

Poultry

for small farms
& backyards



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Poultry in Urban Areas

There has been a significant boom in the number of people interested in raising poultry in the United States.

This is true even in urban areas, where keeping chickens poses some challenges that are different from those of raising poultry in rural environments. While many cities and municipalities have restrictions on urban poultry—or prohibit it outright—the strength and popularity of the local foods movement means that in many areas these ordinances are being reconsidered.

Examples of owners successfully raising poultry in urban areas are many; this publication will outline some best practices and look at a few of the challenges that the urban poultry person will need to address to avoid problems that might otherwise occur.

Benefits of raising chickens

There are many benefits to raising poultry; the first that may come to mind is having fresh eggs on hand. However, those who raise poultry enjoy many other benefits as well:

- Just like the family dog, chickens make good pets and can be a source of relaxation and companionship.
- Many people gain a sense of pride and satisfaction from raising well-cared-for, healthy birds.
- Some families find raising poultry is a great way for their children to learn about animal care and responsibility, better understand food systems, and gain a general insight to basic life processes.
- Chickens may help homeowners “go green.” Poultry waste is an excellent source of nutrients for plants, providing many of the key ingredients for composting and keeping fertilizer costs down. Many poultry owners use their birds to keep kitchen waste out of their trash bins, as chickens will eat many vegetables—especially leafy greens—and unseasoned meat scraps. Caution: be sparing with kitchen waste that contains a high amount of salt, as this can cause wet droppings from diarrhea and may have a negative effect on egg production and shell quality.



Problems associated with raising chickens

Providing the proper space, nutrition, and housing are the keys to raising healthy chickens—see *Guide to Raising Healthy Chickens* (A3858-01), available at learningstore.uwex.edu. In addition, owners have to be aware of the potential problems associated with poultry, especially in urban areas. Typically, issues that may arise involve noise, odors, pests, and concerns about disease. Poultry owners must be attentive to and cooperative with their neighbors, who may have a different tolerance for backyard chickens in an urban setting.

Noise and odor

Most animals make noise and have an odor to some degree. Properly provided for, chickens raised in an urban backyard aren't necessarily any noisier or smellier than dogs.

One concern frequently mentioned when talking about raising poultry in the city is that chickens will crow early in the morning or that a flock will be unusually loud. In fact, only roosters crow, and they can crow at any time of the day. Because of this, many municipalities have banned roosters from urban settings or placed restrictions, such as limiting the number of

roosters allowed. In addition to restrictions on roosters, many ordinances restrict the total number allowed in a flock as well.

There are many ways to help muffle the sounds that chickens make during the course of the day. Insulation will reduce the amount of sound coming from the chicken coop. For chicken coops with outdoor "runs," or areas where chickens can exercise, partial fences and landscaping such as small shrubs and bushes can help reduce sound as well as enhance the appearance of the housing.

Proper lighting is an important part of noise control as well. Birds are active when there is light, so a coop that allows you to control both natural and artificial light means you will have greater control over when the birds are active and more likely to make noise. Keep in mind that to get the most out of egg production, chickens need 14 to 16 hours of natural or artificial light per day.

Odors are another source of concern in urban environments, where neighbors are usually close to one another. Most poultry odor is associated with ammonia produced in poorly ventilated and moist coops. The solution is to properly ventilate the housing area, which will help keep the bedding dry. You may need to consider dehumidification during times of high humidity and other seasonal weather conditions.

Pest management and control

Controlling flies and other insects is very important to all poultry producers, but may have an even larger impact in an urban area. The best way to prevent flies is to keep the litter dry, as fly eggs and larvae (maggots) need moisture to develop. Keeping the pens clean will reduce problems with flies and insects; most small flock owners clean out their coops regularly, so manure buildup is not an issue. During certain times of the year or under particular weather conditions, however, traps or chemical control may be necessary.

Rodents can be another problem. Storing your feed securely and using feeders that minimize waste will reduce issues associated with rodents. Proper coop design and keeping the area immediately surrounding the coop free of weeds and grass will help keep rodents at a distance as well.

Concern about disease

As with any animal they share a space with, there is always the chance of humans picking something up from their backyard chickens. For example, some diseases found in other common household pets such as caged birds and reptiles can also be found in poultry. What follows is a short list of diseases that **could** be transmitted from birds to humans. However, the risks are very low when poultry is kept in a healthy and clean environment.

Salmonellosis: This is often what people think of when they have a concern about chickens and disease. There are about 2,500 different species of *Salmonella*; a few of them can be carried by chickens and potentially make people sick. The one that usually makes the news (*Salmonella enteritidis*, or SE) can be contracted by consuming undercooked eggs or from contamination from raw chicken meat. Only rarely will contact with fecal material lead to infection, and a good hand washing with soap after handling any chicken will take care of this. The same risk and remedy applies to other pets, including dogs, turtles, iguanas, and pygmy hedgehogs.



