

Good Living

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Pets and Layers

By MITCH MAERSCH

Ozaukee Press staff

As a child growing up in the Town of Port Washington, Erin Stewart would try to save birds that bumped into windows of her family's house. She also loved her neighbors' free-range chickens.

"I was just an animal nut from the time I was a kid," Stewart said.

Stewart and her husband moved to five acres in the Town of Saukville in February 2000.

Not just egg producers, Erin Stewart's scores of free-range chickens are pretty and amusing pets

In March, they got chickens and ducks. Fortunately, Stewart knew exactly what she was doing right off the bat. She got eight roosters and eight hens.

"I thought you had to get pairs of everything," she said. "It's been 17 years of learning."

It turned out she did not need that many roosters, although a few are good to have a round.

"You need a rooster to watch the eggs," she said. Speaking of eggs, the

Erin Stewart feeds her chickens each morning at 6:30 a.m. at the back of her home's deck in the Town of Saukville. After an electric door lets the chickens out each day, the feathered friends make a mad dash for the deck for their treats, usually cracked corn.

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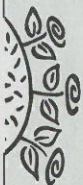
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Ozaukee Gardener

..... Elizabeth O'Connell.....



Hearty asters lend lasting color to the garden

The botanic name *Aster* used to cover a wide variety of plants, but biologists have now reclassified most of our native “star flowers” as *Symphyotrichums* and left the botanic classification *Aster* to Old World plants. (Most plant catalogs haven’t adopted the new name yet.) Whatever we call them, asters of one kind or another can brighten gardens from early June until frost.

I’ve tried a number of asters over the years. I started out with what’s commonly called a *Michelmias* daisy named ‘Professor Kippenburg.’ It’s short by aster standards, about 8 inches before the flowers appear, with bounties of light blue blossoms I found enchanting in our late summer garden. Unfortunately, the local rabbits also adored them, chomping down the foliage most of the time before flower buds could form. I tried barricading them in hoops, but the bunnies loved them so much they collapsed them most of the time. I gave up and let the asters go.

Next I tried a taller *Calico* aster, ‘Lady in Black.’ It’s a bushy plant about 2.5 or 3 feet tall with purple foliage that is topped in the late summer with masses of small, barely pink flowers. It contrasted nicely with the taller lily stems behind it and the mounds of silvery-green *heucheras* at its feet, and produced several seedlings. None had the purple leaves of their parent, however, so I weeded out the ones I discovered.

Rabbits have been a problem with every aster I’ve grown, and ‘Lady in Black’ was no exception. Eventually the rabbits mauled ‘Lady in Black’ into oblivion. Online sources say deer are less attracted to them, but hungry critters need to eat so I bet they’d also enjoy a bite or two of aster. I found another, less appetizing replacement plant.

I should have given up on them, but the New England asters proved to be much tougher. Again, shorter ones — ‘Purple Dome’ and ‘Vibrant Rose’ — are my favorites. They never grow more than 15 inches tall in my dry front garden, so I never have to worry about them flopping over. They have electric purple and neon rose flowers that light up the area even after the surrounding plants have died back.

The New England asters have been faithful bloomers for 20 years now, despite the rabbits. Unlike the *Michelmias* daisies, the New York asters don’t seem to mind a spring trim. The rabbits lose their taste for them as they mature and develop their tough stalks and summer leaves. The plants look leggy, but the intense flower color distracts the eye. Something short planted in front of them can also disguise the problem.

When the rain stopped and the heat soared this summer, I didn’t water, and by the time I finally got concerned, my asters looked like goners. I figured I’d have to replant them in the spring.

But these asters are resilient. Little green sprigs appeared on top of their designated stems after some September showers. Now there’s a sprinkling of flowers. Even if some of the plants are goners, I should have enough survivors to divide and fill in the gaps instead of needing to shop for more.

Asters come in shades of pink, purple, blue and white from the vibrant hues I favor to soft pastels. And since they can be 4-foot-tall autumn giants or spring flowering midgets barely a couple of inches tall, they fit into almost any garden. The family provides food for larvae of the Pearl Crescent butterfly, so be on the lookout for caterpillars if their leaves survive the rabbits.

O’Connell and her husband Tom Hudson garden at their historic home on Grand Avenue in Port Washington and are members of the Port Washington Garden Club. Comments or questions may be e-mailed to mail@portgardenclub.org.



The Cover Story

ERIN STEWART’S TOWN of Saukville farm includes various types of chickens, including bantam mixes, Coochin Bantams, Buff Orpingtons, d’Uccles and more. The Stewarts also have ducks and geese, which tend to make messes and get into trouble.

