

Here is where Ardis Eckel profiles women living outside the norm. Ardis, who is retired, was a beautician for over 30 years. She lives in a tiny Idaho burg bordered by rushing water, nestled at the foot of a pine-studded mountain. Being a beautician is about more than fixing hair. It's about listening to women's stories.

This issue, Ardis introduces you to Dyan Twining, owner of Urban Coop Company in Dripping Springs, Texas. Dyan's idea to market chicken coops grew from her children's 4-H program involvement.

"Caring about and for different kinds of animals opened the conversation to food production and where our food comes from," she says, "and about the supply chain that is involved in providing food for the world. We talked about how, with chickens, you didn't need 10 acres to produce food for your family. And about the number of eggs that aren't being shipped in a truck because they are being produced in someone's backyard."

And that's how Dyan Twining came to make the houses that house the chickens that lay the eggs that feed their corner of the world.





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Backyard Chicken Ranching

by Ardis Eckel



"Coops are a big part of getting the most joy out of backyard chicken ranching," says Dyan Twining, "protecting your girls, keeping them healthy, and minimizing the work it takes. At Urban Coop Company, we're just as passionate as you are about giving your hens the best home possible, and our designs and quality are absolutely second to none."

Dyan and her husband, Montie, design, manufacture, and sell backyard coops in Dripping Springs, Texas. "It's a family affair," says Dyan. From the initial conception to the day-to-day operations, everyone on the ranch plays an important part. With more

than a dozen horses at times and several hundred chickens, the Twinings stay pretty busy keeping up with their "extended" family and four children.

Oldest daughter Courtney is grown and gone from home. But twin 12-year-old daughters Cassandra and Olivia and 8-year-old son Nathan are involved with the company every day. Cassandra and Olivia also have their own little business, Huevos Locos, selling hatching eggs, chicks, and started pullets. They've also recently branched out into incubator rentals.

The idea for building chicken coops hatched in 2012, when Dyan and

Montie were looking for a new business model, something that would make them more self-reliant, involve the family, and fill a niche in the personal food-production movement.

"I said we should build cute chicken coops," Dyan remembers. And she knew exactly what she was flapping her feathers about. "When we moved to the country several years ago, we started acquiring farm animals, including chickens, and really enjoyed interacting with them. I was soon known as the local chicken lady. And more than once, people would say, 'I'd like to have chickens, but I don't know how to go about it.'"

"I realized what they were really saying was that they didn't know how they would house their hens, especially if they lived in town."

The couple's market research showed that functional, affordable, and shippable chicken coops were still as scarce as hens' teeth. So Montie, who also owns a construction company, began drawing up plans.

Dyan began rejecting them. "Not cute enough," she'd say. "If you're going to have chickens in your backyard and it backs up to the neighbor's yard, that coop has to be attractive."

Montie listened. And once they agreed on a plan, they set out to make it something to crow about. "We met several times with the poultry

department of Texas A & M University," Dyan remembers. "We picked their brains and got their blessings on our designs. Then we worked with FedEx to formulate the most cost-efficient shipping parameters."

