

## Letting the birds roam

Chickens and other fowl bring a myriad of benefits to a garden environment. They are on duty whenever they are roaming, patrolling for insects – such as earwigs, ticks and grubs – as well as weed seeds. If your compost pile needs to be turned, let the chickens in to scratch and peck, adding their manure in the process. Maybe you have a stubborn area of weeds. Employ your helpers by throwing corn scratch in the weed bed to encourage the chickens to tear up the ground. And they make the most amusing yard art. After a stressful day, unwind by watching their antics as they free range.

Besides being healthy for your garden, letting your birds roam is healthier for them, too, encouraging them to exercise, forage, dust bathe and have natural social interactions. Before our feathered friends were domesticated they lived in the wilds, jungle and forest. Allowing them freedom means they can fulfill their natural instincts. Bored birds are stressed birds. Happy birds are healthier, laying healthier eggs for you to eat.

## Chicken infrastructure

A well-designed coop and run will alleviate many problems down the road. There are so many designs available, from built-for-purpose coops to reimagined truck cabs. The essentials in any design are size, durability and ventilation. Make your coop big enough to allow room for everyone, but not so big your birds' body heat can't ward off some of the cold of deep winter. An enclosed run is important for added protection against predators,

especially at night. But knowing your birds will have the ability to get out into the larger yard will make your coop and run design more flexible as your birds will be able to get out of each other's way much of the day.

A chicken tractor – a mobile house with attached enclosed run – can be employed as permanent housing or rotational housing during temperate weather. The tractor can be moved from place to place, encouraging your birds to concentrate their pecking and scratching, an excellent way to prep garden beds or remove sod. If your tractor is the same size as raised beds, it can fit directly over each bed. If it will be moved often, make sure it's light enough to easily move yet durable enough to withstand the stress. Schedule 40 PVC and rebar are excellent as they hold up to weather, yet are light. The tractor should be heavy enough, though, to keep your birds safe from predators, especially if it's their night time home.

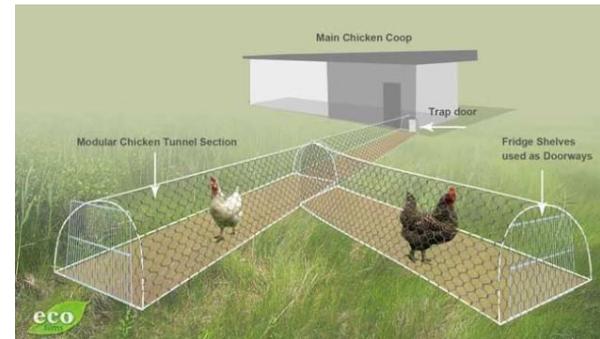


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Portable paddocks, usually made of netting on movable posts, are another way of allowing your birds to roam while maintaining some control. Unlike the run, which is permanent, paddocks are part of a seasonal rotation

system. This allows you to keep the birds out during fragile or fruiting times.

Chicken tunnels (also called chunnels) are short but long enclosed runs, generally made of bent PVC pipe and chicken wire, used around the perimeter of gardens so your birds can patrol for bugs. This allows your chickens to stretch their legs, yet not damage plants. They can be used as secure walkways between distant paddocks or runs, as well.



## Housing other fowl

Other fowl, such as guineas, turkeys or ducks, can be incorporated into the chicken environment, with some modifications. Guineas will need more training to roost in a coop at night as their natural instinct is to roost in trees as they are strong fliers. They are great insect hunters, but cause less disturbance as they don't scratch while pecking around.

Turkeys, from their sheer size, require a larger coop with stouter roosts and will also need more encouragement to sleep inside. Their large feet and ungainly nature make them more destructive in a garden, so you will either need to be more patient with their destruction or more careful of allowing them

free run near fragile plants. A well-established planting area holds up better to their girth.

Ducks love water. Housing them in a coop with chickens can get quite messy as they splash about and chickens can have health issues in damp conditions. Ducks prefer nesting on the floor at night, not on roosts, so consider this when allocating floor space. Any water source should be cleaned often, so situate it somewhere it is easy to empty, preferably recycling the water on plantings. Ducks' flat feet can cause soil compaction if confined to small areas, so make sure they have plenty of areas to roam.

## Before inviting fowl home

As lovely and eco-friendly as chickens are in your garden, there are factors you should consider before blithely letting them run. It takes a fair amount of planning and patience to keep everyone satisfied. Chickens will fling mulch around in their quest for insects and seeds so you either need to design your beds with this in mind or be willing to clean up often or enjoy the soft edges. A relaxed attitude and humor are useful. A Type-A Personality will be constantly frustrated.

Do you collect rare, fragile plants? If so, protect them from the inevitable curiosity. Fences with slack, unstable tops make it harder for chickens to get over as they can't perch on top as they fly over. Large rocks ringing the base of plants discourage chickens from disturbing the roots. Or put your favorite plants in a separate part of the yard, like the front yard.

Keep only as many birds as your yard will accommodate. A one acre yard can handle many more than a city lot. But given ample free time, 4 to 6 chickens in a well-designed city yard will not have many negative impacts.

