

Sewickley chicken coop tour a chance to see poultry in motion



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Dave Parker and Paulina Zunino don't have acres of land. But in the small plot behind their Sewickley duplex, the couple have a vibrant vegetable garden and a handsome chicken coop.

Six Red Star hens run about the enclosed space. When Ms. Zunino and her daughters, Emma, 10, and Olivia, 7, hold a piece of kale over the wire edge, the chickens hop up and try to grab it. Ms. Zunino says kale is the chickens' favorite treat.

The family's chicken coop is one of a dozen on the second annual Sewick's Chicks chicken coop tour from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sept. 8.

The tour is a joint venture between the Italian Garden Project and Fern Hollow Nature Center. Six of the backyard coops are within walking distance of each other and Penguin Bookshop, 420 Beaver St., Sewickley (15143). Tickets -- \$10, free for children under age 12 -- are available at the

shop up to and including the day of the tour. Tour-goers receive a sticker and a booklet with a map and suggested tour routes.

The event began with a group of people in Sewickley who shared an interest in chicken raising. Last year, the first tour drew about 90 people, including Mr. Parker and Ms. Zunino. Afterward, he built the coop and run and they bought their Red Stars, a hardy, cold-bearing breed, at a nearby Tractor Supply store.

"You can get a six-pack!" he said.

The family typically gets five or six fresh eggs a day from their six hens. Although they haven't had any issues with predators, neighbors who also raise chickens sometimes are visited by raccoons. Wild birds attracted by a neighbor's bird-feeder have gotten into their chicken feed, however. The couple recently bought a decoy owl in hopes of scaring the wild birds away.

The coop tour is open to people who are currently raising chickens and to those who want to learn more about it. Some come for the fun of seeing the wide variety of chickens and coops. Others are curious about urban farming in a community known for its impressive houses and gardens.

"People don't necessarily associate chickens and keeping chickens with the Sewickley area," said Mary Menniti, the principal organizer of the tour and founder of the Italian Garden Project, which is about "preserving Italian gardening and food traditions, and sharing and teaching them to others."

Her daughter, Allegra, takes care of the chickens.

"My grandparents have always had chickens," said the younger Menniti. "There was one that was always by herself, a Bantam breed, and I always really liked her."

One day, her grandfather gave her the bird, a hen named Eloise. The Mennitis now have several that they have gotten from friends, including a Sizzle named Jafar, and a Silky named Jan Lew. Silkies and Sizzles are fancier breeds, and their feathers almost look like fur. Allegra's chickens

If you go

What: Sewick's Chicks: a chicken coop tour of the Sewickley area.

When: 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sept. 8.

Tickets: \$10, children under 12 free, available at Penguin Bookshop, 420 Beaver St., Sewickley.

Information:
www.italiangardenproject.org/

are definitely pets, with the added bonus that she gets fresh eggs from them.

Mr. Parker also credits his interest in chicken-raising to his grandparents.

"That generation just grew up naturally growing food, canning and preserving, stocking up for the winter. I was always fascinated and intrigued by those simple things."

He has completed the permaculture training at Phipps Garden Center and is involved with the Transition Network, which aims to grow a robust local food source in response to energy, environmental and social problems. Still, he and his wife said that they are not experts, and that they learn by reading books, talking to people and trying different things. Although it's an imperfect process, the couple is especially glad that their daughters get to see firsthand where food comes from.

"It is a start towards building a stronger community," said Mr. Parker. "You start by building the food system, and it starts to change the way you think about everything else. This is our little way of trying to change our little local food system."

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