



Feeding Chickens the Easy Way

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Chickens forage among spring daffodils.

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Back in the day, fowl fanciers and farmstead owners all over the country kept chickens because they were beautiful, particularly suited to a specific region's environment, and for the services they could offer and/or products they could supply.

Did you know that some fancy fowl were kept to supply the fashion and fishing-fly-tying industries with incredibly beautiful feathers, which were often harvested without ending the bird's life? Others were kept for the eggs or meat they could provide. And all the while, the birds kept their premises free of all manner of pests, including flies, ticks, grubs, caterpillars, and even mice and snakes in some instances. Plus, chickens are an end-of-the-day entertainment that rivals the best Broadway show or blockbuster movie. You've heard the expression "sit and watch the chickens peck." For the homesteader, there may be nothing quite so soothing at the end of a fulfilling day of work than to sit, cool beverage in hand, and watch the chickens just do what chickens do.

So, what is it that they do? Well, if the chickens in question happen to be one of the small handful of over-bred industrial breeds, those poor animals will have few social skills and may grow so fast and so out of proportion that they break bones or die of heart attacks just eight weeks after hatching. Watching these chickens do their thing may be more depressing than relaxing or uplifting — especially if they're in a horrific factory-production setting — but that's not their fault. It's the fault of animal science's morally questionable conclusion that animals such as chickens are nothing more than cogs in a moneymaking machine. As such, laying hens may legally be crowded into small cages where they cannot scratch, cannot interact socially with one another, and cannot lay eggs in the privacy of a nest box or other "secret" place. On top of all of that, most of the top halves of their beaks have been cut off to keep the overcrowded animals from pecking one another.

Thankfully, a sufficient number of folks interested in animal husbandry eschewed the entire industrial poultry production model and have maintained many of the old chicken breeds and lines. Thus it is that some of those sturdy, older breeds are available today. Birds like the Jersey Giant will net you some eggs and grow to sufficient size to produce a fine table fowl. But more importantly, old breeds like the Jersey Giant thrive out-of-doors, and they will entertain you beautifully while performing tasks you'd rather not do and doing the work of agricultural poisons and synthetic chemicals you'd rather not use.

Feeding chickens in the yard

Whether you live in town or out in the country, keeping a small flock of chickens in the backyard is not only fun, it's also rewarding in a number of ways. As omnivores, chickens will gleefully seek out and devour all manner of insect, bug, grub, larva, worm, mouse, etc. They also will mow your lawn — to an extent, anyway. Chickens relish fresh greens, including grasses and forbs. When they are confined in relatively small areas, they can keep the lawn trimmed (though, when left to their own devices, they have a tendency to overgraze their favorite things, like clover and dandelions, and spend less time on the Kentucky bluegrass). If you enclose your birds in a portable pen, you can move it around the yard in a rotation, and your chickens will do a much more uniform mowing job than when they are completely free ranging. So, moving them around in a pen can either keep the birds from overgrazing their favorite vegetation or it can encourage them to do just that — to help you prepare a new garden patch. As the chickens graze, they'll fertilize the lawn with some of the finest organic material out there, but they'll do oh-so-much more.

If you are a lawn purist, you might dethatch your yard every spring. This arduous task involves hard soil-scratching raking that pulls up the thatch of dead grass that collects just above the soil surface each year. Alternatively, you might rent an expensive gas-guzzling power dethatcher that will scratch the soil, while bringing all that dead grass to the surface for easier collection with a leaf rake or power vacuum of some kind. In either case, you are expending all kinds of calories to undo something that mowing does every year. Plus, dethatching can make some turf grass crowns more susceptible to various pests. Here's where the chickens come in.

When left to their own devices, hens will scratch the ground looking for worms, grubs, and other likely food sources. When given plenty of space, or moved around in portable (and bottomless) pens, this scratching will dethatch and aerate the lawn while breaking the thatch into smaller, more easily decomposed pieces. The end result is that the chicken dethatchers will render the thatch gone and promote its decomposition in place. You don't have to collect the debris and send it to the landfill or put it in your compost bin. Plus, you can employ chickens year-round to keep the thatch under control. At the same time, they'll keep the lawn fertilized and help control grubs, bugs and ticks. Chickens do all this and more for the price of a little bit of feed.

