

Chickens can be very useful to have in garden

By Dr. Brigid McCrea

A very popular trend of late is to keep chickens in the garden. They excel as tillers, compost turners, and sometimes as "bio-recyclers." To quote from "City Chicks" by author Pat Foreman, "...chickens' 'skill sets' can be employed ...for food production systems. ... chickens can help produce fertilizer and compost; they can turn yard waste into garden soil. Hens can also be used as mobile, clucking, (organic and non-toxic), pestidcers, herbiciders and insecticiders."

Chickens are definitely a pleasant addition to any backyard as they tend to work with you in the yard. They enjoy exploring under rocks or pots that you move or turn over. They squawk in delight as they search for worms or insects in the garden. Many keepers of chickens and guinea fowl note that their insect levels, including ticks, decrease because the hens are so efficient as pest control. They can help any home gardener control insect populations without the use of chemicals.

Got a weed problem? Not any more! Chickens in the coop will readily feast on any weeds that you toss in for them. Most chickens not kept in a mobile coop will denude their outdoor run so any plant material or table scraps that are occasionally thrown in will be readily eaten.

Hens do not require a rooster to lay eggs. Once hens reach 5 to 6 months of age, they will begin producing an egg almost every day. Depending upon the breeds and varieties that you choose, you can customize a flock to match your garden vision. Chickens come in hundreds of breeds, each with several color varieties from which to choose. Would you like a flock of all white feathered hens that lay only brown shelled eggs? It is easily done! Do you want a flock



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Having chickens can be very beneficial additions to your garden in a multitude of ways.

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of only the rarest breeds? That is possible as well. Do you want a multi-colored flock that will lay you the most beautiful eggshell color combinations? You can do that too!

As spring approaches, you will begin to see chicks in the feed stores. As with any new project, it is best to do your homework first. Luckily, there are two upcoming events that will provide you with excellent opportunities to learn more about getting chickens. The first event is the Delmarva

Poultry Fanciers Show on March 6 in the Dover Building at the Delaware State Fairgrounds in Harrington. The second event is COOPTASTIC! on March 13, also held in the Dover Building at the Delaware State Fairgrounds. In the state of Delaware, you must register your flock with the Delaware Department of Agriculture (the same is true for Maryland residents) no matter how small it is.

The Delmarva Poultry Fanciers Show will give you the opportunity to see hundreds of chicken breeds (both bantam and largefowl) of many different varieties (that

means colors). This event is free and is a great way to make new chicken friends. COOPTASTIC! is \$5 to pre-register (form must be post-marked by Feb. 26, 2010) or \$10 at the door and runs from 10 am to 4 pm. There will be 15 to 20 coops on display, 15-20 cold-hardy breeds on display, contests to enter, 'how-to' and educational workshops all day, a chicken clothing contest, poultry artists, poultry feed and equipment vendors, and more. For more information, visit www.cooptastic.bravehost.com.

Lastly, for those with friends and family in Maryland, there are two upcoming events during which you may learn more about chickens. On Feb. 20, the Poultry Party will be held in Prince George's County (Clinton, Md.). This half-day, educational event will run from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Another small flock meeting will be held March 1 at Kingstown Feed in Chestertown, Md. The agenda for this event is entirely different from all the previous poultry parties so feel free to join us. Pre-register for these events by visiting <http://healthybirds.umd.edu>.

If you have additional questions about starting a flock of chickens to compliment your garden, contact Dr. Brigid McCrea, Delaware State University's Small Flock Poultry Specialist, at bmccrea@desu.edu or (302) 857-6432.