

# Chickens in the Garden

As well as being pets, chickens would have to be considered as also having a purpose. They scratch and forage, they fertilize, they produce eggs and act as guardians in the garden – and all this just comes naturally to them. Imagine if we could harness this activity and work with our hens to create a self-sustaining piece of paradise in our own garden.

There is no doubt about it; chickens are really attractive additions to any yard. The chickens in our programmes are a hybrid variety, but still some of the colours are really great. Once you start to investigate chickens, you will notice they really do have personalities. These personalities are especially present in hand-raised birds, as they have no fear whatsoever. Pure breeds of chickens display some of the most attractive plumage, so should you prefer to have pure breeds in your yard, there are many to choose from. Perhaps you could take the time to visit a local Poultry Show or visit the Poultry Pavilion at your next Agricultural Show.

Pure bred or cross bred, the instincts of the chicken are the same. They love to scratch in the dirt and forage for food. Apart from their diet base of pellets, which is very important to ensure they get their daily nutritional requirements, chickens love to eat grasses and grains, insects and pests, all found readily in your garden. Chickens eat the pests and bugs which many people spray insecticides for and they also consider many of the plants we call *weeds* to be delicacies. Fruit fallen from the trees is quickly consumed. While our hens are scratching around looking for these delicious items, they are actually aerating the soil i.e. opening it up and turning it over to promote positive bacteria growth.

Fortunately for us, our chickens don't use the toilet. They leave their messages all through the garden, and especially under the hen house where they sleep at night. You may think Yuk, but chicken manure is a fantastic fertilizer and is packaged and sold as such. Large amounts of chicken manure however will need to be composted before it is placed around plants, as the fertilizer value is too strong for most plants.

Chickens lay eggs almost every day until their natural moult cycle commences over summer. The eggs produced from your garden do taste better. I don't care what anyone says! Even if you can't actually taste the difference, just knowing they have come from happy hens will make them seem tastier! The yellow of the yolk depends upon the amount of green feed your chickens have access to. Yellow-yolked eggs normally indicate a higher level of vitamin B12. This vitamin is derived from the chicken eating greens. Therefore, your home grown eggs probably are more nutritious than commercially produced ones which may have had additives and colouring agents included.

Chickens are gregarious animals, so they do enjoy company. It is therefore a good idea to have a couple of chickens in the yard. Your group of chickens will create their own sense of community and will consider your garden their home territory. Chickens are very territorial animals, and will not normally wander far. Because of this, they will let you know of any intruders in their territory by creating a tremendous hubbub.

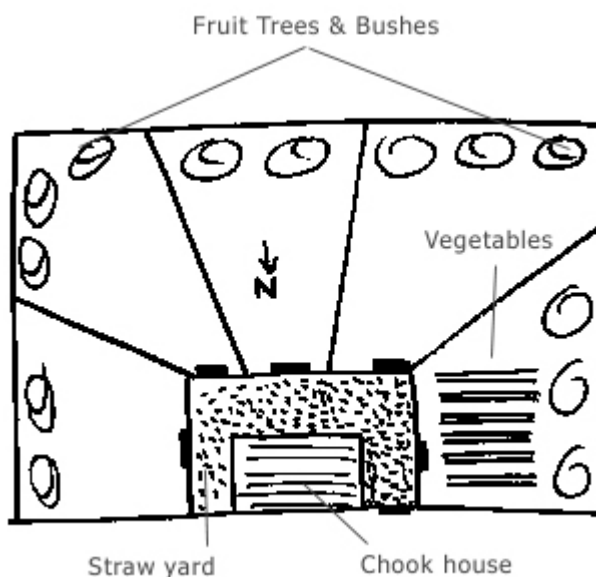
Harnessing all this activity from the chickens to get them to work harmoniously in your garden isn't as difficult as you may think. If your garden is designed with a Permaculture aspect in mind, where all living things, both plants and animals help sustain each other, then a few chickens roaming free will be a fantastic addition. If however your garden is not like this and plants are very precious, a Tractor system using portable pens may be more appropriate. If you have the room, a permanent rotational system may be ideal. After all, if you have willing workers, why not utilize them efficiently and create a backyard focused a little more on self sufficiency and the environment, rather than just looking pretty.

Chicken tractors are fantastic. They are portable "A Frames" or "Dome" shaped enclosures that can easily be moved to ensure chickens get fresh feed regularly. These Tractor enclosures do not have a floor, so chickens can scratch effectively. Therefore this may need to be considered when choosing a housing system to keep your hens safe from predators.

Rotational systems are fantastic if you have the space.

This design can be utilized really easily. While vegetables grow in one section, the chickens forage in the other section on a rotational basis, fertilizing and preparing the ground for the next crop. Once the vegetables are harvested, the gate is opened and the chickens do most of the cleaning up. The straw from the straw yard is turned over regularly and used as mulch around trees and other plants in the garden.

Permaculture is about more than just gardening. It is a strategy. It is a simple way in which we can take responsibility for our own existence and begin to care for the Earth. Permaculture gardens help us reduce the need to buy so much produce commercially, encourage us to recycle, and reduce our over-all consumption. Permaculture teaches us that we are just a small part of a larger community of living plants, creatures and micro-organisms.



Permaculture is such an interesting subject; it justifies a section of its own – perhaps next edition. Many books and magazines are available on the subject and some are listed at the end of this fact sheet. Perhaps it could become a school project.

Well, who would have thought a couple of hens in the backyard could actually make so much difference to anything? As you can see, depending upon how much work you are prepared to put in, chickens in your yard could actually be the first steps toward a more self-sufficient lifestyle.

### **References:**

Introduction to Permaculture

Bill Mollison with Reny Mia Stay  
Tagari Publications

Green Connections Magazine

Various Editions by Green Connections Publications