



Karen Anderson

I'm beginning to feel a lot like a small town farm girl

Club Columnist Karen Anderson takes members on a tour of the urban farming community once known as Seattle.

Howdy, folks. Welcome to Seattle, the epicenter of the urban farming movement.

Here in Seattle, we're not content with simply digging up our lawns to plant heirloom kale and tomatoes. That's so Old School; these days, we require more of a challenge.

So we're putting chicken coops, rabbit hutches and goat pens next to our gas grills and hydrangeas. If your block doesn't yet have beehives, well, someone from the mayor's Office of Urban Trendiness will be bicycling over to investigate momentarily. We've got to keep up with Portland.

Now that urban livestock – specifically small animals and domestic fowl – are de rigueur in Seattle neighborhoods, gaggles of goats are mowing my neighbors' blackberries. The goats are also devouring as much of my yard and rose bushes as they can reach. The bees are buzzing, the chickens are cackling, and the rabbits – well, the rabbits are doing what rabbits do.

According to the "regulations" of the Seattle Municipal Code for Urban Farms, there's a limit of three small animals for average-size yards, and they must comply with size restrictions. The goats must be one of the smaller breeds – and

dehorned, please. Want potbellied pigs? You're limited to one, and it must be a miniature. (Fortunately for my tabby, the city is not yet imposing any size limits on felines.)

In addition to four-footed creatures, the metropolitan barnyard can house as many as eight domestic fowl. However, there's some bad news for the chickens: absolutely no roosters allowed, due to a history of noise complaints. The good news is for the neighbors: Coops must be at least 10 feet away from the residential structure on an adjoining lot.

Bees must be registered with the state. Who knew? You can have four hives, each with one swarm. (I'm trying to picture the state explaining this to two swarms that have

decided to share a hive.) Hives must be 25 feet from any lot line – which means mine would have to be put in the dining room. That could be a problem.

At Rancho Anderson, the biggest beneficiaries of urban farming have been my cats. They're lazy beasts, none of them hunters, but suddenly last year they began bringing home rats. They were catching as many as two to three a day.

I was recounting this new and troubling behavior to a friend when she asked, "Did someone in your neighborhood start raising chickens?"

"What do chickens have to do with rats?" I asked, revealing myself as a city girl.

My friend, who grew up on a farm, explained that chickens are messy eaters and spill a lot of grain out of their raised coops onto the ground. The rats get wind of the leftovers, tunnel under the flimsy fences around the coops, and gobble up the food. Once the cats get wind of the well-stuffed rats, it's party time.

I was mulling over how to bring up the topic of rats with my chicken-farming neighbors when I looked out the kitchen window. There was a big reddish-brown animal in our garden, eating my bush beans.

"What's that?" I asked the scholarly gentleman, who had wandered into the kitchen to get a cup of tea.

"Dinner?" he suggested.

This was not just any chicken, this was a Jersey Giant, a hefty 13-pound fowl with a mind of its own. It's listed as endangered

(perhaps because of its interest in grazing in other people's gardens).

How far can the urban farming movement go? Don't underestimate it. I remember New York humorist Fran Lebowitz observing, some 25 years ago, "I am not the type of person who wants to get back to Nature; I am the type of person who wants to get back to the hotel."

Well, she's in big trouble now. The Intercontinental Hotel in Manhattan now has a vegetable garden and beehives on its rooftop. And New York chickens? You'll find them free-ranging in a yard right next to the Queens Midtown Tunnel. They even have their own website.

