

# Chickens and the Garden

Gardens can be great habitats for chickens. Yards with only a few plants will certainly be damaged, landscapes with varied levels and types of plants do best – the layers of plants give chickens a place to hide from predators and diversity keeps chickens from becoming destructive.

Chickens are great garden helpers! Chickens make wonderful pest controllers. They love scorpions, crickets, baby snakes, slugs and pill bugs. Chickens are also built-in composters. Almost all of our kitchen waste goes to feed the chickens – too ripe fruit, stale chips/cereal, baked potato skins as well as almost all leftover foods. In turn, chicken poop makes a great fertilizer.

Things to consider before letting your chickens free range include the number of chickens, size of your landscape and the amount of time your chickens are allowed in the garden. For successful free ranging, there must be a balance.

You may also limit damage to your garden by allowing only part-time free ranging or allowing your chickens out only when supervised.

## **Predators**

**Dogs and cats:** Many dogs will do well with chickens. My two dogs never bothered the chickens and loved interacting with them. However, dogs with “birding” in their breeds (Labradors, retrievers, etc) may need supervision when around birds. Unfortunately, some dogs will never be able to be around chickens without killing them. Cats are not as big a problem. After the birds reach their mature size, cats rarely bother them.

**Raptors:** Birds of prey can be a danger to your birds. Having a landscape with a lot of shrubbery and varying levels of plantings will give your birds a place to hide. You may also want to consider a chicken tractor. These mobile devices let you keep your chickens in an enclosed area while in the yard. Note: All birds of prey are protected species – it is illegal to harm them.

**Raccoons, foxes, coyotes, skunks:** These are some of the most worrisome of predators. Keeping your chickens locked up in a predator safe coop at night is key to keeping them safe. These predators are most active at dawn and dusk.

## **Protecting your landscape**

There are many ways to protect your plants while allowing your chickens to free range:

- Fencing off your most vulnerable areas will keep chickens from damaging new tender plantings. I recommend always fencing off your veggie garden since there will often be new, tender plants coming up with lots of enticing bare spots that chickens will love to scratch.
- Placing medium sized rocks around the base of newly planted specimens will keep chickens from scratching up tender new roots.
- Wooden lattices placed horizontally 2-3 inches above new plants will let the plants grow through and mature while keeping chickens out.
- Cloches can look attractive in the garden while protecting new seedlings.
- Netting around plants will also keep curious chickens out.
- Trellises give your garden vertical interest while keeping plants up and out of reach.
- Wire barriers work wonders in keeping chickens out of beds. I cut livestock fencing to a height of about 6-8 inches and weave it in an out throughout my flower beds. Once the plants mature, the wire is almost invisible, and the chickens stay out.
- Using containers is a great way to keep vulnerable plants away from chickens. I use tall containers for my succulents – chickens will eat these plants like candy.
- Keeping a dedicated area of your landscape for a dust bath will keep chickens from scratching up other areas of your yard. I sprinkle diatomaceous earth over our dust bath area periodically. This helps keep chickens mite free.
- Thickly planting your flower beds will also discourage chickens. Bare patches of dirt encourage chickens to scratch.

The best advice is to go slowly. Start with letting your chickens out for short time periods while you supervise. You can watch your chickens' behaviors and adjust your plantings accordingly.