

Country Heaven in the City

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
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The Farm offers a reality check on pigs as pets



Ever since reading *Charlotte's Web* when I was nine, I've been crazy for pigs. But in Miami, where can I go to get my "pig fix"? I find it at the only inner-city farm in town: Earth-N-Us Farm.

Located in Little Haiti, Earth-N-Us Farm -- aka the Farm -- is a rustic oasis, lush with butterfly plants, giant gumbo limbo, Florida almond trees, and vegetable gardens. It's been owned and operated for 40 years by Ray Chasser, who greets the *BT* bare-footed, wearing a Bernie Sanders T-shirt, shorts, and a black bandana that holds back his wiry gray mane. Both he and wife, Leslie, have a grounded gentleness about them.

The 63-year-old Chasser rises at 5:30, well after the rooster's call, and waits for daylight to tend to chores. "Feeding the animals each morning takes me about 45 minutes," he says, "and manure is collected once a week for compost."

That may sound easy to city folks who haven't experienced life on a working farm, where there are always fences to mend. He now employs part-time farm help and a full-time carpenter.

Most of the animals on the Farm are rescues, except for those born there, like the chicks hatched from eggs and being raised right now under heat lamps. A duck was brought in because it was causing damage to a golf course. One of several tortoises spent years growing bigger and bigger in a basement before it was given a new life here.

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Chasser also tends to a community cat colony, which is worrisome to him due to their predatory behavior with lizards and birds, as well as the expense of feeding them. "It costs \$600 a month to feed the turtles, tortoises, and cats," he explains, which is why he's had to turn down requests to take in more cats.

One piglet he acquired was spared from a python squeeze at Parrot Jungle, he says. Another just wandered into his compound and never left. Most of these pigs started out as people's house pets but quickly outgrew their welcome.

Seven of the eight pigs Chasser cares for are Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, erroneously believed by many to stay miniature. Males can grow to over 400 pounds -- much too large for indoor living.

Chasser is adamant: "Parrots and pigs should never be house pets." Even actor George Clooney, who gave his 300-pound pot-bellied pig, Max, the run of the house for 18 years, told CBS in a 2012 interview: "Pigs are really smart, but they're work, because they'll destroy everything if you let them."

Chasser built an outdoor aviary for parrots that currently holds two. He's got a pond for koi, plus turtles, goats, turkeys, bees, and one emu -- he's looking for another emu to keep it company. There's even a garden where he raises earthworms and uses their castings to nourish his compost.

"Pigs are like dogs. They can live 10 to 20 years," says Chasser. Jezebel, a large sow, oinks contently, and Baby, Chasser's smallest pig, weighing about 150 pounds, wags its tail when Chasser enters their shaded, sand-filled corral. They share the space with the turkeys, the emu, and the duck. The pigs love to be petted while Chasser speaks sweetly to them.

Pedro and Daddy Warbucks have tusks, which are male canines. Daddy Warbucks has been known to be aggressive on occasion with farm help, so visitors are only allowed to interact with the pigs through the fencing. Three of the pigs are so large they don't want to get up unless it's to eat or drink. "That's why I let the turkeys in here," admits Chasser. "They'll pester the pigs

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and that's the only exercise those pigs get." He never lets the harassment get out of hand.

He loves all the animals but says he's most fond of the pigs and goats. "Pigs are even more affectionate than goats," he adds.

Pigs at the Farm are fed a mixture of Purina Pig Chow, Goat Chow, scratch (made from corn and seeds), and table scraps. Sometimes people drop off food, including bacon and ham, which Ray can't bring himself to feed to the pigs; instead, he gives that to the cats. He's trying to get some of the heavier pigs to lose a little weight.

No animals here are sold or eaten, according to Chasser, who's a vegan. Only parrots are sometimes found forever homes. Eggs are fed back to farm animals, but there aren't many now since he lost 25 hens when Hurricane Irma spurred an influx of raccoons within the compound (he has them live-trapped and relocated).

Chasser says he's been offered \$3 million for his two-and-a-half-acre property (he also owns one acre of vegetable gardens across the street), but his pigs can sleep well at night knowing that the Farm is just not for sale.

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