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# Backyard Chicken Keeping

## Myths and Facts

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## Myth: Chickens are noisy.

Facts: The main rule for keeping urban chickens is “NO ROOSTERS ALLOWED.” Hens do not make a ruckus in the morning like their male counterparts and they are fast asleep in their coop by the time the sun goes down. (As you probably know, hens do lay eggs without the aid of a rooster. Roosters are only needed if you want to have fertilized eggs for baby chicks.) Hens make a soft clucking noise that is less noisy than a barking dog or a leaf blower.

Ordinance: Roosters are prohibited.



No Roosters Allowed!

## Myth: Chickens are messy and smelly.

Facts: Chickens themselves do not smell. This is a fact. It is only their feces that HAVE the potential to smell which is also true of feces from dogs, cats, rabbits or any other animal that is outside.

A 4-pound laying hen produces 0.0035 cu ft of manure per day. According to FDA, an average dog generates  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a pound of manure a day that cannot be composted because of the harmful bacteria and parasites (hookworms, roundworms and tapeworms) present in the fecal material that can infect humans. This waste is considered a major source of bacterial pollution in urban watersheds. Source:

<http://www.pacshell.org/projects/petwasteinfo.htm#facts>.

Dog waste contains higher concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus than cows, chickens or pigs and is a major contributor of excessive nutrients that flow into ground and surface waters through runoff from city sidewalks and lawns. Source: [www.csld.edu/Downloads/Sussman\\_2008\\_DogParks.pdf](http://www.csld.edu/Downloads/Sussman_2008_DogParks.pdf).

The reason people fear an odor problem is because their only experience with chickens, if they have any at all, is on a farm or commercial poultry operation. Under these circumstances, hundreds if not thousands of chickens are sometimes kept in crowded conditions with poor ventilation and without proper cleaning. As a result, ammonia can build up and these facilities

can stink. There is a huge difference between these environments and the very popular and rapidly growing urban chicken movement. A backyard chicken coop housing 6 hens does not create the odor issue that is concerning some residents.

Ordinance: Maximum number of chickens allowed per residential lot is no more than 6 chickens. The floors and walls of the coop shall be kept in a clean, sanitary and healthy condition with all droppings and body excretions collected on a daily basis or more often if necessary to maintain a sanitary and healthy condition. Droppings and body excretions shall be placed in a fire-proof covered container until transported off the premises.

### Myth: A chicken coop is an eyesore.



Photos of Rabbit Hutches



Photo of a Chicken Coop

Facts: City coops are typically small, clean and attractive because people love their hens and want to care for them. Attractive and inexpensive coop designs are available on various web-sites for those who are not able to build their own. There are many books and websites available on coop construction.



Currently in Rapid City, rabbit hutches, doghouses, play sets and workshops are all considered accessory structures and are legal. Chicken coops are very similar to rabbit hutches in size, design and function and should also be considered accessory structures.

Ordinance: Chickens shall be housed in a secure and well-ventilated roofed structure that complies with all applicable provisions of Title 17 and any applicable provisions of Title 15 of the city code.



## Myth: Backyard chickens will decrease property values.

Facts: There is absolutely no evidence that keeping pet hens within the ordinance guidelines would have any effect on property values. This is a property rights issue and while it is necessary to protect neighbors from any potential nuisance, homeowners should have as much freedom as possible with minimal government interference. If property values decreased with backyard chicken keeping, why would major cities like Atlanta, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Madison, WI, Denver, not to mention our surrounding backyard chicken-friendly cities – Sioux Falls, Missoula, Laramie, and Ft. Collins – support backyard chicken keeping?

Urban chicken keepers, like all good pet owners, are concerned about how their chickens might be affecting their neighborhood. They want their chickens to be a positive experience for everyone and they make an effort to keep an open dialog with their immediate neighbors to ensure any concerns or issues are addressed. The American Poultry Association advises that the rights of neighbors must be considered when raising chickens in the city, and that structures and materials used should blend into the neighborhood's existing structures. Actually, chickens can be kept in a yard so inconspicuously, that it may not be apparent that chickens are even around. There are eggs to share, and a chicken coop in the neighborhood can actually be a con-

versation starter, and thus it can enhance a neighborhood community.

