

CHICKENS LOVE SOGGY BREAD, WORMS LOVE MELON RINDS, DOGS LOVE PEOPLE FOOD (AND THINGS WE CAN'T ABIDE)

By CAROL COSTON, OP

At Santuario Sisterfarm, we have a special affection and respect for these very diverse creatures that contribute so much to the web of life. The chickens make their contributions noisily; the worms go about their work in complete silence; the dogs respond to life with unbridled enthusiasm. Global and national problems fade away with local greetings characterized by vigorous tail-wagging, dancing on skinny hind legs, attempted kisses.

Every week we pick up buckets of vegetable peels, stale bread, and melon rinds from the kitchen at Oblate Renewal Center in San Antonio. When the chickens see me coming, they rush to the gate, thrilled in anticipation of eating limp lettuce or soggy bread; I have to shuffle in, so as not to step on them. The worms are more muted in their appreciation. But a few days after I add a layer of thick melon rinds to the top of their beds, I find a mass of wriggling worms

under paper-thin rinds—a close-knit community of eaters and poopers. Their “castings” are a perfect form of plant food, a concentrated soil amendment that also aerates the soil and retains moisture. We use worm castings in potting soil, in garden beds, and to make worm tea, which we use as a foliar spray—all to produce healthy fruits and vegetables.

The chickens are a diverse lot: Ameraucanas lay pastel eggs, Anconas white eggs, and Rhode Island Reds brown eggs. Two Japanese bantams, one black and one white—that we added to the flock as future layers—turned out, alas, to be roosters. What they lack in supplying eggs they provide in amusement, as they throw out their little chests and crow an octave higher than the other roosters—or as they attempt to achieve non-celibate status with much-larger hens that will have no part in it.

Our canines, Martín de Porres and Rosalima, are



gifts from Victor Fernández, Santuario Sisterfarm's Farm Manager. Martín is a black 14-pound Chihuahua/Rat Terrier mix, the latter having snuck into the sperm bank. Rosalima, named in honor of St. Rose of Lima, is all Chihuahua, white and half the size. Rosalima's first social event, upon arriving two years ago as a six-week old puppy, was a gathering of Adrian Dominican Sisters. It was winter and she was cold, so different women would tuck her under their sweatshirts for warmth. Every time I looked up during the meeting, I saw another pregnant-looking nun!

Martín and Rosalima are generally loving and good natured, but their reptilian brains can kick in when it comes to food. On a recent walk, Martín snatched up a set of feathers and cartilage from a dead bird and became instantly snarly and proprietary when I tried to take them. I feel sure he would have bitten my hand, if it hadn't meant loosening his grip on the precious feathers.

We're not sure which of Rosalima's evolutionary instincts are at play when we take walks and she sprints wildly and pugnaciously toward grazing cattle, seemingly unconscious of the difference in size between herself and Texas Longhorns. She is also proprietary about our country road, which we walk daily. She gets really annoyed if anyone else, walker, car, or truck, dares to pass by. Much high-pitched barking and lurching on the extension leash ensues. We call her the "Sheriff of Hein Road." Both dogs have a contemplative side as well, however. They sit on our laps every morning for quiet periods of prayer, reflection, and reading.

How much poorer our lives would be without such creatures. The dogs help us to live in the present moment and to take delight in the simplest of activities.

When I sit with the chickens and observe their contented clucking and wide-range scratching, I am so grateful that we can provide them this space and healthy food, in contrast to factory-raised chickens. Similarly, I am happy we recycle food scraps to the chickens or the worms, instead of to land-fills. Perhaps we can learn from the worms to give back to Earth as much or more than we took from Her.

**"Yahweh,
what variety you have created,
arranging everything so wisely."**

~ Psalm 104: 24

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