

IT'S A TREND that's taking root in urban spaces across the country. From lush community gardens in once vacant lots to backyard chicken coops and rooftop beekeeping—urban farming is coming back in a big way. And the green spaces cropping up throughout Bakersfield have already improved the landscape.

RANCH Style

By Mandy Wallace

WHAT'S FUELING THE TREND? Knowing where your food comes from and how healthy it is motivates many backyard farmers. **Brandy Gardner** is a Kern County resident who keeps a variety of livestock on her property—an impressive range of chickens, ducks, geese, pigs, and pygmy goats. She says, when it comes to meat and eggs from your backyard, “the knowledge of what’s going into them, that you’re going to be putting back into your body, is huge.”

High food costs and declining quality also fuel the trend. “I’ve noticed that name brand quality chicken breasts are not tasting as good anymore,” Gardner says. While the best chicken you’ve ever eaten, according to Gardner, takes only eight weeks to raise. “So why not do it yourself?”

In the end, many urban farmers keep livestock because it’s fun. “It’s exciting to go out every day to collect eggs,” says **Kelsey Sears**. Sears teaches classes for **Future Farmers of America** (FFA) through North High School. And for her, tending animals is as much about stress relief as it is about quality food. “If I was having a bad day, and I can come home and take care of my livestock, that’s a relaxing experience for me.”

For many would-be urban farmers, potential legal and zoning issues curb the appeal. The good news is, navigating zoning issues is easier these days than you might think. That’s because zoning organizations know they have a lot to keep up with in the shifting urban farming trend. It’s good for the community. And Bakersfield is one that has kept up with the times, adopting revisions to the zoning ordinance that welcome urban



Knowing where your food comes from is one of the driving forces behind the recent surge in urban farming.

farms, especially community gardens in urban spaces.

Many residents are surprised to find out that even smaller residential properties in and around Bakersfield allow for a variety of livestock.

Cows are probably overkill for many urban farmers. It’s no surprise that zoning laws are tougher on large animals, and cows produce more milk in a day than most families can use in a month. Goats and pigs can run into zoning issues, too, depending on where you live. But chickens, small birds like pigeons and quail, and rabbits are a good start for most new urban farmers.

Chris Mynk is a division chief for the Kern County Planning and Natural Resources Department. His group manages zoning issues that keep residents happy and businesses running smoothly. And he has a few tips for urban farmers in and around Bakersfield. His first tip? The more rural the area, the more open they are to >>

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animal keeping. Still, many of the more urban areas in and around Bakersfield expect their neighbors to have animals. Smaller animals like chickens and rabbits are the easiest to start with.

According to Mynk, most single family and estate zones allow up to twelve chickens or rabbits and up to forty pigeons. These animals are also easier to care for and cost less for new urban farmers to try out.

If you live in areas like Greenacres, Lamont, and even some parts of Rosedale and Oildale, you have a few more options when it comes to keeping livestock. Areas like these outside of the Bakersfield City limits tend to welcome the larger animals like cattle, sheep, and pigs.

“The best way to find out if a specific property is zoned for large animal keeping is to look for the RS (residential suburban) combining district,” says Mynk. “Zoning that allows for single family residential uses and large animals will look like E(1/4) RS up to E(20) RS.”

If that’s confusing, a good rule of thumb is that one large animal is allowed for each quarter acre of land. But, it’s best to call the City or County to double check the rules for your specific community. Because, as Mynk is the first to admit, zoning differs so greatly throughout Bakersfield and surrounding areas.

Once you have zoning out of the way, there are a few best practices for anyone ready to get started.

Gardner advises new urban farmers to do their research first and to test themselves with one animal at a time. Chickens are a good start for the urban setting because they’re easy to care for, the coops and feed come with a smaller investment, and many residential homes are zoned for them. They also come in a wide variety, with different egg colors and sizes that can be fun for kids.

Rabbits are another easy place to start. Sears says they don’t do well with heat, so pack their spaces with frozen water bottles or bring them indoors for the summer. This is especially important for Bakersfield weather. And bonus! Rabbits can be potty trained, which means less maintenance even when you keep them in the house.

Maintaining goats and pigs is still on the easier side. But it’s also where many Bakersfield residents will hit zoning issues. And larger animals like these require vet care, so this is a tier better left for when you have more experience. Still if you’re cleared for them and comfortable with the additional medical needs, pigs are surprisingly clean animals. Gardner even lets hers into the house.

Goats provide a manageable amount of milk for families. Urban sized varieties, like the Nigerian Dwarf and Pygmy, produce



an average of two quarts of milk daily. That’s plenty for most families who want to make butter, sour cream, and cheese. Sears says goats are hardy, but make sure you build housing strong enough to keep them. “Goats are very smart. They’re sort of escape artists. They can climb and jump and work latches,” she says.

Research is important since each animal type comes with its own feeding and medical needs. Some things you’ll learn with experience, but like Gardner says, research means saving time “not reinventing the wheel or making the same mistakes as other people.” Of course, there’s plenty of information online that can get you started. But talk to people you know who keep animals too. Both Gardner and Sears point to local feed and supply stores for the information, community spirit, and classes on animal keeping that many urban farmers find invaluable.

Starting slow with just one animal type at a time can save time, money, and energy too because not all animals may be a good fit. Rabbits are likely to devour your produce before you can harvest it, for example. Knowing what type of animal needs what care ahead of time can head off wasted investments.

With a little research and starting slow, you’re more likely to take full advantage of the joys of backyard farming. Even the challenges in most cases can turn into a positive. For many would-be urban farmers, one of the biggest fears about getting started is how neighbors might react to the potential smell and mess that animals can bring to an urban setting. Urban living means closer neighbors, which makes odors and noise harder to hide. It helps if you live in an area where residents expect their neighbors to have animals. But even if you don’t, there are a few easy ways to head off potential negative reactions.

Sears advises urban farmers to build good relationships with neighbors. That made it easier to meet challenges when she brought home a baby goat that had lost its mom. She says her neighbors “knew to expect a little bit of noise and a little bit of smell,” because she let them know ahead of time that the goat would be there. She even invited her neighbors and their kids over to bottle feed the baby goat, which gave the kids an exciting new experience and brought the neighbors closer.

Another tip from Sears is to “keep the environment super clean.” That will cut down on odors and the critters that urban farms tend to attract, which will keep the neighbors happy. And her last tip is especially helpful. She says to feed your livestock at set times. This keeps them quieter at non-feeding times and cuts down on noise throughout the day. So whether you keep a small coop or embrace the full homestead, it’s never been easier to transform your empty urban space into that lush (and delicious) backyard oasis where the chickens come home to roost.

Taking care of animals can help kids learn valuable skills.