Ordinance: The lot owner shall be required to obtain a yearly permit for keeping chickens from the Finance Officer. The



permit shall not be granted if there have been two or more nuisance violations that resulted in a conviction for violation of a nuisance provision of the Rapid City municipal code or state law.

## Myth: Chickens will create a health hazard.

Facts: In the US, there is no need at present to remove a flock of chickens because of concerns regarding avian influenza. The U.S. Department of Agriculture monitors potential infection of poultry and poultry products by avian influenza viruses and other infectious disease agents.

H5N1 virus (Avian Flu) does not usually infect people, but since November 2003, nearly 400 cases of human infection with highly pathogenic avian influenza A



(H5N1) viruses have been reported by more than a dozen countries in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Europe and the Near East. Highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) viruses have NEVER been detected among wild birds, domestic poultry, or people in the United States. Source: [www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/)

Research shows that there are actually more diseases that can be spread from dogs and cats than from chickens. Dogs and cats can spread parasites, bacteria, fungi and viruses to humans. Rabies is an example of a viral infection that can be transmitted to people from the saliva or bite of a dog. Cat Scratch Fever is a bacterial infection passed to people by cats. Each year, 25,000 cases are diagnosed in the U.S. Ringworm, a highly contagious fungal infection, can be transmitted to humans by touching an infected animal's fur or skin and is common in cats that roam freely. Roundworm, hookworm, tapeworm and Giardia are intestinal parasites that can be passed to humans from pet waste. There are also a number of tick-borne diseases that can be brought home from dogs and cats like Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Chickens can actually keep your yard healthier because they eat ticks and insects.

### Myth: Backyard chicken keeping is a fad.

Facts: Chickens have been domesticated since 10,000 BC and have played an important part of life ever since. Many of our grandparents had victory gardens and knew how to grow vegetables, can food, and raised their own chickens. But this valuable knowledge seems to have skipped a generation (or two) and we are anxious to bring it back on a smaller scale so that



our children will not be so far removed from these basic skills that they think food comes only from the grocery store. Raising 6-8 hens in the backyard is a tremendous opportunity for parents to teach their children about the responsibility that comes with caring for a pet and because of their small size and friendly demeanor, young children can easily handle hens.

Backyard chicken keeping requires conscious planning and preparation. It takes a great deal of time to learn about raising healthy chickens, to determine the appropriate design and build a coop, acquire all the necessary feeding and watering supplies before acquiring the chickens.

## Backyard Chickens and Sustainability

Sustainability, even though a broad concept<sup>1</sup>, can best be thought of for our purposes here as an effort to minimize our impact on the resources of the earth. Several outcomes are desired from the chicken flock experience:

1. Better food source for eggs. While the nutritional superiority of organic and homegrown eggs vs. conventional store-bought eggs is debated by some, it is certainly true that any harmful effects of antibiotics, hormones, or other chemical additives would be avoided with homegrown eggs. Anecdotally, those who keep chickens may boast about happier chickens yielding happier (more tasteful) eggs, but the growing sustainable and

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<sup>1</sup>For a great discussion of sustainability and the UN definition, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline\\_of\\_sustainability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_sustainability)

humane food movement has exploded—organic groceries in the US going from about \$14 billion in 2005 to an estimated \$24 billion in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

2. Compost/fertilizer. Chicken manure is a sought after fertilizer, and chicken litter (the wood shavings on the bottom of a chicken coop to absorb droppings) provide a weekly addition of about 4 pounds of organic material from the average backyard flock of 6 hens.<sup>3</sup> Even if there is no compost pile, chicken droppings or chicken litter may be worked into the soil around trees, shrubs, flowers, vegetables, or other plants as a general organic fertilizer. When chickens are allowed to visit a compost pile, they will perform needed labor: toss the compost pile, shred leaves, and remove unwanted grubs or maggots.

3. Food waste consumption. Backyard chickens, as omnivores, delight in eating vegetable scraps and almost all other scraps from the kitchen. All types of fruit and vegetable discards such as apple cores, peelings, stalks, etc., can be diverted to the chickens instead of to the trashcan or garbage disposal. In many cases, it may be preferable to feed such veggie discards to chickens rather than composting them (where they may attract rodents).

