

Spring Chicks, The Natural Way



Chicks A Few Days Old







Chicks are 3-4 weeks old

This marks the start of our sixth flock to date and the fifth spring that we enter raising chooks as chicks. What's different about this year however is that for the first time we hatched our own. The natural way. We must tell you that it has been extremely exciting and rewarding to watch the transformative process. From the time our broody Australorp plucked out all of the feathers from under her belly to the dawn we found the first chick chirping in the nesting box along her side.

In the past we have always purchased our chickens from other breeders. Throughout the process we have experienced both joy and pain. We have learned to become very resilient flock shepherds through the multitude of casualties we've experienced and for a number of reasons which we suspect. Chook owners know more over time, but even after we have

conducted a necropsy, sometimes you just never know why your little feather friend died. Then we remember natural selection and survival of the fittest doesn't always make sense. Nature has a way of showing you tiny details and intricacies of life that may have gone unnoticed before, when everything appeared to be perfect. It is under the ruffled feathers that you find many questions left unanswered. And yet somehow you have the urge to try again.

So, this season it is extremely rewarding for us to watch mama hen take ownership of 11 brown, white, and blue eggs in her nest. We watched as a few more eggs were laid each day in the same space by the Leghorns, Barnevelders, and Ameraucanas. Only 7 hatched and we buried the others in the garden. Each one of them is unique in their own way by the day of the week they were born which earned them names of which to keep.

The first egg that hatched was blue and an Ameraucana. It had been at least twenty-one days when we noticed a fracture in the shell. Over a period of more than six hours she pecked her way out of her shell. Chicks can live for four days after they've hatched on the nutrients supplied from the inside of their shell. Remarkable the way that nature works eh?

One by one they hatched and we brought them into their temporary brooder. The goal was to

reintroduce mama hen to her chicks after they'd all hatched, but she was so stressed out from the extensive incubation period that when she left the nesting box we could tell she was relieved. So we let her find her zen again to sow and scratch in peace.

The youngest chick is nearly two weeks behind the oldest and Thursday, the only Australorp that hatched was born January 7th. She took a couple of days to get out of the eggshell. She was exhausted and we were not sure that she'd pull through but shorty is hanging with the best of them today. Sunday, Ameraucana the first was born January 27th, then Wednesday Ameraucana the 2nd (30th), Sunday the first Leghorn (3rd), and two Leghorns hatched on Monday (Jan 4th). One Barnevelder hatched on Tuesday (5th). By now a few of them are about a month old.

For more information on raising your own flock we highly recommend:

Harvey Ussery *The Small-Scale Poultry Flock*

Gail Damerow Storey's *Guide to Raising Chickens*, and *The Chicken Health Handbook*

Chicken Flock Transitions

It's nearly December already and we haven't had

our first freeze yet. But, there is a chance that the predictions may be wrong and we have one tonight. For the past 2 years we have had our first freeze by November 15th. We are only a few days past, and I'm holding out on our green tomatoes, sweet peppers, and hot peppers that aren't quite ready. I'm also created temporary low tunnels for nightfall in the event of a freeze. I suppose I must cut some of the herbs too, if I plan on preserving them for winter (it did end up freezing as I'd predicted! It tends to be roughly 4 degrees cooler in my backyard probably due to the greenbelt). Which meant a busier day in the garden removing all of the frozen plant mass. The bees and butterflies, especially the Monarchs, have been migrating through here the past few weeks. I saw the last hummingbird pass through and our regular clan mid September. They seemed to be on schedule. I read that if you keep a feeder up throughout the year you may likely see a few of the more rare species. I may test this out this winter just to see.

We have a new flock of 12 chicks. This will be our 4th flock to date. So far our second flock was by far the most superior health wise and we selected them from Ideal Poultry in advance. For whatever reason we didn't fare well with our selectively bred spring flock in 2016. They weren't given an immunization shot and perhaps that's what did them in, or the heavy rains and potential chemical run off from neighbors, who knows. Our place has been

pesticide free and “organic” for 7 years now. There were a multitude of issues with this flock and after contacting experts from various purveyors including Fertrell and Penn State experts, and doing a necropsy, our tests were inconclusive. We didn't send them to A&M either.

The interesting thing is that the first days of a chicks lives are imperative and you may not see results of their first 5 days until weeks or even months later. So perhaps it was the feed, this seemed to be a concern when we lost a few chicks. We didn't have this issue in the past using our favorite local feed mill, but all ideas aren't off the table. We found ourselves giving them regular Vitamin E doses in their water when we thought it was feed issues. Again, any developmental issues that happened in the chicks first 5 days could have very well been the culprit.

We once again ordered a flock from Ideal and after 2.5 weeks old they are happy, lively, vivacious, and flighty as ever. In due part to the fact that we have Americaunas and they tend to be wilder to the core. We had a 20% success rate with our selective breed flock of Barred Rocks last spring, pretty brutal. One gloriously handsome Rooster that we recently culled (we aren't supposed to have chickens, and he was no exception since he crowed at all times of the day and night, but we did almost have him for 1 year, he was spunky scaredy cat too), and one hen are all that remain

from that flock.

