
Backyard Poultry

Many gardeners live in rural areas with space (and zoning) that can support small poultry flocks. Poultry can benefit gardeners in several ways: 1) food from eggs and/or meat; 2) weed control; 3) insect/snail/slug control; and 4) nutrient-rich manure that can be composted or used as a garden soil amendment. Beside these benefits, home food production is fun, educational, and rewarding. Poultry will also attract predators and must be protected from raccoons, skunks, coyotes, bobcats, birds of prey, and neighbor's dogs. If you are thinking of raising some poultry, now is a good time to build facilities prior to acquiring a spring flock.

For gardening and manure production, a small flock of chickens is ideal. Manure can be collected inside the pen and the night roosting area (chicken house). Free ranging chickens also fertilize the area, but it's difficult to collect the manure. Chicken manure contains a good balance of essential plant nutrients. On average, it will have about 1 to 2% nitrogen, 1 to 2% phosphorus, and 1% potassium. If chicken manure is directly incorporated into soil, planting should be delayed for one or two months. If composted, the nitrogen in the manure will enhance biological activity and consequent breakdown of other materials.

An egg-producing chicken flock should be replaced every three or so years to maintain production levels. Buy chicks from reputable sources. Local feed stores usually get chicks in early spring. However, catalogs ship day-old chicks via air mail through summer and into fall. Some suppliers will determine sex of the chicks (with about 95% or greater reliability) which generally costs a little more. By the way, you do not need a rooster to produce eggs. In fact, the absence of roosters may be greatly appreciated by your neighbors (and is mandatory in most municipalities). Young chicks need lots of care during the first few weeks and you should be prepared for them when they arrive. Reputable suppliers will provide feeding and care instructions.

The smaller the hen, the more efficient her production which also lowers your feed cost per dozen eggs. Leghorns and sex-link crosses have been developed for egg production and disease resistance. Most pullets come into egg production at 20 to 24 weeks of age. You can expect to get about a dozen eggs from each four to five pounds of feed.

My wife and I have had several chicken flocks. Breeds we prefer for egg production include Americanas, sex links, Barred Rocks, and Rhode Island Reds (we've tried many others). We use pine shavings or shredded paper as bedding inside the chicken house and compost this with our other garden and household waste. We also rake out the pen and compost the manure we collect.

Our chickens free-range about a third of the time in our fenced yard and are shut in each night to protect them from predators. Their coop area is completely enclosed by poultry wire and we've never lost a bird in this enclosure. Over the years, chickens have been killed while free ranging in our fenced yard. Our vegetable garden is also fenced to exclude the chickens, but they have access to the entire garden perimeter. I like to think this arrangement helps control insects and weeds.

Turkeys are great for meat production and are usually processed when they are 20 to 30 weeks old. Young turkeys need a little additional coaxing to get them to eat and drink. Guinea fowl are considered superior to chickens for garden insect control but are also elusive and can fly. Ducks and geese are easy to raise and grow very fast. By the time they are 5 or 6 weeks old they will eat lots of fresh green grass if it is available. Swimming water is not necessary, but fresh drinking water must always be available for any poultry species.

Before starting a flock, you should be prepared with a predator-proof coop/run and look into local zoning ordinances and homeowners association rules to determine whether your community allows backyard poultry



Poultry waterer is on a heated base which prevents freezing during winter months (photo by Jeff Schalau, University of Arizona).



Backyard poultry flocks enjoy fresh garden produce and kitchen scraps which are accessible in the compost pile. This provides them with a diverse and nutritious diet. They also assist in turning the compost (photo by Jeff Schalau, University of Arizona).

Additional Resources:

University of Arizona Yavapai County Cooperative Extension
[Yavapai County Poultry Regulations, by Community](#)

Utah State University Extension
[Basics for Raising Backyard Chickens](#)

University of Minnesota Extension
[Backyard Chicken Basics,](#)

[BackYardChickens.com](#), A Commercial Site with Reputable Information

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