window, I was met by a startling sight: Henny



petlandia

BY MARY MANDEVILLE, DC

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Henny Penny was renamed Pretty Boy Floyd, and though his development had been delayed, his comb now grew large and his tail feathers arched with flamboyant drama. Lending new understanding to the term "cocky," Rooster Boy picked on Pretty Boy without mercy, pecking and clawing 'til poor Floyd was bloody. Rooster Boy pecked us, too, and was generally unpleasant, so we sent him and his excess testosterone to live with rural friends. Once Rooster Boy left, Floyd found his true voice and we woke to his charming call every morning before the first light cut across the sky.

Floyd and Xena managed to make babies and become doting parents. Without being overbearing or aggressive Floyd protected his flock, often perched on a fence watching the neighborhood for predators. He loudly announced the approach of dogs, sending the hens racing for cover. At dusk, Floyd would cluck and crow, calling the girls home to roost, as his title implied.

Inevitably, a developer snapped up the vacant lot behind our chicken coop and slapped up a new house. We were quickly served with a notice: Lose the rooster or face stiff fines. We'd come to cherish our gentle Pretty Boy and were sad to see him go.

The hens seemed fine without a boy-chicken around; they laid eggs regularly and didn't seem worse for wear—fish without bicycles, as it were. Then one hen, Hazel, became broody, resolutely sitting on a clutch of infertile eggs. After an entire month, we decided to purchase chicks from the feed store. We shooed the wannabe mom out of her nest and traded smelly eggs for fluffy little chicks. When Hazel peeked into the nest-box her beady chicken eyes nearly popped out of her head. In minutes she had taken the baby chicks under her wings—literally, of course.

Over time our old lab passed away. Our pit-bulls lived peacefully with poultry so we opened up the chicken run, allowing our hens access to the entire backyard. The ladies appeared to enjoy free-ranging around the property; they pecked and scratched, munched grass and bugs, and scooped out areas under the trees for dust baths. Still, they seemed unsettled. They started hiding their eggs around the yard and abandoned their coop, taking to trees or shrubs at night, becoming fodder for raccoons. We tried chasing and bribing them to go into the coop, but they were having none of it. Perhaps they sought true freedom (like Patrick Henry—"Give me liberty or give me death"), or maybe they really did need a rooster to, well, get them to roost.

When commercial eggs were recalled last year due to contamination, our supply of safe fresh eggs remained robust. Still, I wish we could complete our flock with the addition of one (well-mannered) rooster. Together with the hens they would create a sustainable, self-renewing flock. Compared with questionable industrially produced food, and economic challenge, a rustic country wake-up call seems a fine trade-off for a steady supply of super local, healthy food.

I just want happy hens, tasty eggs and to hear the pastoral call of a rooster the hour before dawn. Do I ask too much? ☐

MARY MANDEVILLE is working on a book about her chicken-murdering dog. She practices animal chiropractic. You can find her at animotionchiro.com.

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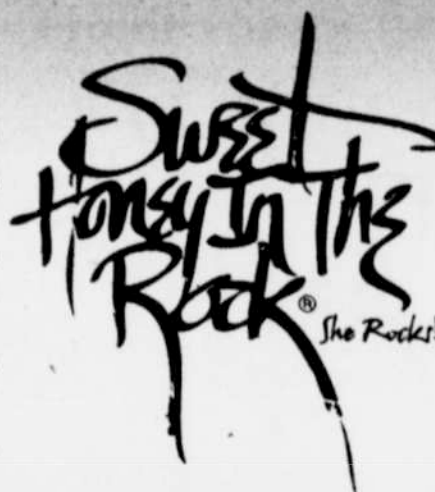
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