

Backyard Chickens

By Jane Billingham

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The return of the household flock: chickens come home to roost – in your yard.

If you are following “eat local” movements, you may be aware of the current interest in keeping chickens at home. Many municipalities either already have or are in the process of drawing up regulations for keeping chickens in the urban environment.

Publications extol the virtues of integrated gardening systems, where industrious birds in portable chicken coops or “chicken tractors” move around the yard cleaning out weeds, gobbling up insects, and leaving a rich trail of fertilizer on the freshly tilled ground—fueled in part by kitchen waste.

At first blush, chickens do have benefit for home gardeners. They are voracious snackers, and as they scratch and peck, they can do a fine job of insect clean-up. Slugs are not their favorite—ducks are better for that—but a local chicken owner told me her chickens have developed quite a taste for crunchy snails.



Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald - Jill Eelkema, who raises chickens in Mount Vernon, treats her hens to some cracked corn in their coop Wednesday. Eelkema will teach a workshop May 18 in Mount Vernon about raising backyard chickens. The birds once relegated to the family farm are becoming a common sight in urban locations, prompting city governments to write rules for keeping hens inside city limits.

Chickens around the periphery of your yard can keep creeping weeds at bay, providing a protective buffer between your yard and whatever wilderness might lie beyond. Just don't let the chickens near any seed beds, prize lawns, or ornamental plantings as all will soon be reduced to one wonderful chicken dustbath.

And what gardener has not heard of the benefits of chicken manure? A chicken produces about 4 ounces of manure per day. High in ammonia, this manure can burn plants if it is applied directly

to planting beds, so you need to process it in some way first. Remember to wear gloves if you're handling fresh chicken manure, as it can harbor viruses, worm eggs, or bacteria.

It is especially important to process manure if you have a vegetable garden as fresh manure may contain salmonella, listeria, and E. coli. USDA organic standards require 120 days between the addition of raw (uncomposted) manure and the harvest of a crop whose edible portion has contact with the soil, and 90 days before harvest for crops without direct contact.

To process fresh chicken manure, first mix it with a good carbon source (like sawdust, paper, cardboard, or wood chips, which might be present in some quantity already in the chicken bedding). For four to six weeks, turn the pile every week to incorporate air and stimulate microbial activity. When you're not working the pile, keep it covered with a burlap sack, tarp, or straw to stop nitrogen being lost to the air or leached out into the ground during heavy rains.

The high temperatures produced when mixing fresh chicken manure with material high in carbon cause huge shifts in the microbial makeup of the manure, banishing most problem-causing bacteria in favor of more beneficial ones.

If what you want is pure aged chicken manure, you can then let the pile sit in a holding pen for an additional four to six weeks. It will now be ready to apply to the garden. Dig down below your planting rows and bury the aged manure so the plant roots can grow down into it for a nitrogen boost.

Alternatively, after the initial four to six weeks of turning and mixing the manure with a carbon source, you can give it its final four to six weeks of processing in your regular compost pile.



Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald - Jill Eelkema, with one of her compost pile contributors, mixes chicken manure into her compost bin.

Compost is not a huge source of nutrients, but it makes a great soil conditioner. It helps sandy soils store more nutrients and water, and it loosens and aerifies compacted clay soils. As organic matter, compost also benefits microbial action in the soil in a way that inorganic fertilizers do not.

Work compost into the top layer of the soil in the spring, and it will improve the tilth of the soil and provide a small but steady supply of nutrients in the warm, wet weather of spring just as plants are getting a jump on the growing season.

Chickens, like any other living entity, need care. If you think they might be for you, attend a class or read up on the subject of chicken husbandry to decide if you want to enjoy chickens as part of your own backyard fertilizing and weeding system, or whether you are content with sourcing fertilizers in other ways, getting fresh air as you weed, and buying your eggs from neighbors, local farmers, or the grocery store.

Jane Billingham is a WSU Skagit County Extension certified Master Gardener. Questions may be submitted to the WSU Extension office, 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington, WA 98233. 360-428-4270. Except for the Program Coordinator, all MG programs are funded through the efforts of Master Gardener volunteers. Donations to the program are gratefully accepted and can be made through the non-profit Skagit County Master Gardener Foundation (SCMGF), PO Box 2801, Mount Vernon, WA 98273.

Know and Grow Workshop:

What: Urban Chickens 101 - Learn if chickens are for you!

Date: Tuesday, May 18

Time: 1:00 - 2:30 p.m.

Where: WSU Mount Vernon NW Research and Extension Center,
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)

- Jill Eelkema's presentation will cover all aspects of what is involved in raising a few chickens at home. Jill will talk about regulations, breeds, care of chicks and adult birds, health and safety, benefits, and chicken coops.

This workshop is free of charge and open to the public. Space is limited and available on a first-come, first-served basis.

References:

- National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultryoverview.html>. Accessed March 2010
- WSU Extension. Carol A. Miles, Ph.D., Vegetable Extension Specialist, and Karen Killinger, Ph.D., Food Safety Extension Specialist. "Manure Management for Vegetable Gardens."
- *Sustainable Gardening Handbook* <http://gardening.wsu.edu/stewardship/compost/manure/manure2.htm>. Accessed April 1, 2010
- *The Complete Compost Gardening Guide* by Barbara Pleasant and Deborah L. Martin. Storey, 2008.
- Information on aging and composting chicken manure from Callie Martin, waste reduction/recycling educator for Skagit County Public Works in Mount Vernon, calliem@co.skagit.wa.us / 360-336-9400