Even if you keep sufficient chickens to handle most of the mowing, you might still choose to mow the front yard more formally. Many people who mow with machines collect their grass clippings in black plastic trash bags, which are then dutifully sent to the landfill every week throughout the summer. It's true that some folks add the clippings onto their compost pile, but those piles often turn into stinking anaerobic messes because clippings have a relatively high protein content. But there is a completely different way to dispose of the clippings. You can take advantage of the fact that chickens like their greens and simply feed the chickens the clippings. (You'll only want to use chickens to mow if you refrain from applying synthetic fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides to your lawn. Although some folks say that there's no harm in feeding greens fertilized with synthetic fertilizer, we say, don't do it.)

Feeding grass clippings works best with chickens that can be confined — even temporarily — to a spacious pen that has one side or corner devoted to the compost pile. (If you live in town where you aren't allowed to have a compost pile, call it a “chicken feed pile.”) As you collect your grass clippings, simply dump them

into the pen. You can alternate dumping sites if the chickens aren't eating, scratching up, and aiding decomposition of the clippings quickly enough. Spread them out more thinly if there's even a hint of anaerobic stink going on deeper in the pile.

You also can feed your flock of clucking composters vegetable and fruit waste from the kitchen and garden. The key here is not to overload the chickens. They won't mind, but your neighbors might not like the smell, and the code enforcement officer will likely conclude that those chickens of yours stink, when it is actually the vegetable matter. Either way, at the end of the day — month, more likely — you will wind up with a ton of composted clippings mixed with chicken manure and other good stuff that you can spread on your lawn in lieu of store-bought weed-and-feed that really does nothing but make more work for you. And don't forget, even if you do plan to eat eggs or meat from your chickens, allowing them to help you out in the yard will go a long way toward obliterating their feed bill.

Feeding chickens in the pasture

Much to-do is made about free-range chickens these days. Most people imagine chickens roaming peacefully on lush pasture. But the term “free-range” can mean anything from no cages (but crowded indoor conditions), to free access to a concrete yard, to being raised completely outdoors with little more than a mobile shelter to keep them warm and dry during inclement weather. Especially in the case where the birds are “free” to range inside a chicken production barn, the label is just a marketing scam.

While the completely free-range model is attractive, it is often not practical. The birds might not agree that a barbed wire fence or hedgerow is their boundary, and they are often highly prone to predation. A more practical and humane choice is a free-range model that incorporates some kind of mobile enclosure, complete with predator-proof shelter. You might be wondering: Why raise chickens on the pasture at all?

When you run cattle through a pasture in a controlled manner, they don't eat everything, and they don't necessarily eat it down evenly. And, while the action of their hooves can help decompose thatch, their manure patties can become fly-breeding weed patches if left to rot on their own. Those weeds and the patties represent a concentration of fertilizer that would be better utilized if it were spread more evenly over the pasture. We already know that chickens like to scratch the ground — that's great for the pasture in general. And the chickens also will eat some of the plant material left behind by the grazing cattle. But, even more useful is the way they obliterate manure patties in search of seeds, germinating plants, grubs, fly larvae and flies. And they distribute all that material in the form of the fertilizer they drop throughout the pasture. No doubt about it, a pasture that welcomes chickens for a fixed interval after the cattle (and/or sheep, etc.) is healthier, more diverse, and freer of flies, grasshoppers, ticks and other invertebrate pests.

Managing chickens on pasture generally involves movement of a portable laying or broiler house to fresh pasture every day or two. If the birds are tightly bonded with their structure, they may only roam a hundred yards away from it. If you have light predator pressure, managing this way can work quite well. If you have more predator difficulty and want to limit the size of the chickens' territory, you will want to enclose the birds in large “chicken tractor” pens that have an integral shelter of some sort (and include nest boxes, if you're working with a laying flock). Typically, these pens are moved once or twice per day; larger operators employ a flock of them on pasture. A second alternative is to surround your mobile range shelter with sufficient portable electric net fencing to give the birds the range space they need while keeping ground predators out. This method will not deter any but the most timid of hawks; however, if you can house a chicken-friendly dog along with your birds, you will go a long way toward solving a hawk problem while using the relatively large area, open-top electric netting system.

