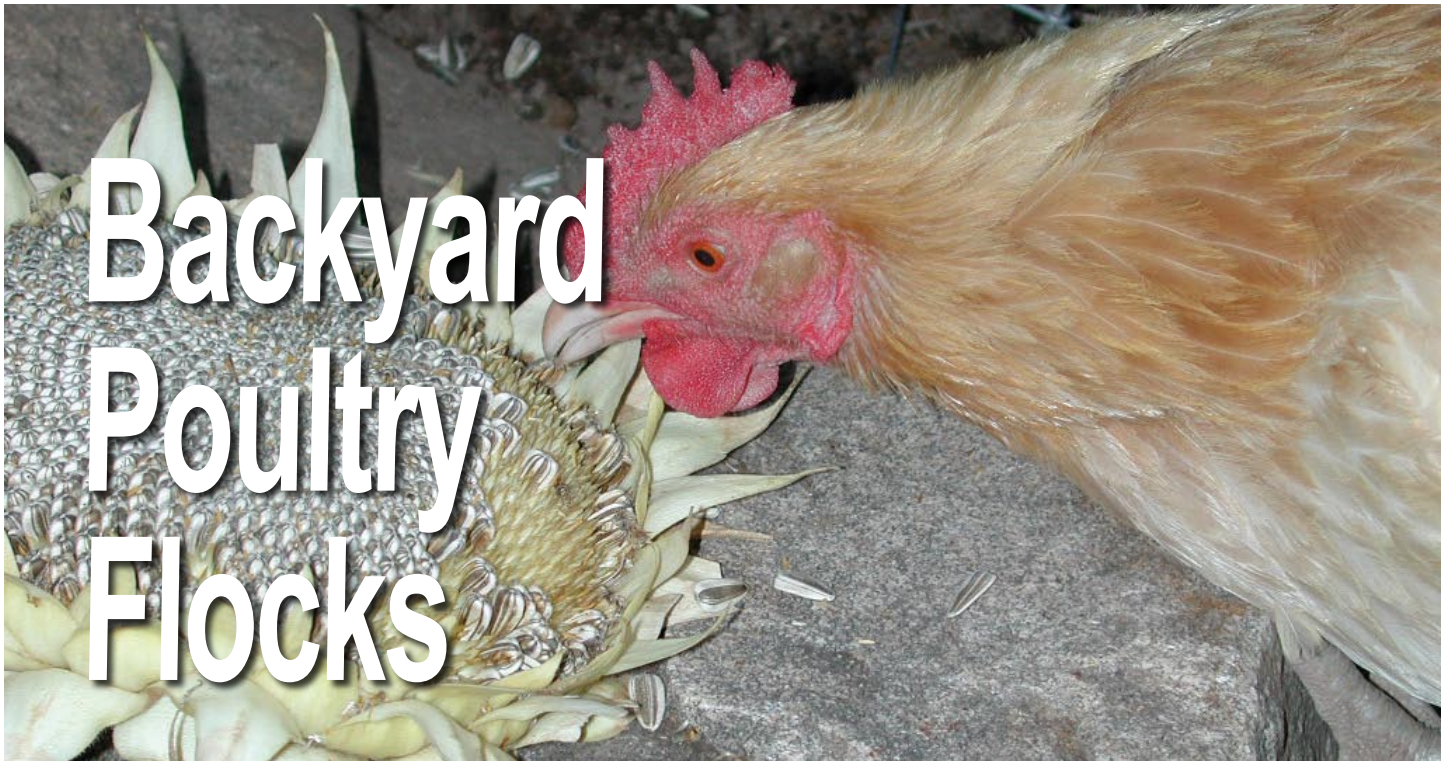


Backyard Poultry Flocks



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Many people live in rural areas with space (and zoning) that can support small poultry flocks. Poultry can benefit you 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.

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 (except on the bottoms of your shoes). Chicken manure contains a good balance of essential plant nutrients. On average, it will have about 1-2% nitrogen, 1-2% phosphorus, and 1% potassium. If chicken manure is directly incorporated into soil, planting should be delayed for about a month. If composted, the nitrogen in the manure will enhance biological activity and consequent breakdown of other materials. Composting is recommended for bedding that contains shavings or straw.

An egg-producing chicken flock should be replaced every two 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) for a little extra money. 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. 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 or age. You can expect about a dozen eggs from each four to five pounds of feed.

My wife and I are on our third flock of chickens. Our 11 pullets were ordered in April 2007 and included three Aracaunas, two Blue Andalusians, three Barred Rocks, two Redcaps, and one Phoenix. They should start laying in October or November. We use pine shavings as bedding inside the chicken house and compost the manure and shavings with our other garden and household waste. We also rake out the pen and compost the manure we collect.

Our chickens free-range about half the time in our fenced yard and are shut in each night to protect them from predators such as hawks, bobcats and coyotes. Our vegetable garden is fenced to exclude the chickens, but they have access to the entire garden perimeter as well as a quarter acre. I like to think this arrangement helps control insects and weeds.

Turkeys are great for meat production and are usually processed when they are 20-30 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. 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.

Backyard poultry flocks are fun and the fresh eggs are fantastic. For more details about poultry care, feeding, space requirements, facilities, there are many great books and web resources available. A good on-line publication called *How to Keep a Small Poultry Flock* is available from New Mexico State University at: www.cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/_circulars/Circ477.html. Also, before starting a flock, you should look into local zoning ordinances and whether it is allowable to have backyard poultry.