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## Chicken Workshops Sold Out

By Sophie Braccini



Papa John demonstrates how to set up a box for baby chicks Photo Sophie Braccini

John Kiefer, also known as Papa John, is a well-known figure of sustainable living in Lafayette. He often opens the doors of his beautiful property, by the Lafayette Branch of the Walnut Creek, to groups for their meetings. "I am the custodian of this place," says Kiefer, "it is my duty to share it with others." Along with the creek and pastoral setting, the garden conceals another treasure: a chicken coop. Kiefer shares that, too, not only supplying eggs to neighbors, but offering training for budding chicken enthusiasts. When news spread by word of mouth several weeks ago that Kiefer would hold a free chicken workshop, so many people responded that he had to add five additional sessions. "I stopped the registration when the number reached 105," he says, "who knew that so many people were interested in raising chickens in Lamorinda!"

"I went to the class to learn more about backyard chicken-raising. We are fairly new to the experience, having added chickens to our family just this past April," said Trish Barnes, one of the workshop participants, "we always planned to have them, and our kids are now old enough (9, 7 and 5) to help out and enjoy the experience."

The first part of the workshop, one recent Sunday morning, took place in the living room of the Lafayette home where Kiefer has been raising chickens for 40 years. The purpose was to arm participants with the knowledge and resources to start their coops come spring. "The best time to get your chicks is between mid February and the end of March," he stated, "so start building your coop now and you'll be ready to start within a month."

Kiefer advocates doing it all yourself. "Pre-made coops have a floor, that's dirty and not good for the chickens," he explained, "the best way is to build on the floor." Chickens like to scratch and dig, so having the coop on the dirt ensures that they will create healthy manure by digging and turning the soil of their home. Kiefer harvests the fertilizer from time to time for his vegetable garden and his trees.

Chicks are normally only a few days old when purchased, so Kiefer also taught participants how to build a box in which the chicks can be raised until they are big enough to be transferred to the coop. It seemed doable, with a heavy cardboard box, a lamp for heat and raised bowls for water and feed.

Building the coop, on the other hand, is not an easy week-end project. It requires the digging of a trench to set the chicken wire that will protect the flock from predators, raising wood walls, a door, the construction of a nesting box, installation of a water source and a roof. "At the end of the first workshop a lady asked, 'who's going to build my coop?'" recalled Kiefer. "I hadn't thought about that, but I contacted Siamack Sioshansi of the Urban Farmers project and now we can recommend two individuals who can do it for you," he added.

Kiefer also presented a lot of information about where to find the chicks, the feed and facts about eggs as well. More than half of the participants in the workshop were from Lafayette.

According to Kiefer a significant portion of them will actually build a coop. "Some ask questions, others return for further examination of the coop, so it is clear they are moving forward. Some had made their decision to build a coop before attending the workshop. My estimate is 40 - 60% will build and have fresh eggs," says Kiefer.

Some participants found out at the workshop that their chicken dreams might crash against the wall of the city's regulations. "I learned during the workshop that my lot was too small to have chickens," says Rebecca Calahan-Klein, a Lafayette resident with about a third of an acre property, "We are building a front yard fruit garden, a vegetable garden for our family and neighbors and wanted to have chickens to round out our ecosystem."

In Lafayette the rules for keeping farm animals are set according to the zoning district. The closer to downtown you are, the less likely it is that you will be allowed to keep poultry. For example, the owner of a 1-acre lot in a dense neighborhood (R-10, R-12 and R-15 districts) may not be allowed to keep hens, while a resident with the same acreage will not need a permit if they live in a R-40 zone. (If chickens are in your future, it would be a good idea to check with your local Planning Department first.)

Kiefer says he plans to reach out to the city and try to help residents with smaller lots, and to work toward a change in the regulations. Calahan-Klein will participate in this effort, "In the suburbs we have a way of living together that's respectful and friendly to neighbors," she says, "Lafayette has great capacity to look at a question like this and find a way to make it work for everyone involved."



Chickens need to eat plenty of greens Photo Sophie Braccini



Workshop participants roam the chicken run and check Papa John's chicken coop Photo Sophie Braccini

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