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HOME & REAL ESTATE



Some Place Like Home *Dave Milano*

It Takes a (Roach) Village

Pictured is a Madagascar Hissing Cockroach (MHC)—a house pet, in a glass tank in son Patrick's bedroom.

Patrick finds MHCs to be, by certain limited standards, excellent pets. They are hearty, interesting in a raw and rudimentary way, and require very little care—at most a minor mission that Patrick has whittled down to the finest possible nib. (“Did you remember to feed your roaches?” Yup! Did that just last week!”) His bugs have grown, reproduced, and by all signs lived full and happy cockroach lives on little more than water, warmth, and an occasional morsel of garbage.

MHCs are impressively large—up to three inches long fully grown—so naturally some of their biggest fans are in Hollywood. MHCs have had starring roles in several great movies you've never heard of, most notably *Bug*, which portrayed them as intelligent pyromaniacs. We doubt that MHCs are either of those things, but can say unequivocally that, as their name declares, they hiss. Slide your finger along one and it sizzles like a grilled steak. Entomologists say it's a form of communication, and perhaps a defense mechanism. Fun, right? Okay, well, fun or not, that's about the pinnacle of entertainment with MHCs.

Some people sniff that reflexive hissing is not the sort of engagement they want from their house pets. Dedicated bug owners counter that cockroach hissing is equivalent, roughly, to their care requirements. And besides, when the family dog makes his last trip outdoors at bedtime, rolls in something dead and then happily romps back into the living room, cockroach minimalism can suddenly become downright agreeable.

Patrick found MHCs appealing right from the start, after a young acquaintance showed off his own colony. At the time the young man had, umm, unanticipated extras. A deal was struck immediately. “Shall we drop by sometime to get them?” we asked.

“Oh, no need,” said the boy's mother. “I'll be happy to deliver them. Are you busy right now?”

The bugs arrived in a plastic tub with a very short list of instructions: feed fruits, vegetables, and an occasional chunk of dry dog food; fill their water bowl with gravel so

they don't drown; keep them warm; make sure the tank lid is tight (or at least put a good smear of grease on the inner edge of the tank top because MHCs have tiny pads on their feet, if they have feet, that would otherwise allow them to climb up the glass). That was about it. Easy. No problem. In no time at all Patrick became a successful cockroach breeder.

We passed that concise cockroach catechism to a friend who, in bold defiance of his wife's wishes, started his own colony by purchasing five roaches from Patrick's growing family. He set up a nice little MHC village, dutifully locked the bugs in, and put the tank next to a radiator. In short order the tank glass cracked, setting the inmates free and inducing mad searches through the house, liberally mixed with grumbling and glaring from the wife. Only the latter had any measurable effect—the roaches are still on the lam. (Under normal circumstances such an event might damage a marriage, but in this case the couple takes consolation in the fact that MHCs grow so large that they eventually run out of hiding places.)

Patrick has maintained his roach colony (without mishaps) now for four years, and though I was a skeptical roach grandfather at first, I've come around now to thinking that MHCs do make fair house pets. Want any?

Dave Milano is a former suburbanite turned part-time Tioga County farmer. You can contact him at someplacelikehome@mountainhomemag.com. See his blog at www.mundanedaily.com.



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