

Healthy and Happy Chooks in the Urban Garden

Chickens are wonderful pets and are fun to watch, and regularly produce home made eggs. But they can be your organic recycling power house. You provide them with the easily 'homemade' needs of shelter, food (kitchen waste), water and company (several chooks), and they can provide: eggs, meat, manure, features, soil cultivation, pest removal and weeding, and many hidden ecosystem diversity builders.

Amazingly a chicken seems to produce more yield than they consume, they are true organic farmers.

Getting some chooks

Council Regulations -

All council will have different housing rules, stocking numbers, and spacing requirements from your neighbors. Some councils don't even currently allow chooks. What can be summarised is that most of the rules are made so that the council can take chickens away for those mistreating them and creating a problem in the neighbourhood. Follow all these tips, and give your neighbors some fresh eggs and most issues will never happen.

Backyard Needs

A chook house must:

- Be fox and bird of prey proof, so dig in wire and enclose roof. Keeping doves out of the feed area is also important to avoid introduction of lice and other pests.
- Be weatherproof (yet allow for summer ventilation), with coops having adequate ventilation plus a draft free area for nesting boxes.
- Chickens are jungle fowl they, like shade and protection, with some warm morning sun.
- Have a perch (Chooks like to perch off the ground at night. These perches should be 30cm or more off the ground, allowing 30cm space per bird). The manure will build up under perches, so this should be deep litter area also, this allows them to scratch it around stopping the concentration and need for continual house cleaning.
- Food and water containers should be placed above the ground level at about the height of the chickens' backs, and must be kept clean and fresh. Elevated water areas avoids it filling with scratched litter and reduces cleaning frequency.
- Be easy to access (you'll visit it at least once per day)
- Have nesting boxes where the chooks can lay their eggs in private. Nesting boxes should be about 300mm square. It is ideal if you can provide a hinged opening outside the coop, behind the nesting boxes, so that you can retrieve the eggs without disturbing your chooks. Old lawn mower leaf-catchers or wooden boxes are good. Add straw or preferably bug repelling tansy/wormwood leaves to the laying boxes to stop eggs breaking. Allow 1 nesting box for every 3 chooks, but they will still use the same one and fight over it 😊

Deep Litter:::: Scratch Yard - WHAT MOST PEOPLE GET WRONG

A deep litter scratch yard, which is a fox-proof fully enclosed area adjoining the house is essential for urban backyard chickens to control odours, flies and scratch that chicken itch. Street tree mulch and any other carbon based litter can be used to similar effect, as per permaculture principles use what you have, but realise that shredded paper and soft carbon will pack down when it gets wet so wont last as long. Cover the floor with 30cm deep litter, and every few months put this into your compost systems and replace the litter.

Runs and Chook Tractors

Chooks need room to move about, and ideally need a large run broken up into several separately gated sections. Fences should be at least 1.4m high. This area usually doesn't need to be fox proof, as the chooks are only out in their run during the day. This run/area should be your orchard if possible. Note chickens will scratch the dirt continuously, so runs soon become devoid of vegetation and then become muddy, wet and unsightly, hence again advising deep litter runs.

Consider a chook 'tractor', i.e. a mobile pen without a floor. This can be moved around the garden allowing the chooks to scratch the ground and eat weeds or left-over veggies, while spreading their droppings.

Chook Plants

Comfrey, broad leaf plantain, Kale, nasturtiums, weeds are all good fast growing green food. Southernwood, Wormwood, Tansy, Rue and garlic can all be placed beside the chook run fence to be grazed for de-worming and general bug repellence.

Chook Food

- Kitchen scraps – All your food waste can go in the run, what is not eaten will be scratched into the mulch and 'composted'. pasta, veggie peel, scrambled egg, mashed potato
- Grain mix. To lay well, chooks need approximately 18% protein in their diet
- Layer mix, I like to avoid this if I can as I dont know what has gone into it, sick animals, GMO canola, etc.
- A calcium source – shell grit, cuttlefish, crushed roasted eggshells (shell grit or sand is also important for their gizzard, to help them crush their food)
- Insects and earthworms
- Greens – grass, spinach, parsley, carrot tops, cabbage leaves (tie up in bunch and fasten to the side of the chook run). Or grow a 'green manure crop' that will condition your soil + provide green pick for your chooks.
- You can add apple cider vinegar, fresh garlic and small amounts of sulphur to their water, to aid health and act as preventative medicine and pest management.

Organochlorines in eggs

- Chicken houses and other old structures built before 1984 could have been treated with organochlorines (e.g. dieldrin and DDT) to control termites. These chemicals can be harmful to humans if ingested in high concentrations.
- As birds eat soil to help digest their food, any organochlorines still left in the soil can contaminate their meat and eggs. If you are unsure about the condition of your soil, it is best to get it tested before selling your eggs or passing them on to friends or family. Testing can be done by ARL labs and other groups in WA.

Chooks Breeds and Buying Chooks

The brown chooks you normal see are Hyline, Hyline Brown, or Isa Brown. They can lay 320 brown eggs a year (amazing but unsustainable) for 2-3 years before declining, but this requires very high protein diet and careful food management. The Hyline has been especially breed as a factory chook, calm, strong egg layers.

