

OPINION

Planting hope amid the coronavirus

I had come looking for vegetable seeds as I was planning to expand my garden this year, then I saw the chicks.

By **Leila Philip** Updated May 2, 2020, 3:00 a.m.



Raising chickens has become popular during the coronavirus pandemic. STEVE GRIFFIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“I’d avoid anything with a puff on its head,” said the store attendant, “they can’t see what’s coming at them . . . they’re literally sitting ducks.” I nodded, thinking of the

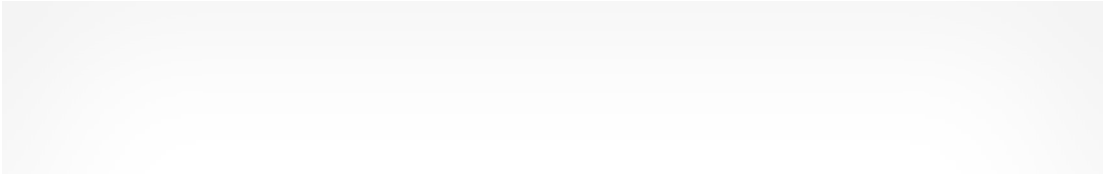
raccoon that had recently moved into our garage and the hawks that regularly flew over.

We were standing by a row of enormous stock tanks, each filled with hundreds of baby chicks, scratching and chirping and for sale. One downy yellow chick had climbed up onto the feeder tray and was flapping her impossibly cute wings, peeping like a tiny flute. What would he recommend for my starter flock? Sapphire Gems, Buff Orpingtons, Silver-laced Wyandotte, Ameracauna. There were so many to choose from. Six hundred chicks had arrived in the store that morning, the third delivery that week. I had come looking for vegetable seeds, since I was planning to expand my garden this year. Then I saw the chicks. A starter flock of six hens — once they were grown, in 16 weeks — should lay about 10 eggs a day, just over five dozen a week. I could take eggs off my shopping list.

“We can’t keep up,” said the store manager. “The back-to-basics movement has always been big in this area, but now we are seeing sales way up in chicks, garden supplies, canning, hunting. Maybe people skipped a season in the past, but not this year.”

Sales in my local store mirrored what was happening on a national level. In addition to buying guns and adopting puppies in response to COVID-19, Americans were shopping for seeds and chicks to return to gardening and backyard chicken farming. “I think people are worried about food security, sure,” said Dennis Jensen, from the store’s corporate office. “We’ve sold four times the usual number of chicks already. People want to get outside and get away from it all. . . . None of us knows how this is going to end up.”

ADVERTISING



COVID-19 has made vividly real to Americans the dangers of our food production system, which relies on a handful of food producers. It has disrupted distribution to the extent that [farmers across the country are destroying produce and milk](#) that they can no longer get to customers before it rots or spoils. Millions of pigs and chickens are being euthanized. Last week, the nation's three largest [pork and beef processing plants closed](#) 15 of their plants due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

As a result, [US beef and pork production is down 25 percent](#) and more closures are pending. The USDA estimates that there is enough frozen meat in the system to feed Americans for now but predicts a meat shortage. Trump ordered meatpacking plants essential, but keeping them open, especially since worker protections were not made mandatory, will be a challenge if workers continue to die.

For people like me, fortunate to still be employed, empty produce shelves and meat quotas represent an inconvenience. But this is not the case for millions of Americans. According to the [US Department of Agriculture's September 2019 hunger report](#), an estimated 37 million people were food insecure in the United States. With job losses now at a staggering 30 million, that number has already increased.

Will COVID-19 make farmers of us all? Probably not. One of the biggest lessons we have learned from the coronavirus pandemic is just how interconnected we truly are. Visions of self-sufficiency in our complicated 21st-century world are an illusion. Even if I added chicken farming to my plan of eating mostly from my garden, I would be relying on shipments of grain to feed my hens. Most important, no amount of food independence can protect me or my family from a virus like COVID-19 during a pandemic.

But the national trend toward farming is a good thing. Whether you live in the city, the suburbs, or the country, you can grow vegetables or raise berries and fruit. Backyard,

rooftop, terrace, patio, public park, street lot, and community gardening is something we can do that is good for the planet and good for our mental health. Raising our own food reconnects us to our most elemental relationship — the natural world as a source of sustenance. Once we experience directly the miracle of how the planet feeds us, we can begin to make better choices about how to live on it in sustainable ways. I have decided not to raise chicks — this year. But I'll be planting plenty of seeds, each one an act of faith.

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