

## Backyard Poultry

By Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

Have you ever considered raising chickens in the backyard? If so, spring is a good time to get started, and I have received a few calls on this subject of late. Here are a few tips to consider while you explore this subject.

Before you get started, check your local ordinances – even some rural towns have rules governing backyard poultry flocks. Next you will want to think about what kind of chickens you want and how many to buy. Some breeds are better for egg production, others are better for meat. If you want eggs, remember that one hen will lay as many as 300 eggs in a year and you do not need a rooster to get eggs.

Are you planning to build housing for your flock or manage them free range? If you build housing, you need to plan on 3 square feet of space per chicken, and one nest box for every 4 chickens. If you are thinking about free range birds make sure you do not have neighborhood dogs, bears or birds of prey that may feast upon your flock. I have one friend who lost his chickens to a bear, so he now lets his chickens roam around in a large fenced yard during the day and then puts them up in a sturdy coop at night with a bear proof door. You will also need to create a plan for how you will keep the chickens out of your vegetable garden. Tomatoes, squash, and lettuce are just a few of the human foods that chickens enjoy too.

Chickens are social creatures, but do not always accept newcomers graciously. If you add a new bird to the flock, do so in the evening. Chickens are also attracted to the color red so if your chickens do begin pecking each other, isolate injured birds and try hanging red cabbage or kale in the coop at the height of the birds' heads so that they can peck at it rather than each other.

The simplest way to ensure proper nutrition for your birds is to purchase poultry feed that is labeled for the type and age of your birds. Also keep in mind that an average chicken needs 1 cup of water per day. Hanging the feeders and waterers will help you maintain cleaner food and water sources for your birds.

One of the biggest reasons people raise chickens is because they like the taste of fresh eggs. But fresh eggs need to be refrigerated to maintain their quality. In the heat of the summer it is best to collect the eggs twice a day.

Raising a chicken flock can be a wonderful hobby for you, educational opportunity for the whole family, or even a small business opportunity. However, chickens do require a fair amount of care and like any activity the more you research it before you get started the more successful you will be.

For more in-depth information on this topic come to our Backyard Poultry Flock Management Workshop on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. See <http://extension.unh.edu/Counties/Grafton/Docs/PoultryFlyer3-23-10.pdf> for details.

Look for next week's column by County Forester, David Falkenham.

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