We have a small backyard flock; 12 elder hens (3-3.5 yr olds, 8-2 yr olds, 1-nearly 1 yr old), and 12-2.5 wk old chicks (4 Black Australorp, 4 Cuckoo Marans, 4 Ameraucanas). We have learned a lot, and experimented a ton! From building multiple brooders and chicken coops, to experimenting with various dual purpose breeds, visiting multiple farms, researching how to sex chickens, to culling them and dissecting them, attending workshops, tours, clubs, fairs, and events. We are not chicken experts but we have had our share of trials and tribulations that would make one give up. Since we are a fan of pastured organic chicken egg production we also joined APPPA last year and nearly launched a joint venture with a neighboring farmer to go into a larger small scale pasture raised chicken egg production operation. I wasn't quite ready to handle that operation on my own but it's in my husband's mind that's what he wants to do when he retires. We shall see. Until then, we will keep our backyard flock manageable and try to be as simplistic as possible. I must note that this time instead of using a 250w heat lamp we used a heat mat and it has cut our energy bills in half. Once I placed the chicks in the brooder on our back patio, I also added a reptile black light for additional warmth. They seem to be fine and we are pleased with the savings and the hassle. Plus they have normal sleep patterns without a light on all of the time. One thing that has remained

constant throughout all of the changes is that we harvest rainwater and the chickens love it as their main source of drinking water.

Mid Summer Garden

Well I don't think I can ever get caught up in the backyard these days! My gardens have become so large that I'm constantly cultivating the soil! It seems as if just as I've finished one thing, another bed needs redone!

It has been a very successful tomato season for us even though many farmers have said the complete opposite due to all of the rain! Plenty of heirloom tomatoes here! At this time I have planted about 102 in my small space. The reason for that is a greenhouse lesson learned. In the years prior I seed started in the house where the environment wasn't ideal for sprouting. Davin was able to finish the greenhouse coop last fall and I was able to start my favorite varieties successfully for the first time. I put 3 seeds in each pod, and guess what, they all came up! So, I was able to sell a few at the farmer's market, and donated about 40 to a few local families. Lesson learned! We will be expanding our greenhouse coop into a full greenhouse with aquaponics in one section and a chicken care station below, in addition to our seed starting stations. That will be our next big project after Davin remodels the new coop again. I swear, how many times can you rebuild something until you are satisfied with

the end result?

Our chickens are 20 weeks old on Wednesday! One of our Campines has been laying for almost 2 weeks straight now but none of the other ladies have begun yet. The campine eggs are tiny, a little smaller than a guinea egg actually. The new flock is having a hard time adjusting to the heat I think because we had so much rain in the spring that it was actually pretty cool for much longer than it usually is. Since it's dried up for the past month or so it's been pretty hot and they are struggling, even though it hasn't reached 100 degrees yet. Luckily we have multiple fans in both the new coop and the old coop so all of our hens are getting some relief. It does help them to lay in the summer if they have places to cool off. We have multiple locations for water and I like to give them refreshing frozen or chilled afternoon fruit treats.

We also have ten different breeds, within the 20 birds we own. Four of them are 16 months old and three of them are consistently laying. The Ameraucana hasn't been laying eggs but has a deformed dorsal, which I've read is how some of the original Araucanas were shaped. She did have some very soft shelled eggs and I'm not sure if she will lay again or not. So right now she's helping to control the bad bug population, and fertilization. She is one of the original ten pullets that we bought 8-10 weeks old and lost 60% for different reasons. Davin calls her Corky. For anyone considering raising chickens, get them as chicks, not as older pullets. They'll have a much better chance of survival and be much healthier if they grow up in the same environment.

Here are a few pictures to show you what's new at our market garden-backyard homestead and some of the things

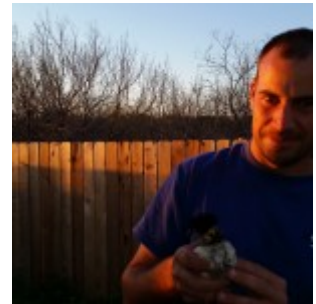
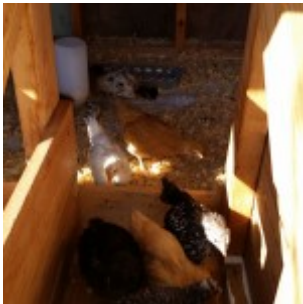
we've done this spring and summer!



A few plants that
we got from
Sunshine
Community Gardens
annual spring
plant sale, 2015



Seed starts in
the greenhouse



Davin's favorite.



Adjusting the new
system.



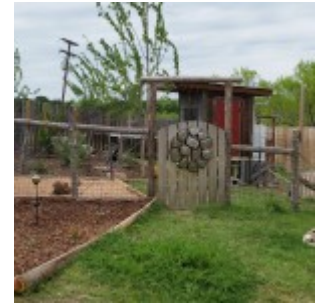
Drip system runs
off of rainwater
and is very
efficient.



Drinking
harvested
rainwater, packed
full of
electrolytes!