Photo by Sam Arendt

Chickens, says their owner, are the ‘gateway to healthy eating’

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Stewarts rarely buy them at the store anymore. She collects them every day from her own birds.

“We’ve had good breakfasts. I call (chickens) the gateway to healthy eating,” she said.

The family of three changed their eating habits to make more food from scratch and use more organic ingredients.

“Just knowing where your food comes from is a lot more important to me than before,” she said.

Through the Internet and chicken groups, Stewart learned different tips and tricks in raising chickens. They are creatures of habit, often motivated by food.

Each morning at 6:30 the electric gate on the chicken coop opens, and Stewart’s birds storm out and head toward her deck. That’s where Stewart feeds them their treats, usually cracked corn.

Some even extend their wings to try to run faster. Stewart becomes the pied piper as her birds follow the giver of food.

Stewart said she can tell if the door is malfunctioning if the chickens don’t show. That has only happened once, and that’s because her naughty geese chewed through the wires.

After their treats at the deck, the chickens used to visit to the neighbors for more treats, until Stewart determined that was too much.

Stewart lets her birds roam outside during the day. In winter, the key is to keep them warm and dry so they spend less time outside. If the temperature falls to below zero, they remain inside.

During the cold months, Stewart scoops out chicken droppings in the coop so the birds don’t die from the fumes, which is also why she doesn’t use cedar chips. She doesn’t use straw because that can grow mold.

While they don’t mind the cold so much, Stewart’s chickens don’t often like to go out in rain.

“The pretty birds know they’re pretty,” she said.

Stewart is drawn to chickens because of their personalities. A couple of them can even sit on her shoulder.

“I think it’s the comedic nature of them,” she said.

A rooster and hen Stewart is keeping in a separate cage for a 4-H have a loving relationship. When Stewart puts treats in their food dish, the rooster makes a noise alerting his hen to the goodies and then picks some out and puts them on the ground for her.

Stewart’s nearly 50 chickens are pets used for eggs. The lot includes bantam mixes, Coochin Bantams, Buff Orpingtons, Belgian d’Uccles and more. She raises meat chickens each summer. At first, she said she didn’t think she could do it, what with taking them to be butchered, but she realized the personality of the meat birds is different. All they want to do is eat, she said. The meat chickens are kept in a bot-



SOME OF ERIN Stewart’s chickens are tame enough to sit on her shoulder, like Jack (left) the Coochin Bantam and Winter the bantam mix. Each chicken has its own personality, she said.

Photo by Sam Arendt

tomless cage called a chicken tractor. It gets moved daily to a new part of the yard so the birds have fresh grass to devour.

The chickens live for eight weeks. By the time they are 12 weeks old, they start to have heart attacks because their bodies are too big for their organs to handle.

Stewart times their butchering according to the Ozaukee County Fair.

“My birds have eight great weeks and one bad day,” she said.

She takes them to a butcher in Cascade. They are delicious.

“They’re a little more firm but the flavor is so much better,” she said.

In addition to chickens, Stewart has ducks. She didn’t know much about them, either.

“I was completely unaware of the pigsty they made,” she said. She got rid of them all last year before acquiring several Cayuga ducks months ago.

The ducks provide a trade-off to their messes. Duck eggs are amazing for baking. Stewart said she has tried for years to perfect her grandmother’s chocolate eclair recipe but could never get it right. The first time she used a duck egg the treats came out like they should.

Two and a half years ago, Stewart added geese. She now has three white ones named Sebastian, Sabrina and Charmin.

“We do squeeze the Charmin,” Stewart said in reference to the old popular ad campaign for the toilet paper brand.

“I call them the feathered goats. They’re the troublemakers of the yard,” she said.

The geese can be intimidating to visitors, so they remain inside a fence when company comes. They like to do their business on the driveway and get into all sorts of things.

Erin’s husband Bryan said he knew he married an animal lover years ago. They don’t bother him, except the geese “sometimes when they’re in my tools.”

The Stewarts’ son Taylor shows chickens, ducks and geese at the fair.

Last year, he sold enough at auction to pay for a new snowboard.

Stewart is passing her knowledge and passion for chickens to the next generation. Three years ago, she and her cousin Sheila Lederer of the Town of Fredonia became 4-H chicken leaders. They connected exhibitors with good breeders leading to higher ribbons and better education on how to care for the animals.

Stewart requires the youth to take the incubators with the eggs, hatch and raise the chickens. When they get too big, the birds come to her farm.

“That way the kids don’t feel like they can’t do the project,” Stewart said.

The 4-H members must clean the coops, wash and prep their birds and sell them at the end of the fair. They only get birds if they compete in showmanship.

“These kids have to raise the birds and send thank-you cards and photos to the breeders,” Stewart said. “It’s teaching them year-round responsibility and communication.”