The Benefits of Backyard Chickens

Whether you consider yourself to be urban, rural or somewhere in between, keeping chickens offers a wide array of benefits. As it turns out, chickens are not just fluffy and fun, they are good for you! With nutritional benefits of free range eggs, garden benefits of pest control and fertilizer, and health benefits addressing a variety of issues and disorders, it’s no wonder backyard poultry has gained popularity and led to city ordinances allowing urban flocks. With the rise of the locovore movement, there are more resources out there than ever before with information on how to keep and care for chickens, and plenty of support for getting started. These fine feathered friends are not just a fad, they are an asset to holistic health and sustainable living.

Fight Factory Farming with Farm Fresh Eggs

It can be challenging to make sense of labels on supermarket eggs these days. When terms like “free range,” “cage free,” and “naturally raised” can mean all kinds of different things, it’s important to know what you’re really eating. In factory farming, hens never see the outdoors. They are treated inhumanely, they are fed the cheapest possible diet filled with additives, and they produce eggs that are lower in nutrients.

There are many loopholes that allow farms to use the title “free range” when their hens are anything but. When you raise hens in your back yard, you know exactly where your eggs came from, and you stop supporting factory farming with your grocery dollars. True free-range eggs contain higher levels of Omega-3 fatty acids, beta carotene, Vitamin E, and Vitamin A.

They are also lower in saturated fat and cholesterol than conventional, store-bought eggs. Really, there is no comparison.

Natural Pest Patrol for the Garden

Rather than using harmful chemicals and pesticides in your yard and garden, use chickens instead. Chickens are known to reduce or eliminate populations of grasshoppers, termites, fire ants, slugs, fleas, scorpions, and even rodents by cleaning up food sources that might attract them. They eat various beetle pests like the Colorado potato beetle that can do a lot of damage. Beneficial nematodes and earthworms live far enough below the soil surface to escape chicken scratching, while the unwanted surface pests are eliminated. Chickens can also do a lot of damage to newly planted gardens with their foraging and dust baths, so it is a good idea to let them range around the outside of the garden or in garden rows with chicken wire protecting the beds.

Chickens are Master Recyclers!

Table scraps, unwanted weeds, and garden clippings can all be cleaned up and broken down into soil nutrients by your chickens. While you can’t feed them everything (coffee grounds, avocado, raw potato, and onions are on the “no” list), you can give your chickens most of your table scraps to supplement their food every day and keep that waste out of the landfill. Whatever scraps you can’t feed your chickens still make a great addition to the compost pile. Chickens are master recyclers because the nutrients in whatever scraps and weeds the chickens eat end up being recycled into an extremely valuable substance for the garden… manure!

Chickens Are an Excellent Source of Organic Fertilizer

Poultry manure contains all the essential nutrients for plant growth and offers a rich source of nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorous in the garden. Because of the high nitrogen level and nutrient balance, chicken manure is considered the best type of manure for garden use.

Chickens fully digest weed seeds, so you won't have to worry about those weed clippings sprouting back up as you would from horse or steer manure. Having a free source of organic fertilizer that doesn't have to be packaged or transported is not only valuable to the home gardener, it is an environmentally friendly alternative to chemical fertilizers and good for the earth. Every time you clean the coop, the resulting byproduct is a fresh pile of manure that can be recycled in your backyard ecosystem.

Since chicken manure is so high in nitrogen and tends to be "hot", you will want to either compost, make a compost tea, or till your manure into the soil at the end of the gardening season.

Chickens Reduce Stress

Watching chickens lowers stress levels. Studies have shown that tending chickens releases oxytocin, a stress lowering hormone. Not only that, it reduces blood pressure and decreases feelings of loneliness, which further contribute to decreased stress. There is an excellent book by Clea Danaan, *Zen and the Art of Raising Chickens: The Way of the Hen*, that delves into the backyard chicken movement and the simple, Zen nature of chickens' existence. Her book discusses how chicken watching increases our mindfulness skills. Caring for chickens gets us outside regularly, and watching their methodical

scratching and foraging around the yard slows us down and grounds us in the present, providing a meditative experience that can be difficult to achieve in our busy day-to-day lives, particularly in urban settings.

Chickens as Therapy

Chickens are now being used as therapy animals for people of all ages to address a wide variety of issues including dementia, Alzheimer’s, psychiatric illness, depression, and autism. Their calming effect helps with symptoms like anxiety, emotional distress and social frustration. There is also some good information supporting the role chickens can play for addicts in recovery.

Organizations are starting to bring chickens to nursing homes to use as therapy animals for memory loss patients. Agitation is a major issue for people with dementia, and holding a chicken has been shown to calm them down.

Short attention span is another issue, where watching chickens forage, take dirt baths, and roam around for short periods of time is a mentally engaging activity that can be dropped and picked back up again later as the chickens will still be doing the same thing.

Chickens have also been shown to reduce loneliness and depression for the elderly. For children on the autism spectrum, chickens have been registered as emotional support animals for their soothing effect. Not only that, they have been shown to increase social skills and play skills, enhance conversation abilities, and promote self-care and independent living skills through daily chores.

Not long after my own son was diagnosed with autism by the local school district, we began keeping chickens as backyard pets and he immediately bonded with them. At a time when social interactions were a challenge, he identified with the

chickens as his friends, and would spend time with them out in the yard as a self-soothing activity.

Getting Started with Chickens

If you've decided chickens are for you, you can start by reading up on websites like Back Yard Chickens, Fresh Eggs Daily, and The Chicken Chick, or books like *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens* by Gail Damerow, *Keep Chickens!* by Barbara Kilarski, and *Chick Days* by Jenna Woginrich. You may have a friend with their own backyard flock, and you could ask them to show you the ropes. Chicken keepers are usually happy to give a tour of their set up and talk about their chickens (trust me, chicken keepers LOVE to talk about their chickens).

Next it is important to check your local city ordinances or neighborhood regulations to make sure backyard chickens are allowed and to find out the limit. Most cities allow 3-6 hens and no roosters. When you're ready to get set up, you can visit your local feed store for chicks and supplies. Once you get chickens, your life and garden will be richer for it, and you will reap the rewards of delicious, fresh eggs!

Sources:

- *Meet Real Free Range Eggs* – Mother Earth News
- *Gardening with Chickens for Fantastic Natural Pest Control* – Mother Earth News
- *The Health Benefits of Pets* – NIH
- *Autism and Therapy Chickens* – Autism Daily Newscast
- *Local Mother Fights to Keep her Autistic Son's Therapy Chickens* – Fox 59
- *Chickens Provide a New Form of Animal Therapy for Memory Loss Patients* – Boston Globe
- *No Spring Chickens, Hens Help Heal Elderly* – Modern Farmer
- *I Love My Chickens – Discovering my Own Personal Recovery* – Psychology Today