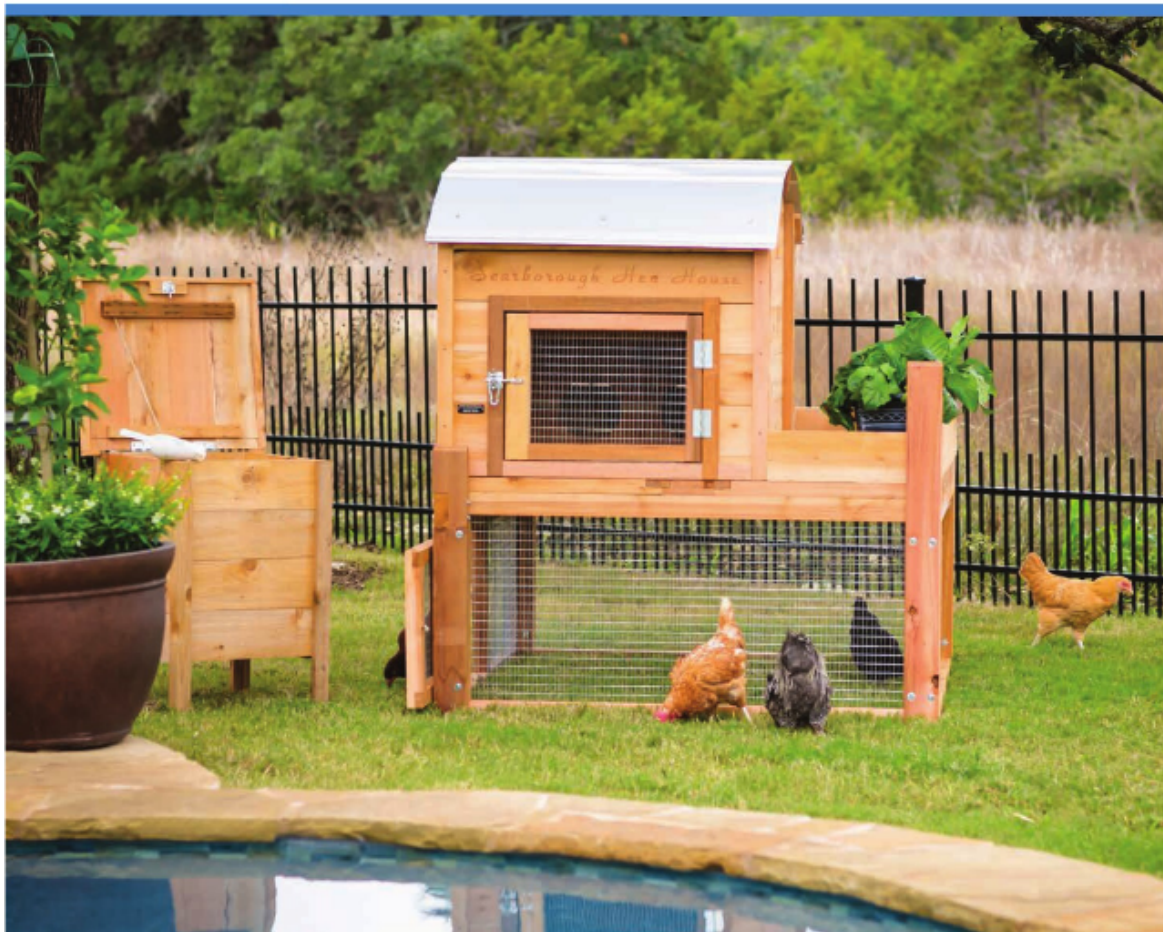
The Twinings chose building materials that would be chicken-friendly, weather-hardy, and heavy-duty. Then they built prototypes that they still use themselves. Now they are more than scratching out a living selling two terrific trademarked henhouses, the Round-top Backyard Chicken Coop and the Belfry Mobile Backyard Chicken Coop. There are great photos and loads of information on their website, UrbanCoopCompany.com.

The larger of the two, the stationary Round-top, weighs about 230 pounds

and houses 6–10 chickens. The portable Belfry weighs about 90 pounds and houses up to four chickens. Both coops are shippable and easy to assemble. "Sometimes," Dyan says, "when a local buys here, my girls assemble the coop with just a drill and hammer."

The coops are handcrafted from western red cedar, so they can withstand outside weather without chemical treatment. The predator-proof, 16-gauge welded wire is galvanized steel. Holes are pre-drilled. Instructions are included. And for those who would rather, "white glove" assembly service can be arranged.

Accessories include a run extension and gravity-fed feeders and waterers. (continued)



(continued from p. 39)

And some customers have one board engraved with something personal, like the owner's name or the names of the hens that live there.

Once the coop is occupied, the clever Roost-over-Run trademarked design offers multiple benefits. "The rounded updraft ventilated roost, where the chickens sleep, ensures respiratory health and safety," Dyan explains. "Chickens are cold-hardy as long as they can get out of the wind and keep dry, and the sheltered roost rungs provide for that. They also breathe a lot and poop a lot, and that makes a lot of moisture, so the high ventilation holes are important for air circulation."

For owners, the nesting boxes—set in the darkest part of the coop—are accessible from the outside for convenient egg gathering. And cleaning is easy, too.

The Twinings started production in the spring of 2013. "Growth is exceeding our expectations," Dyan says. "Word of mouth and Internet advertising are paying off. But the very best part of this business is that we can work it as a family. We homeschool our children, and this business has become part of their education. When I do local coop deliveries, I take my kids with me. They meet a lot of different people. People come here to buy chickens or coops and my kids teach them how to hold hens, how to care for them, and how to keep them healthy."

"Cassandra and Olivia started out selling eggs. They saved their profits and purchased incubators. Now they rent out incubators to schools and people who want to see chickens hatch. Nathan collects scrap lumber for the recycle bin. And when someone comes to look at chickens, he's our number-one chicken wrangler."

It's clear as feathers on a hen that operating Urban Coop Company has brought the best bonuses of a family business home to roost.



TESTIMONIALS

One Urban Coop Company customer visited Dyan's farm to purchase a coop because he also wanted to learn more about chickens while he was there. "On his visit, he met our son, who we adopted from Haiti four years ago," Dyan says. "Over the summer, this man purchased five more chicken coops and had them shipped to a village in Haiti to give the villagers a way to produce food. A group from his church then went to the village, set up the coops, and taught the locals about caring for chickens."

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"Our school was all-a-buzz yesterday about our new Urban Chicken Coop! Thank you so much for helping us to realize our dream of yet another outdoor classroom on our campus!"

— Oak Hill Elementary School