Herbicide and pesticide use can be detrimental to birds' health if used where plants can be eaten or walked through. Be very conscientious of their use, reading the labels carefully and following all instructions.

And all birds love to dust bathe. If you've never seen a chicken gleefully rolling in a dust pit or lying out with a wing spread to the sun you are in for a treat. But dust pits are destructive. Better to create a dry, sheltered area big enough for several birds at once than have them find their own area. Adding cooled fire ashes and diatomaceous earth to the bathing beach will make it even more inviting.

## Planting for success

Chickens and other fowl can be beneficial in any yard, but planning makes life easier. The more variety you offer, the less damage will occur. Using "the right plant in the right place" rule is imperative. Spacing plants far enough apart for their mature size will allow ample air circulation, creating healthier plants. Choosing plants for your hardiness zone, microclimates and growing conditions will encourage plants resilient to chickens' natural curiosity.

Layering plants – groundcovers under short flowers, shrubs and taller trees – will create a diverse habitat with many options for chickens to graze on and hide in. Birds need places to

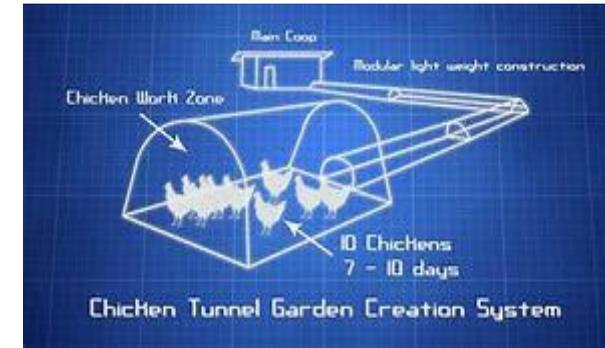
escape from predators. Thick bushes with thorns can help when ground dwelling predators lurk. Fences, hedges, shrubs and trees chickens can run under help protect from aerial predators. Space these diversionary tactics throughout your yard for easy access.

Creating a food forest of nut and fruit trees, vegetables, herbs, berries, seeds and vines will allow your birds to forage for some of their feed, occupying their time and minds so they have less time to get into trouble and filling their diet, as well as yours, with diversity.

Hardscapes should be hoseable as chickens will inevitably poop wherever they roam. Permeable paths and patios allow more water to soak in to your soil, benefitting nearby plantings. Paths of 3" thick gravel with small, unwashed stones which pack well is an excellent choice, creating a firm, permeable footing difficult for chickens to scratch away.

Don't forget the lawn. Instead of fighting for a pristine expanse of green, try an eco-lawn, a mixture of grass and any broadleaf plant or weed, as long as it isn't a noxious weed. This requires less maintenance, less herbicide and your birds can forage there. You will see how desperately chickens love greens when a small patch of grass is exposed from under snow. They congregate there until it is picked clean. So don't forget to give them greens, such as lettuce, cabbage or wheatgrass, in the winter.

A tree or shrub in their permanent run is appreciated, as this gives them shade in the hot summer. Choosing a variety with fruit or seeds will be an added bonus at harvest time.



Resource: "Free-Range Chicken Gardens; How to Create a Beautiful, Chicken-Friendly Yard", Jessi Bloom, 2012, Timber Press

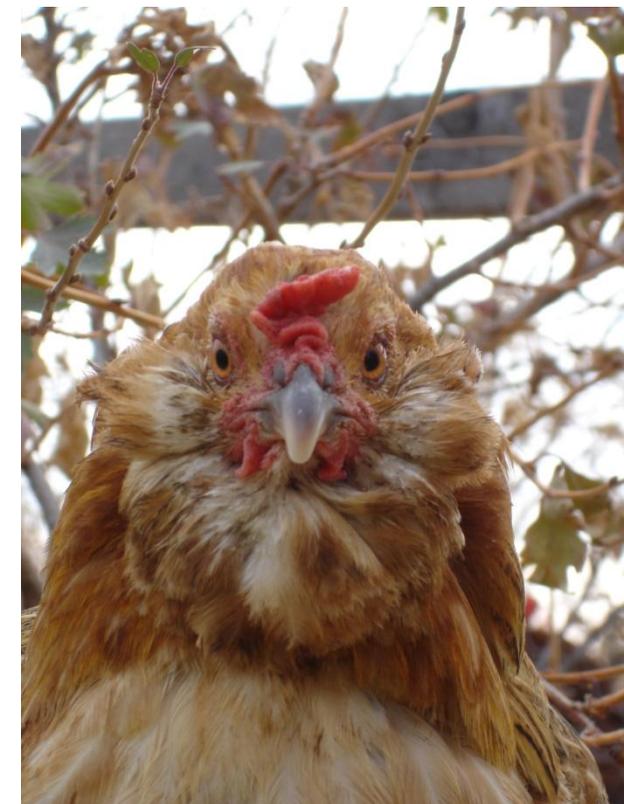
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# Chickens in the Garden

and other feather friends



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