

Raising Chickens in Urban Environments

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Raising small flocks of chickens within city limits is becoming a popular pastime for many families. Urban residents keep chickens in their backyards for many of the same reasons as rural residents. Some urban residents want to produce eggs or meat for their families to save money, live more sustainably, or simply know where their food comes from; others keep “fancy” or ornamental chickens (standard-bred birds of specific breeds or colors or both) to exhibit. Some urban residents have chickens to eat insects in the lawn and garden; others simply appreciate watching the birds in their yard, which can be a relaxing and sometimes comical sight.

Chickens can offer insights into the basic life processes and simple behaviors of another species. They provide companionship and the potential for social interaction with other chicken owners. In recent years, issues regarding sustainability and animal welfare, organic food and local food production, and the carbon footprint of large industry groups have increased people’s interest in raising chickens in urban environments.

Because of their small size, chickens are ideal for urban environments, especially when compared to other livestock species such as sheep, goats, pigs, and cattle. In urban settings, livestock-type animals do not receive the same reception from neighbors and city authorities as domestic pets like dogs and cats. Most cities have restrictions that ban most livestock, but a few chickens in the backyard are usually tolerated as long as policies (such as numbers of chickens, property line setbacks, and the absence of crowing roosters) are followed. However, there are some cities that do not allow any livestock.



Photo by: Lynn Ketchum, © Oregon State University

The city chicken hobbyist must remember that chickens are regulated in urban settings because not everyone enjoys chickens. Therefore, it is important that small flocks of chickens not infringe on neighbors who may be sensitive to or who simply dislike the noise, odor, flies, rodents, and unsightliness that can accompany a small chicken flock. Careful consideration of the animals’ facilities and management can reduce the potential to irritate neighbors. Most cities don’t have “chicken police”; complaining neighbors are the only way that the authorities learn there are chickens in a backyard. With proper facilities and management, in addition to some occasional friendly gestures—such as sharing eggs—you can reduce the potential for complaints, which could result in losing your flock of chickens.

Basic Guidelines

Following these guidelines can help you avoid conflicts with neighbors and help prevent the authorities from developing ordinances that ban chickens within city limits.

Location, health, and safety of your chickens

As the owner of chickens in an urban setting, you must consider carefully:

- Location of animal facilities in relation to residences
- Location of feed storage to avoid rodent problems
- Fly control
- Sanitation management
- Safe disposal of animal waste

You must also take into account the health and well-being of your animals. The chickens must be given adequate space, proper nutrition, sufficient attention, and a place to seclude themselves. An enclosure (coop) is necessary to provide protection from the elements and predators (Figure 1).

- **Site chicken facilities, whether enclosed or outdoor runs, as far from property lines as feasible.** Check local codes to determine whether there are setback requirements. Typical setbacks range from 10 to 25 feet.
- **Provide a minimum of 1 square foot of floor space (for permanent indoor confinement areas) per pound of body weight.** Most hens weigh from 4 to 6 pounds (bantams are smaller), so each hen needs from 4 to 6 square feet of ground space. In addition, when chickens are kept in enclosed spaces, there should be at least 3 cubic feet of air space per pound of body weight to ensure safe air quality and minimize odors. Enclosed facilities require regular air changes; vents or exhaust fans may be required in these facilities. In Oregon, cold temperatures are not usually a problem for chickens. However, heat lamps or other heat sources may be needed if winter temperatures dip into the single digits or below.
- **Allow chickens to roam in the backyard for at least part of the day.** These “free ranging” chickens will eat large amounts of insects, grasses, and seeds. They will also eat ornamental and vegetable plant gardens in their search for insects. Chickens will scratch up the garden and lawn grass. Restrict chickens to their own yard to reduce damage to desirable plants.
- **Provide a prepared diet (not scratch).** Even though chickens enjoy insects and seeds found in the yard, and most kitchen waste, hens also need a prepared diet to thrive and lay eggs. This prepared diet must be formulated to contain all the required nutrients. To discourage rodent populations, store feed in a container and immediately clean up any spills.
- **Clean enclosed animal facilities and any ranging areas on a regular basis.** Dispose of manure and litter promptly and properly. Used litter and manure are especially good for garden composting because of their high nitrogen content.
- **Identify a local veterinarian who is familiar with chickens and their diseases, and keep their contact information available.** Occasionally, chickens will become ill. Most often, sick chickens appear lethargic; they fluff up and sit in a corner with their eyes closed. Most chicken diseases do not affect people, so there is a low probability that sick chickens can transfer their disease organisms to you. Normal personal hygiene, including hand washing after touching chickens, is recommended.



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Figure 1. A chicken enclosure (coop) can be a simple construction. Coops should be adequately sized for the flock and kept orderly.



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Figure 2. A well-maintained chicken facility helps keep chickens healthy and neighbors tolerant of small backyard flocks.

Appearance and property values

The appearance of urban poultry facilities and equipment, including external runs that are visible to neighbors, should not detract from the appearance of the surrounding neighborhood (Figure 2). Exteriors of sheds and other structures should be kept painted and well-maintained. Weeds and trash should be removed from around the facilities. Proper landscaping can provide screening and also help muffle sounds. Old and unkempt structures surrounded by weeds and piles of trash are unsightly and unsanitary. Provide a privacy fence or shrub screening (at least 4 feet high) around any outdoor chicken enclosure.

Sounds and odors

All animals and birds have characteristic sounds and odors. Owners are obliged to house animals so that sounds are no louder than the normal, adult speaking voice and odors are not offensive. Owners can achieve this by insulating the chicken coop, providing adequate ventilation, and using good sanitation practices.

Conclusion

Diplomacy and cooperation with neighbors can help avoid conflicts. If you have chickens in an urban environment, follow these suggestions and you can reduce complaints and have a long and happy relationship with your neighbors. Happy neighbors mean that chickens will remain an animal that can be raised successfully and legally in urban environments.

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