Influenza: There has been evidence in **some other countries** that chickens can transmit the influenza virus to humans. In the United States, the specific subtypes of the virus that affect humans have not been found in poultry for many years. However, the influenza virus can occasionally mutate from one subtype to another. In order to prevent future outbreaks, the USDA conducts an aggressive program to depopulate flocks that may have these other influenza subtypes, even if they aren't highly pathogenic.

Psittacosis: This bacterial disease can be contracted from poultry, although such occurrences are very rare. Caged birds such as parrots are more common carriers of psittacosis. If infection occurs, the disease can be treated with antibiotics.

Tuberculosis: While rare, there have been cases of people contracting tuberculosis from birds, although is not a common disease in poultry. Typically, people with a compromised immune system are most at risk.

Histoplasmosis: This fungal disease is actually caused by a soil fungus. While birds are not carriers, histoplasmosis can grow in old poultry or pigeon manure and is commonly connected with church belfries, barns, and other places where droppings accumulate. As long as a poultry house is cleaned regularly, this should not be an issue.

Parasites: Because chickens belong to the class *Aves* and humans to the class *Mammalia*, poultry and people are not closely related. Thus, there is little risk from the spread of parasites, which generally adapt to a specific class. Mites and lice from birds, for example, will not live on humans for more than a few hours. Likewise, internal parasites that are adapted to the poultry gut typically won't be a problem for humans. One protozoa, *Giardia*, can occasionally affect both birds and humans, although this is more commonly seen with caged birds such as parakeets and canaries. Most hobby flock owners routinely monitor and treat their birds for parasites nonetheless, to keep them healthy.

Other issues to consider

There are other issues specific to raising poultry in urban settings that you should consider before deciding to raise chickens or allowing chickens to be raised in your community.

Waste disposal

To safely keep poultry in an urban environment, you must have a secure plan regarding the disposal of poultry waste. If you have a waste storage container, make sure that it can be sealed and is rodent-proof. Composting poultry waste has become popular; homeowners have many options for purchasing or building compost bins. Poultry waste, which has a high nitrogen component, should not be directly applied to young and growing plants for fear of nitrogen burn. After it is composted, however, poultry waste makes for a safe, stable, odor-free fertilizer.

Can you have poultry in your town?

If you are thinking of keeping chickens in your city or town, the first thing to do is to check with your local officials to see if zoning or municipal ordinances limit or prohibit the raising of poultry, as is the case in many cities. Common restrictions include the distance between poultry housing and the lot line, the number and types of poultry that can be kept, and the need for permits and/or inspections.

Across the country, many groups are working with their municipalities to make it legal to raise poultry in areas where it was previously prohibited. If your city or municipality does not allow this, there are many resources to draw upon that will help your community decide whether an ordinance change is advisable. Keeping poultry in urban settings can be a contentious issue, so keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Be respectful of all positions
- Refer to poultry as pets and not livestock
- Start small and stay organized
- Be willing to educate neighbors, friends, and community members
- Include both the pros and cons of urban poultry and be prepared to provide ideas and solutions to concerns that people have
- Do your research and know your local resources



Developing rules and best practices

For communities that do allow backyard poultry, establishing good rules and best practices is the best way to protect citizen rights and property. A good system of regulation means poultry keepers will have the freedom to raise poultry while governmental bodies will have the tools necessary to minimize and settle any conflicts that arise. For more information on best practices, contact your county extension office:

UW-Extension, Cooperative Extension website (with links to county extension websites): www.uwex.edu/CES/



Housing

When selecting housing for your chickens, consider the following factors:

- The location of the enclosure: Where is it in relation to nearby residences?
- The size of the enclosure: Does the housing provide the proper space?
- The design of the enclosure: Is there adequate protection from the weather and predators?
- The appearance of the enclosure: Does it fit into the surroundings? Is it well maintained?

Raising poultry in any setting is fun and rewarding. By taking your neighbors and the community into consideration, you can successfully enjoy raising poultry in an urban setting.

Resources

University of Wisconsin-Extension resources

"Egg Safety and the Backyard Flock," available at: foodsafety.wisc.edu

Guide to Raising Healthy Chickens (A3858-01): learningstore.uwex.edu

Main poultry education website: www.uwex.edu/ces/animalscience/poultry/resources.cfm

Pasture Poultry Ark (A3908-02): learningstore.uwex.edu

Polk County home composting information: polk.uwex.edu/hort/Composting.html

Producing Poultry on Pasture (A3908-01): learningstore.uwex.edu

Richland County poultry website: Richland.uwex.edu/ag/Poultrylinks.html

Other resources

Mad City Chickens: www.madcitychickens.com

North Carolina Extension small flock management resources: www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/poulsci/tech_manuals/small_flock_resources.html

University of Kentucky small and backyard flocks: www.ca.uky.edu/smallflocks

Urban Chickens: urbanchickens.org

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Photo credits: Shingled roof coop (page 1) and Carl Wacker with his Buff Orpington hen Shasha (page 2) courtesy of Kristy Hanselman; chicken run (page 3) courtesy of David Lovell.

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