

Kids, Chicks, and Bulls...A Chronicle about the joys of farming

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“That damn rooster tried to get after me again, Mom! Just ‘cause I wanna get the eggs out from under the hens!” On the upside of this conversation, I know that once again we don’t need eggs from the store, my son is learning about work and responsibility, and he knows how to handle himself around feisty fowl. On the downside, we need to have another sit down, and discuss better vocabulary choice.

After being hit rather hard in the economic crisis, my family of four was forced to move in with my in-laws for several months. I’ll admit, I absolutely hated living with my in-laws, but I was sincerely grateful to them, even though I absolutely hated it. We just couldn’t keep food on the table and pay all the bills. We finally got back on our feet, and the first thing my husband did was buy chicks to raise, and till a garden. Mind you, we had just moved back to West Virginia after eight years in Florida near Orlando. I was a city girl, and so were my kids. I don’t worry about food now, though; I have a nice stockpile in the pantry raised by my family.

I started researching everything needed for raising chicks and how to gather eggs, and then bought every book imaginable on canning fresh foods to last through the winter. In the midst of all this learning, my husband John had all four of us out in the backyard helping him construct the chicken coop. I think that’s when my son began picking up the cuss words.

Between the four of us, each having our part to do in the scheme of things, we raise a fairly nice sized garden every summer. We currently have 18 live chickens (4 roasters made it in the freezer naturally), 3 steer calves, and 3 dogs. No we’re not rich, or crazy, we just don’t ever want to worry about making sure the kids have something decent to eat and not having to beg or borrow.

In between helping the kids care for chicks (which is a chore when they’re little, both the kids and the chicks) and building a structure to house them (just for the chicks, not for

the kids), I continued my research and learned that many, many families are beginning this new way of living, though this is nothing new. Backyard farming or gardening even has urban residents growing their own food to supplement the weekly grocery purchases. Anyone can do it; you just have to be resourceful with your space.

I enjoy having fresh veggies to cook with, fresh meats without all the carcinogens everyone is complaining about, and most importantly, I enjoy all of this with my family.

My son was only four when we began with just twelve straight run chicks. Those were his babies. He ran out every morning, sometimes before anyone else was awake, to check on them and feed them. I would catch him talking to them and petting them. And for the first few days, my six year old daughter loved them, when they were all cute and fluffy and chirping. It wore off on her much faster than it did him. She learned quickly how smelly and gross they can get.

I began explaining to them shortly after we got the chicks that these aren't pets, they are producers of eggs for us to eat, and will eventually become our food. My daughter swore to go on hunger strike, and my son just went with it and decided that if he fed them a lot of food they would grow faster and fatter. After going through a fifty pound bag of feed in just a little over a week, we had another talk.

Six years later, we're still going strong and growing our little farm a little more every year. We decided to use these experiences with our children to increase the bonds within our family, and teach many of the life lessons right on our property, instead of being glued to the television. We've learned a lot of lessons together as a family.

Our first lesson of choice for the children was the value of work. Nothing is for free and in order to reap the benefits you must put in your time and effort. Mind you, our son Zander was only four at the beginning of this little adventure, but even that is old enough to learn the value of work. At four, Zander could be taken to feed the chickens, and help water them. A small leftover Easter basket was the perfect size for him to gather eggs. Of course he needed help going into the coop and getting the eggs, but he learned to do this on his own after watching the adults.

Now that he is 9, he fully cares for the chickens himself, and earns money made from selling eggs at the local farmers market. Vivian, not wanting anything to do with the chickens, took on more responsibility in the garden and with canning. She, too, earns her allowance the same way when her produce sells at the farmers market.

One of the hardest lessons to teach is that animals depend on us for care. Of course, as time went by, chores grew tiresome, and I had to nudge the children every day to make sure our animals were fed and watered. In order to drive this home, when they did not assume their fair share of the work, I kept the money earned at the farmers market. The children weren't happy with this, but they got the point.

We still have days when I have to check on them but they are periodic. Because my daughter is twelve, I chalk up her refusal to do her chores to laziness, or, if she is just having one of those teen moments, to just plain obstinacy. I have taken away privileges, and sometimes resorted to grounding.