4. Insect and weed control. If chickens are allowed to roam a small backyard lawn even for a short period, they can perform

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<sup>2</sup>Oberholzer, L. et al (UGA). Organic Poultry and Eggs Capture High Price Premium. USDA Outlook Report. 2006. See <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/LDP/2006/12Dec/LDPM15001/ldpm15001.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Harrison, J. P. *Scientist's own experience (unpublished) for a period of 6 months in Georgia autumn 2009: about 1.5kg per week, with about 3/4 of the mass being pine shavings (non-dried).*

the useful tasks of weed and insect removal. Weeds with seeds are a prime target for chicken grazing. In the spring chickens will feast especially on dandelions, chickweed, and other low seed-bearing weeds to help the lawn. During the winter, warm-season grass lawns can benefit from chicken grazing since the birds will select out the green weeds in an otherwise brown winter lawn. Similarly, chickens spending a short time in the yard will help rid it of many unwanted insects and grubs. Mosquitoes have reduced chance of survival in shallow water exposed to chickens since the birds will feast on the insects in addition to disturbing the larvae. This “animal” solution to weed and insects would be seen as more sustainable in that pesticides and herbicides could be (and indeed should be) avoided, if the birds have access to a lawn area.

5. Low impact pet. Contrary to their commercially raised counterparts, backyard chickens are a decidedly easy to care for “low impact” pet. A two-gallon water supply will last almost a week in average weather (for a flock of six), and chicken feed is, well, as cheap as chicken feed. Typically these are the only resources required once an adequate coop is built. Backyard chickens should not require soaps, chemicals, medicines or other intrusive products. Their nesting material is hay (wheat straw), and a single bale will supply more than enough for the season. In terms of the commercial feed used, it is generally made from leftover animal, soy, and corn meal, and, for the domestic laying flock, commonly mixed without hormone or antibiotic additives.

6. Potential energy product. Although not commonly part of the backyard chicken cycle of sustainable events, chicken litter can be used as a fuel source in some types of wood-burning stoves. Commercially, chicken litter is pelletized for fertilizer or pellet burning stoves. Should a homeowner have a more advanced “green” heating system, chicken litter could be used in some heating stoves as a supplement.

7. Flock role in a backyard ecosystem. Backyard chickens can be part of a larger backyard ecosystem not only in their feeding, grazing, and waste recycling roles, but also by being a component in a symbiotic relationship with other pets, namely dogs. All herding dogs and many other mixed breed dogs gain great pleasure and purpose in watching over backyard chickens, whether they are in the coop or out on the occasional graze. “Guarding” the flock can be perceived as a job and for the herding dog and can distract those hyperactive herding dogs from other annoying behaviors. In return, the dogs will definitely deter crows, hawks or other predators from lighting in the yard.

In summary, the raising of backyard chickens yields several bona fide and scientifically demonstrable ways to encourage the average citizen to explore and experience the world of sustainable behaviors as well as provide healthy, safe, highly nutritious food for the family.



## Final Thoughts



*"Chickens suffer from a PR problem. People think they are dirty, noisy and smelly. The truth, a few cared for hens are cleaner and quieter than one big dog or the three neighborhood cats that poop in the flower bed. Plus you get eggs....." The Wall Street Journal*

*FORT COLLINS - The noise over last year's controversial urban poultry farming ordinance has died down with barely a squawk. Since the chicken ordinance went into effect in September 2008, 36 households have acquired chicken licenses. To compare, in the same time period, animal control in Fort Collins responded to 14,314 calls through last Wednesday. Of those, six calls concerned chickens, according to Bill Porter, director of animal control with the Larimer Humane Society. "Not much has happened," Porter said. "There were four calls of complaints from roosters crowing. ... The other two regarded smell and location of the coop, and both cases were unfounded." <http://m.9news.com/news.jsp?key=216227>*

The bottom line is that the proposed ordinance allowing backyard chickens in Rapid City addresses all of the major concerns that are often brought up by opponents. We want an ordinance that is restrictive but not prohibitive, one that protects our neighbors from potential nuisance but allows freedom and minimize governmental interference. Our pet chickens enrich our lives, teach responsibility, entertain us AND provide eggs. Plus they are just plain FUN!