You might also choose other laying breeds, or meat breeds but as you cant have a roster and 'breed chooks' in the city, meat breeds are less worthwhile. Other heritage breeds that are worth sourcing are:

Egg layers that are friendly and suitable to a backyard:

Australorp – Australian, dual purpose. 200+ eggs per annum. Large, handsome, black, docile bird.

Rhode Island Red – U.S. dual purpose. Docile. 160+ eggs per annum.

Isa Brown – Cross between Rhode Island Red and Rhode Island White breeds. 150+ eggs per annum

Dual purpose chooks that are suitable for a backyard (moderate egg layers and table birds)

Sussex – U.K. breed. Dual purpose. 120+ egg per annum. Docile and suited to cool climates.

Wyandotte – U.S. dual purpose. 100+ eggs per annum. Docile, friendly and cuddly looking.

Where to get Chickens

Breeders - Your at the Royal Show, you can go and meet some.

You can also look up WA poultry breeders society to find reliable breeders.

The quokka, Gumtree and other places have some cheap backyard chooks but often you end up with half rosters and half hens, so not that helpful, or cheap in the long run. Also always inspect the chook house health where the animals are coming from to make sure it's hygienic and humane.

There are facebook groups/forums for chicken and poultry owners this is a great place to ask for feedback on the best place to get your chooks from other experiences.

Chicken FAQ's

The Chickens Are Very Noisy -

Chickens are generally quiet animals but they do take ownership of the backyard so if there are foreign creatures or noises they will sound a clucking warning. Their gentle clucking can be soothing and the little announcement that they have laid an egg won't bother anyone. However in certain circumstances they can become very rowdy and you will be able to hear them a couple of houses away. This is particularly important if you are living close to your neighbours who may not share the same enthusiasm for your chickens as you do.

The habit of being noisy is due to your chickens becoming demanding over food and freedom.

Food

Chickens love treats! If you like taking your scraps to your chickens and feed them from your hands, your chickens will start to associate you with fine dining. If you go outside to hang up the washing (and don't have treats) your chickens will let you know that they are disappointed that their expected treat didn't arrive. To prevent this problem, take your greens in a container, just make sure it is the same container and you make a small show by tapping it on your way to deliver the treats. This ensures the chickens associate treats with the container and not you, so they won't expect greens every time they see you.

Freedom

Allowing chickens to free range around your garden seems like a good idea. They will eat bugs out of the garden and fertilise as they go. However in practice it doesn't always work out like this. The chickens end up decimating veggie gardens, scratching mulch out of garden beds and leaving droppings all over your patio. The way to prevent this problem occurring is to not let them free range in the first place. What they don't know, they don't miss, and they won't demand to be let out. Before you get your chickens, make the largest enclosure you can afford to give them. Once they are here leave them behind the fence and don't let them out!

Smell

Chicken enclosures can smell if you don't regularly clean it out or you have tried to squeeze too many chickens into a small area.

It's worth considering that most councils allow about 9 chickens per household. If they have deemed 9 chickens to be acceptable from a smell point of view then what is the impact that your 3 or 4 chickens going to have? Barely any. However they do need their enclosures maintained and carbon nappy replaced as required. Also keep a close eye out under the perches where much build up.

Chicken run litter/waste is fruit tree and compost food, it's half the benefit of chooks, free fertiliser.

Dogs

Dogs aren't always accepting of the new additions to the family resulting in a barking dog and scared chickens. In most cases the dog will become accepting over time, especially when they work out that they can't actually get to the chickens. However in some cases the dog just won't drop the issue.

No Roosters

Do I have enough room? How many chickens can I get?

This mainly depends on how much space you have and how many eggs per day you need. Chickens don't require half of your backyard, but they also don't like to be cooped up!

The general rule is to give the chickens as large an area as you can afford to give them. It is better to enclose them rather than let them free range and an area of 3m x 3m would suit 3-4 chickens.

For a family of four, 2-3 chickens will provide enough eggs to feed the family. Remember you will receive about an egg per day from your chickens – so you'll have a carton about every 4 days. The eggs will keep for a couple of weeks. A couple of points to consider; you will need to clean the enclosure more often the more chickens you have, and more chickens means you are spending more money on chicken feed. To keep it economical, keep as many chickens as you need eggs a week (1 egg per chicken per day), otherwise you will be funding the eggs you give to friends and family (unless you sell the excess eggs).

Are chickens good with kids?

Your children will love your chickens. Most chicken breeds don't mind being picked up (do your research), however make sure younger children are supervised as chickens can get hurt by playful young ones.

Do chickens attract mice and rats?

Pests such as mice and rats are attracted by food and not by the chickens. You have as much chance attracting mice as you do with other pets such as birds in an aviary or a bird feeder, rabbits, and guinea pigs.

Chickens are messy eaters so keeping wasted food to a minimum will help pests be less attracted to your chicken pen. Remove any treats or leftovers that the chickens didn't eat.

My Chicken has stopped laying.

Chooks will sometimes go "off the lay", due to extremes in temperature (hot and cold), upsets within their environment, and when broody or moulting. Often a change in diet and added protein will get them back on the lay, but keep in mind these breaks are natural.