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## Invite Some Chickens to your Garden!

Thomas N. Tomas

Most any size garden can benefit from a few chickens. They will root out persistent perennial weeds, eat insects, fertilize the soil, and provide eggs and meat in the bargain. All it takes is a little planning and a small investment in fencing and shelter.

I keep about a dozen hens and one rooster year-round. They get regular feed plus table scraps, damaged fruit and vegetables, insects, weeds and grass clippings. We get all the eggs we need, an occasional chicken dinner, and the best compost you can imagine.

To make my chicken pen, I built seven 4 x 12-foot panels out of 1 x 4-inch lumber and covered them with chicken wire. One panel has a four foot access gate built into it. I put four of the panels together to form a 12-foot square. I put the other three on top to keep the chickens in and predators out. The outside two top panels are hinged so I can lift them up to throw in grass clippings, leaves, or garden waste for bedding.

Feeders hang from a pipe across the pen, and fresh water is available at all times. For a coop, I use an old pickup camper shell, complete with roost and nest boxes, next to the pen. The whole setup can be taken apart and moved to a new location without too much trouble.

Over the summer, about a foot of compost accumulates in the pen. In the fall, I move the pen to a new location and apply the compost to the garden. By spring, another foot of compost has built up in the new location and it is time to move again. By adding grass clippings in the spring and leaves, straw or hay in the winter, fly and odor problems are kept down and the proper carbon to nitrogen ratio is maintained for good composting. The chickens do the turning and mixing of the compost, as well as providing the nitrogen.

In the spring, I may allow two or three of the hens to set on a clutch of eggs and hatch out some chicks. The grandchildren really like to watch the whole process from the time the hens are starting to set until the fluffy yellow chicks peek out from under her wings.

The chicks and hens can be put out on new grass, and by the end of summer another area is ready for garden. The roosters can be butchered and the best hens kept to replace burned-out cluckers destined for that great pot of home-made chicken noodle soup Campbell's hasn't even dreamed of yet.

When we toured Tom Larson's farm this summer, he showed us his "chicken tractors." These are portable, covered pens on skids that he moves each day to new grass. After starting his chicks in a brooder, he raises several batches of broilers in his portable pens. Fresh water and feed is available to the birds, and the grass supplements their diet.

By moving the tractors, the birds are always on clean ground. If the tractors are moved often enough, the grass will recover and grow back. It can be pastured again in a few weeks. If the tractors are left in place long enough for the chickens to thoroughly scratch up the grass, it can be tilled and prepared for garden.

To learn more about chickens in the garden and how to set up your own "chicken tractor," check out these books from your library or NSAS, or contact the publisher:

Chicken Tractor: The Gardener's Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil, by Andy Lee. Published by Good Earth Publications, PO Box 160, Columbus, NC 28872.

Pastured Poultry Profits, by Joel Salatin. Published by Polyface, Inc., Swoope, VA.

