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All the buzz: Learning how to tend to bees and chickens

Coops and hive boxes popped up everywhere during the pandemic. So post-vaccination, I decided to get my gloves dirty with a ‘sustainable living experience’

By **Megan Lisagor Stoessel** Globe correspondent, Updated May 11, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Chicken-keeping class at Miraval Berkshires with instructor Tess Fedell. MEGAN LISAGOR STOESSELL

When I read that Gen Z had shamed millennials on TikTok for wearing skinny jeans, it didn't phase me or my fellow soccer moms. I laugh-cried to think we'd care about denim during days like these, refusing to be

canceled in my pajama sweats. Out here in the rural suburbs, or what I like to call the country, we're shopping online, but not for pants. We're busy buying gloves and veils.

Not because we've embraced the "Bridgerton"-inspired fashion that's supposedly stylish. It's because we've gotten into bee- and chicken-keeping. For adults of a certain age, these are the trends occupying our time. I can't go for a run in Sherborn without passing a new coop or hive box. Add a maple tap, and you have the town trifecta.

And Sherbs isn't alone. During the pandemic, there's been a surge in locals raising backyard bees and chickens. "The numbers are most definitely on the rise," Mary Duane, president of the Massachusetts Beekeepers Association, said of enrollment in area schools. "We're seeing a boost now because people are home."

Chickens are a similar story, according to Christy Bassett of the Northeast Organic Farming Association's Massachusetts chapter. "Last year with the pandemic, people tested out the waters with gardens, and it's like, 'What's the next step?' They realized the more they could grow themselves, the better. Food is probably the primary driver."

I understood the appeal, having avoided the grocery store for months. There was just one problem. I have the opposite of a green thumb, forget tending animals. I've been content to live vicariously through a friend who's a master gardener. When she gifts me stalks of rhubarb, I display them on the kitchen counter like a mommy influencer arranging a photo

shoot.

This spring I wanted to move beyond aspiration, to get my own gloves dirty. Enter Miraval Berkshires in Lenox, which I noticed was running both bee- and chicken-keeping classes while planning a post-vaccination trip. I wondered whether exploring these activities at a wellness resort was like ordering avocado toast at Starbucks (not the right place) but decided it was a way to test the waters myself.

Just over two hours from Boston, Miraval offers these “sustainable living experiences” to overnight guests and those visiting on a day pass for an added fee. But you can’t really put a price on artisanal honey (\$150) and fresh eggs (\$45). I arrived on a brisk May morning and waited for a white van to whisk me to my introductory workshop as women in Hoka sneakers and Lululemon talked about organizing their children’s closets.



Beekeeping class with instructor Felisha "Flee" Pulley. MEGAN LISAGOR STOESSELL

They were headed elsewhere. My group consisted of a 30-something couple in hiking boots celebrating their second wedding anniversary and our instructor, Felisha “Flee” Pulley, who studied beekeeping at Penn State. “The first year you’re going to make a lot of mistakes,” said Pulley, walking us to the apiary. “That’s OK. They’re just lessons.”

That day our lessons shifted inside due to the cold weather, where we delved further into the types of bees and their life cycles. “Everything they do is to benefit the next generation,” explained Pulley, a tattooed mom of two. “They are the world’s best preppers. It took a pandemic for us to be like, ‘Maybe we should have some extra toilet paper.’ The bees were way ahead of us.”

As if prepping for doom wasn’t enough incentive, we finished with a honey tasting, applying the color grading system to our samples. It was satisfying to learn something new after so much sameness, though I wasn’t quite ready to order bees. My classmates seemed tempted to do so back in Philadelphia, and Pulley recommended finding a course and a mentor.

With a wave goodbye, I joined a middle-aged woman from Brooklyn for my chicken-keeping class down the hall. Like me, she was curious but uncommitted. “My husband calls it the gateway drug to farming,” our teacher, Tess Fedell, said encouragingly. “It’s really easy.” Fedell, who has her own backyard brood, covered logistics related to housing, fencing, and breeds.



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From there, the focus shifted to feeding and collecting eggs. We helped with the latter, filling a basket as chickens roamed free at our feet. “Once you get hooked on good eggs, it’s hard to go back,” Fedell added. “It really is an easy homesteading task and makes people feel more connected to their food.”

I felt more connected to my brain, at least, and more excited about the garden bed my husband had recently ordered, which seemed like a good gateway for us. It turned out Miraval was the right place to explore — and to recharge. Following a spa treatment and sleep seminar, I changed into my mom jeans for dinner. For the record, the kind that’s back in style.

If you go . . .

Miraval Berkshires runs bee- and chicken-keeping classes as part of its “sustainable living experiences.” Like those activities, wellness travel is having a moment. Check the calendar online and call for reservations. 55 Lee Road, Lenox. 800-232-3969, miravalberkshires.com.