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June 2017 | 100%

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A brown hen with a red comb stands in a garden. The ground is covered with dry leaves and twigs. In the background, there is a wire mesh fence and some green plants with red flowers.

# TAKE YOUR GARDEN FROM PALTRY TO POULTRY

Chickens can be helpful and fun in the garden, and easy to incorporate into your backyard with these handy hints.

WORDS & PHOTOS **WENDY MEGGET**





est-selling,  
from David  
Mention chickens to most gardeners and they'll throw up their hands in horror, picturing decimation and ruin. They flippantly dismiss the possibility the humble chicken could help them create a garden worth crowing about. While they are busy doing other things, their chooks could be working hard in the yard – weeding, turning soil, fertilising and keeping bugs at bay.

My first venture into the realm of chickens was out of pure desperation. With a massive slug and snail infestation, my goal of growing organic vegetables was getting further out of reach. I tried all the eco-friendly techniques, but to no avail. But within days of getting chickens, my garden started to improve.

Not only were those silly birds dealing to the slugs and snails, but also to a myriad of other unwanted pests around the section – aka big scary spiders and cockroaches. They were turning over the soil as they dug for more bugs. Their poop was bringing my compost to life. Best of all, they were digging up and eating weeds, then never giving them a chance to grow back.

Yes, there was some initial damage. I learnt to protect certain crops as they ripened, like berries and capsicums. Seedlings also needed protection until they were strong enough to withstand a bit of scratching around the roots and were no longer sweet and tasty.

Chickens are primarily driven by bugs and soft tasty food. Once I worked this out, my new pets became the garden helpers of which I had dreamed. I figured out that if they had access to unprotected seedlings, they would eat the leaves and then inadvertently dig them up. If they pecked around more established plants, the plants would be pest free but sometimes require a bit of soil pushed back around the base. If feijoas fell on the ground, they would be left untouched, but if I cut them in half the chooks would happily eat the flesh. If I fed them whole vegetable scraps, they wouldn't eat much, but if I put the scraps in the blender first, they loved it. But best of all, if I had compost or manure, I could tip it in the middle of the garden and 24 hours later it would be spread out (although sometimes a little too far).

So, if you've ever thought about getting chickens, or simply fancy the idea of doing less backbreaking work, here are a few things to think about first:

#### **COUNCIL RULES**

Check your council website for rules relating to keeping chickens. Generally roosters are not permitted in urban areas. There may be other restrictions such as the number of chickens allowed and requirements for coops.

#### **SPACE**

How many chickens can your garden support? This will depend on how much area you give them,



how much supplemented feed you provide, and the nature of your garden. As a guide, I have a small urban section with a large vegetable patch, and I wouldn't want to have any more than two free-ranging chickens in my backyard. They receive some extra feed and provide us with a dozen eggs each week during good laying times.

### FENCING

A standard 1.8m boundary fence should contain chickens with their wings clipped (an easy process where you trim a few of the long flight feathers). Lower internal fencing of about 1m can be utilised to temporarily restrict the chickens to an area of the garden, where it is not going to be a disaster if they manage to hop over.

### PREDATORS

When introduced to chickens for the first time, your household cat can vary from mild curiosity to full-on attack mode. Slow and supervised introductions are recommended – having a hose on hand can provide a clear message and deterrent for even the most determined cat. A fully grown chicken can defend itself against a cat, but I would rather not take the chance of injury to either party. Having your own cats also deters neighbours' cats from having a go at your chickens.

Dogs can be a significant danger to chickens – even the most docile mutt can still possess the instinct to kill small animals. However, some dogs are smart enough to understand when an animal is “part of the family” and, therefore, off the menu.

Predatory birds, like hawks, can attack and kill chickens, although they are more prevalent in rural areas. Providing plenty of shelter from the sky, such as trees, bushes or rooves, will keep the chickens safe and relaxed.

### SHELTER

Chickens require a coop with an elevated perch and nesting box. Once they know where their coop is, they will return by themselves at the end of the day.

Close the coop once the chickens are inside to keep them safe from night-time predators.

### SOURCING CHICKENS

Try to source chickens from a reputable breeder. While rescuing a factory hen might seem cheap and altruistic, the chickens may be sick or not vaccinated for diseases that can develop after they would normally be disposed of. They may also be bred to lay for only two or three years, so may never lay eggs for you.

Find a suitable breed depending on what you need. Some breeds are better for eggs, meat or both. There are breeds that make great pets for children, and smaller breeds more appropriate for smaller gardens.

### LEVEL OF CARE

Finally, I must admit there is some work required to care for chickens. On a daily basis I feed them, check for eggs, pick up poop for compost, and replace any stray dirt flicked out of the garden. Weekly, I shift and clean their moveable coop.

However, I have found that this work is far outweighed by the wonderful job they do in my garden, resulting in healthy plants, abundant produce and yummy fresh eggs.



## Beverley's Bacon & Egg Pie

Making bacon and egg pie is a great way to use excess eggs from your chickens. You can also add other vegetables and herbs from your garden to add extra taste and colour.

The secret is to roll the pastry sheets so they are not so thick, and use a preheated oven tray under your pie to brown the base pastry.

### YOU WILL NEED:

- 2 sheets flaky puff pastry
- 10 eggs
- 200g bacon, chopped
- milk
- 20cm (max) square tin/dish with 5cm high sides, lined

### METHOD

1. Take out ingredients early so they are at room temperature.
2. Preheat oven and tray to 200°C.
3. Roll pastry on floured surface and place one sheet in dish.
4. Layer bacon and eggs, breaking each egg into a cup first for checking.
5. Brush pastry edge with milk, place top sheet of pastry, trim and crimp edges together with a fork.
6. Cut air holes in top and brush with milk.
7. Bake in oven on tray for 35 minutes.