Before you think I'm using my kids as slaves, you need to remember that they are still dependents, and everyone has to do their bit around our home. Before you judge me too harshly, let me reassure you that they do get to do some of the things other kids do. For instance, they do get to enjoy sleep overs with friends; they spend weekends with grandparents; they play different sports year-round that Mommy has to chaperone them to. They're still just kids and still need to be able to live a kid's life. When they engage in these activities, my husband and I take care of everything then. Yes, one day my children will be grown and move out and then how will all of this work around the farm get done? I guess my husband and I'll have to roll up our sleeves and go at it.

The hardest but most necessary lesson on the farm is the circle of life. Everything dies, and everything on the farm serves a purpose. Yes this was the hardest lesson for the children in their younger years, but now I can gladly say they accept it for what it is, that it's just part of the circle of life. Their first encounter with death occurred when we got our first baby chicks. It is commonly known that when raising chickens, you order more than you need because not all of them will make it.

My son loved running to the hen house every morning to check on his babies, but about a week after getting the chicks, he found two had been pecked to death by the other chicks. He cried of course, and we ended up having a funeral service. Yup, we had to go the whole nine yards for two chicks! He stood over the hole and delivered a eulogy, saying how they had been good chicks, and that he had like them best because they had been extra fluffy. I was dying to laugh, but didn't dare do so.

This lesson has been absorbed by both children, and they now understand that not every animal is a pet. So they have adjusted their expectations and the manner in which they deal with our animals' deaths.

Now when we run into dead chicks, Zander carefully removes and buries them himself, and then he comes in later to tell me how many chicks we have left along with a report on how the rest are doing. Sometimes he even goes on to tell us how much feed is left and whether there is adequate bedding. He normally rounds it off with an assessment of how many, or which ones, we need to keep a close eye on.

This past summer we decided to add beef calves to the farm. I'll admit when John first brought them home in the trailer I thought there was no way I could tend to them too. And how on earth was I going to butcher them when they were so sweet and innocent looking. They followed us everywhere like little puppies, and Vivian just fell in love with them.

But I was determined to remain detached and to condition myself to simply look at them as walking T-bones. I went ahead and named them so as to know which one was which. So we wound up with Filet who is black and white, Mignon who's solid black, and (yum yum) Rib Eye who is white with some black spots.

The kids aren't as attached to the calves now as they were at first because the calves have grown quickly and have grown up to become bullies. Still, Vivian wanted to take on the cows as her responsibility.

At first, things were fairly easy, though extremely time consuming. They had to be fed three milk bottles three times a day. Vivian hung in there like a trooper though, and the day finally came that the calves were eating hay and grain good.

We are glad we bought Fritzi, a German shepherd a couple years back, because she goes into the pen with Vivian when she has to feed and water these 200 pound beasts. Vivian at twelve isn't very big for her age, but has learned how to deal with these cantankerous animals, and could do it alone but feels better when Fritzi is with her. I never let her care for them in my absence because I got run over myself not long ago. Vivian just has a better rapport with them, I guess.

Our animals don't know it but they all serve a purpose. Chickens and cows are for meat and the dogs are here to protect the farm.

So now, the hardest but most necessary lesson of all, butchering. Vivian will have nothing to do with this of course. My first try at butchering chickens myself went horribly wrong, and it took nearly 3 hours for one hen. Experienced butchers can dress a hen fully in just under 20 minutes. I'm getting much better, and Vivian moves further away every time. Zander is always completely gung ho for the experience. Now hold it there, he ain't no axe murderer in training, nor is he weird or excited about killing an innocent animal. He's just excited about finally having the fresh meats we have talked about since spring and throughout the summer. He's excited that he has done something meaningful for the family, he has provided it food.

Everyone in our family has learned to deal with a broody hen, an overprotective rooster, and a cantankerous steer. My daughter is expert at canning homemade slaw, and my son is doing so well with his hens that some days we bring in over two dozen eggs. We know how to get slugs out of the garden, and can teach others about the best planting times for certain veggies. Every morning, they brief us on how the animals are doing, how much feed is left, and what they did with the animals.

One day it will all be left to my husband and me, but for now, the kids are learning important lessons, and we have extra excuses to spend time together and enjoy almost every minute of it. Now we have a nice stash of food saved for the tough times. We

often give some to help neighbors and friends in need, and the kids love this; they feel a great sense of pride when they can share.

I can proudly say that I enjoy spending a day in the garden with my children having a good time pulling the god awful weeds. The best lesson we all learned, though, is that any work done on the farm is more fun when it is done together as a family.