Feeding chickens in the garden

As you might already imagine, due to their natural scratching and bug-eating tendencies, chickens have a place in the garden. That's true, but, because chickens also love to eat tender young vegetation and fruits like tomatoes and grains like wheat, their services as gardeners need to be employed a bit more carefully in some cases. Don't let this need for more careful management turn you off, chickens can do much of the legwork involved in building humus-rich soils, keeping pests at bay, composting garden mulch and waste, and post-harvest gleaning.

Consider a typical four-season garden scenario. During winter, you can use your garden as a temporary chicken run — if you have a good enclosure or easily handled portable enclosure that can be moved around in the snow. Winter is a good time to spread hay or straw for the chickens to work into small pieces. And since you must feed your birds through the winter, you'll save yourself some collecting and spreading of manure if you simply let the birds do it for you right there in the garden.

In spring, the chickens will gleefully consume, trample, and generally dispatch any green manures you may have planted in the fall or late winter. They'll continue to work hay and straw down into a friable mulch, and they'll stir the soil surface to aid with seedbed preparations. When you're ready to plant, it's time to pen up the hens a bit more tightly, though. Many folks build chicken tractors that are sized to travel down the garden paths — so their garden hens can keep the paths weed free and well mulched. Others build tractors the same size as the garden beds (raised or otherwise) and move them onto the beds as crops are harvested. Choosing these options will make your chicken-tractor rotations more rational and orderly — but if you're not into orderly, by all means make your tractor the way desire or necessity dictates, and just have fun with it.

Let's say you have one tractor that's sized for paths and one sized for beds. You could move the path-maintaining tractor around the garden (or into the yard) as required. And you could move the bed-sized tractor from bed to bed, allowing the chickens to prepare the ground for planting by converting hay, straw, grass clippings, etc., into mulch that will later get incorporated into the soil. Later in the season, you can move the bed-sized tractor to harvested beds to allow the chickens to glean, clean up any remaining bugs, and help ready the ground for the next crop or cover crop. You can use the chicken tractor to mow down mature cover crops, and so on. The downside with chicken tractors in the garden is that you can't use them to get much help cultivating young crops or controlling bugs in maturing crops.

Some folks use a combination of chicken tractor(s) and chicken moat(s) in their gardens. In theory, the moat model works like this: Create a more-or-less permanent chicken tractor (covered run) all the way around the garden and populate it. The moat should be at least 3 feet wide, and you can use it as a location for the birds to process compostables as well. In theory, the chicken moat will keep most crawling pests from migrating to the garden because the birds will pick them off as they make their way through the moat.

Chickens also can be used quite successfully to keep certain crops relatively weed- and bug-free if you let them roam freely in the crop. In these scenarios, you'd typically fence off the crop in question from those that the chickens will damage. For example, you can turn your hens into corn, okra, asparagus, sunflowers, potatoes, and other crops once the plants have gained sufficient height that the chickens can't damage the fruit or tender new growth.

Note: Potatoes don't generally fruit above ground, and the birds aren't fond of the leaves, but some food-safety experts caution that digging root crops in close proximity to fresh manure can increase the likelihood of bacterial contamination. We can thank industrial agriculture's overuse of antibiotics in feed, the overfeeding of grains to grazing animals, and other practices that all pretty much point to poor sanitation — a lack of animal husbandry, actually — for those superbugs. Frankly, the likelihood of contracting any serious disease from letting your chickens run in the garden is pretty slim.

The bacterial contamination caveat notwithstanding, you can turn your chickens into your corn patch with

little worry of making anyone sick. The birds will enjoy the shade and will feast on the young weeds and myriad insects and caterpillars they're likely to encounter. Some of the more aggressive hens will figure out how to fly-walk up the stalks as the ears fill. If you observe this behavior, simply move the chickens elsewhere. At that point, your corn crop is pretty much assured — so long as you have a raccoon-control method in place and aren't inundated with grain-robbing migratory birds.

Read more: Raise broilers safely with these easy DIY plans in [How to Build a Chicken Tractor for Raising Broilers](#).

This material was excerpted with permission from [Plowing With Pigs and Other Creative, Low-Budget Homesteading Solutions](#), by Oscar H. Will III and Karen K. Will.