Another compost
pile located in
Sustainable
Garden Bed



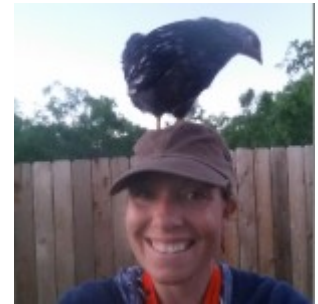
New grape bed and
added garage sale
decor to the gate



French Heirloom
Creme de l'ite
Carrot



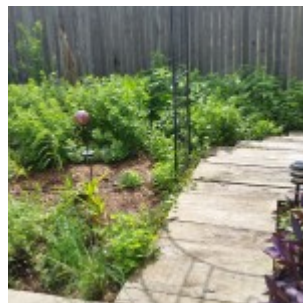
Walking onion



Yes, early
bonding. They
like to jump on
my head!



Table grapes from
Stark bro's.



Herb garden in
the spring 2015



Citrus and
succulents



New coop



Just a little wet
from the rain



Grew buckwheat to
build the soil
with nitrogen, as
a beneficial
insect promoter,
and for chicken
scratch



Compost for the
chickens to
scratch in

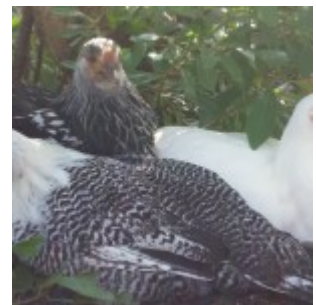




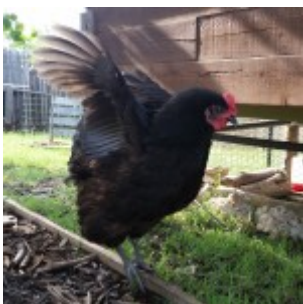
Everbearing
raspberries



1015, Red, White,
Texas Sweet
Onions, were
harvested early
because of all of
the rain and
flooding.



Silver Campine,
Leghorn, Heritage
Breed Hens



This was our
broody Australorp
hen this spring!
We got her back
on track after a
couple of weeks!



Buff Orpington,
Ameraucana, J

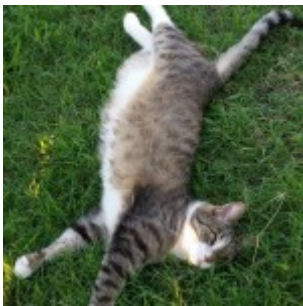




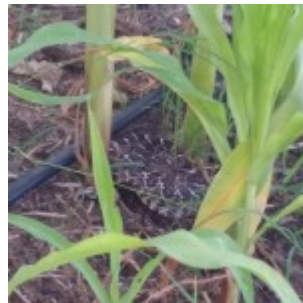
Brabanter
Heritage Breed
Hen



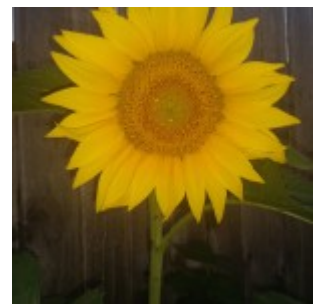
Norwegian
Jaerhons,
Heritage Breed
Hens



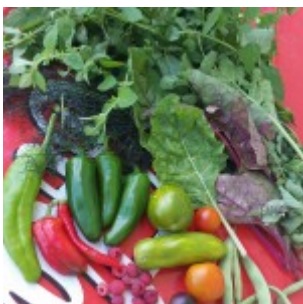
Mic relaxing



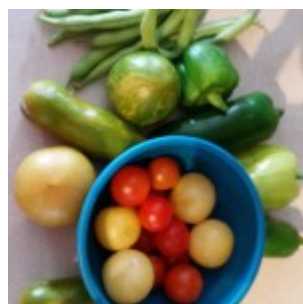
rattlesnake that
I went face to
face in while
cultivating the
corn bed



sunflower



late spring/early
summer harvest



Some of the first
harvests in the
spring.



Heirloom Garlic



Giant Zinnia



A peek in the new coop



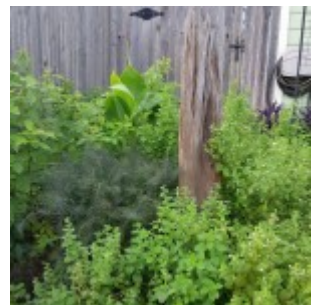
Garden in June



crimson
watermelon that
came up on its
own free will



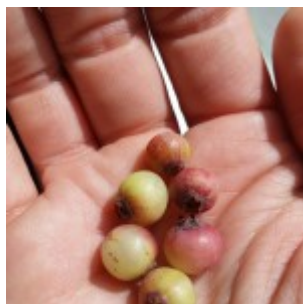
For some reason
we have two
banana spiders
hanging above our
nesting boxes on
both coops. I'm
ok with that too!
They are well
fed!



Melissa, fennel,
raspberries,
roses, cana, and
an old log that
we turned into
garden art in the
herb garden



Cinnamon basil



Pink lemonade
blueberries

