

Raising Dinner

As urban bee keeping and hen raising become more popular, Birmingham residents find ingredients in their own yards. **By Jason Horn Photos by Cary Norton**

DINNER HOUR



Jill Nelson



Mike Malone

"Eat local" is the catchphrase on every foodie's lips these days. And there's nowhere more local than your own backyard. But not every homegrown food has to come from the plant kingdom. A growing number of Birminghamians and metro residents are raising chickens and keeping bees for the freshest eggs and sweetest honey nature can provide.

"I come from a long line of green, earthy gardeners, but I have a brown thumb," says Jill Nelson. The marketing professional got her first hens two years ago, when her mother ordered some chicks through the mail and passed four on to her.

Today, Nelson has five chickens out back in a coop designed and built by her architect husband and about seven dozen eggs in her fridge. "We make a lot of egg salad, frittatas, fried eggs," she says.

That's nothing compared to the 26 gallons of honey Mike Malone harvested from his five beehives last summer, but he says beekeeping requires very little work. "Bees need pollen, nectar and water. They do the rest," he says. The former college administrator grew up in Roebuck Springs, and after retirement he

moved to a verdant two-acre lot in his former neighborhood.

A certified master gardener, Malone calls himself a naturalist. He says he values his bees more for their pollinating of his vegetables than their sweet product. "I consider myself more a beekeeper than a honey harvester—I wouldn't care if I harvested one ounce of honey from these guys."

Raising bees might evoke terror in some, but Malone's hobby is on the rise: A beginners' beekeeping class offered at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens this spring had 67 students, and 30 more on the waiting list, according to Jefferson County Beekeepers Association president Danielle Dowell.

Beekeeping isn't terribly expensive to get into—you can get a hive and all the necessary equipment for about \$250—and Birmingham makes an ideal setting. "Urban planting is really an untapped resource for pollinators," Dowell says. "There are lots of landscaped gardens with flowers."

Aside from in the city of Tuscaloosa, there aren't any legal restrictions on beehives in Alabama, Dowell says. But there's still the issue of courtesy. If you're going to start an apiary, Malone says, "make sure your neighbors know you've got bees." And if they have objections, "a jar of honey goes a long way in making your neighbors agreeable."

Pacifying neighbors is even more important for raising hens. Backyard chickens are only allowed on agriculturally zoned land in the cities of Birmingham and Vestavia Hills, making them effectively illegal.

The other municipalities in the metro area all have restrictions on how far the birds must be from neighboring homes. This means many people are technically breaking the law with their chickens. (In fact, one illicit hen-keeper in Crestwood declined to participate in this story, citing legal worries.) Nelson tried to start a Birmingham chapter of CLUCK—Citizens for the Legalization of Urban Chicken Keeping—but didn't have enough time to keep it going. She's now looking for someone to take over.

Barbara Saurer doesn't know if her backyard chickens are strictly legal, but the Homewood resident has been raising them for 15 years (she even drove them—in cages—in the car when she moved from Dallas eight years ago). "They're pets that lay eggs, really," she says. "But you should know your neighbors and talk to them."

If you're thinking about chickens or bees in your yard, Nelson, Malone, Dowell and Saurer all agree that you should do your research first. Luckily, there's a great resource for that: the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Saurer has taught two chicken classes there, with another planned for this summer. The BBG of course also hosts the spring beekeeping classes (there may be another session scheduled for the summer), and its library—which accepts any Jefferson County library card—holds a vast collection of animal husbandry books. ●

DETAILS

Resources for beekeepers and chicken-raisers in Birmingham

- **Jefferson County Beekeepers Association**, jeffcobees.org
- **Birmingham Botanical Gardens**, bbgardens.org
- **Alabama Cooperative Extension System**
- **Jefferson County Office**, aces.edu/counties/jefferson

