

Chicken tractors let you move hens around yard

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Question: I have been reading organic gardening guides, and they use the term "chicken tractor." What is a chicken tractor?

Answer: Free-ranging chickens can be incredibly destructive to vegetable and flower gardens. If you want chickens to do their rototilling without ruining your flowers, fruits and veggies, you'll need to wrangle them. That's why building a chicken tractor is on my list of things to do this spring.

A chicken tractor is a portable pen without a bottom that you can move around to different spots in your yard. It permits a few hens to feed on plants, bugs and worms in any given area.

The Chicken City Web site, <http://home.centurytel.net/thecitychicken/tractors.html>, has photos of 140 different backyard chicken tractors, submitted by chicken tractor owners from around the world. Most of the chicken tractors posted on this Web site seem like they could be replicated with recycled materials, such as scrap wood, chicken wire, corrugated roofing and small wheels.

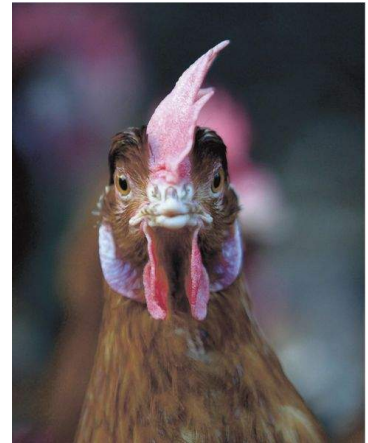
These contraptions can be moved around each day, so the enclosed chickens can graze on fresh greens and hunt bugs. In return, the birds rototill the garden's surface and leave behind fertilizer. Some tractors have a place for the chickens to lay eggs and sleep.

For the past three years, I have kept a small flock of hens that I sometimes allow to free range. I have enjoyed watching their antics, eating their fresh eggs and using their manure and coop litter to heat up my compost pile. They come running to see me when I arrive home. I like having hens so much that I am now raising five more little chicks to add to my "flock" of egg-laying, compost-making, bug-eating pals.

Having chickens at home isn't all roses. I'm constantly tracking bits of straw and chicken poop into the house. Then, there is the mortality. Without management, hens can get into a whole heap of trouble, really quickly. My first fatality occurred when my prized buff Orpington hen experienced playful overtures from my friendly Labrador retriever.

Don't forget about natural predators. If you have an area of your yard or wild meadow you aren't particular about, then it is tempting to let your chickens free range, but to do so runs the risk of having your pet poultry attacked by visiting hawks, owls, raccoons, foxes, skunks and weasels. Chicken tractors can help prevent these mishaps.

Backyard chickens seem to be in the news a lot these days. With our free-falling economy, food-safety issues and a growing local food movement, people are finding comfort in becoming more self-sufficient.



The Associated Press

Backyard chickens provide eggs and fresh manure for garden beds, but if allowed to free range they can tear up a garden, making a "chicken tractor" attractive. A self-guided chicken and duck coop tour will take place Sunday in Corvallis.

The urban chicken movement is burgeoning — a 2008 Newsweek article claimed that 65 percent of major U.S. cities allow chicken keeping. Some Oregon communities, including Corvallis and Portland, and other cities around the country, including New York City, Los Angeles and Seattle, all permit urban chickens. Ordinances generally limit urban and suburban residents to five or fewer hens, with no roosters

Locally, a cadre of citizens in Salem called Chickens in the Yard is asking the City Council to allow residents to keep as many as five backyard hens — but no roosters. City code currently prohibits keeping livestock and fowl within city limits except for areas zoned residential-agricultural. The Salem City Council postponed action this week on a proposed amendment to city code that would allow chickens in the city.

If you are interested in seeing well-kept backyard chicken coops in action, come to Corvallis from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday to the "Cooped Up in Corvallis" self-guided chicken and duck coop tour.

On the tour, you'll get a chance to visit eight chicken and duck coop sites in the Corvallis community and talk with backyard fowl keepers who can give you first-hand tips for integrating poultry into your backyard.

The tour is a fundraiser for the Corvallis Environmental Center Edible Corvallis Initiative, a local community gardening project. Tickets cost \$8 or \$14 per family. Tickets and maps are available at the First Alternative Co-op (North & South Stores) or at the Corvallis Environmental Center, 214 SW Monroe Street, from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. For more information, contact Leslie Van Allen at youthgardenproject@live.com.