

## **Gardening with Chickens**

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One of the benefits of raising backyard chickens is that they can be the source of some of the best fertilizer available for vegetable gardening.

With the proper handling, chicken manure can feed the garden just as the eggs can feed the family - simple and sustainable.

Imagine being able to feed those table scraps to an appreciative flock and being able to recycle their byproducts to produce more fresh food. Keeping it in the backyard eliminates driving those compostables all over the countryside and creating more of a carbon footprint.

Our modern agricultural practices result in the waste of at least 80% of the nitrogen that could be made available to the topsoil in the form of manure. Granddad would not have thought of a farm without animals. They were the source of animal fertilizer that was the key to enriching and maintaining the quality of the topsoil.

Chicken manure happens to be the highest in nitrogen content of all the manures. In fact, it has twice the level of nitrogen found in the steer manure that is sold at the garden store. And, it is rich in phosphorus and potassium as well. The nutrient designation is 20-10-10. In fact, it is so rich in nitrogen that direct application can burn and even kill the roots of growing plants. Therefore, it should be applied in only one of two ways: till it directly into the soil during the dormant period in the fall, or treat it by composting it.

Successful composting requires a ratio of organic material that is 20 parts carbon to one part nitrogen. This can be described as “browns to greens” as the nitrogen component is often made up of materials that are green, such as grass clippings. In the case of chicken manure, the bird droppings make up the nitrogen component. Raising chickens can work out the ratio mix quite well as the bedding materials used in the coop are a great source of carbon. The most recommended material is the baled wood shavings. The shavings are already in a size and consistency that is readily compostable. Plus, they absorb odors effectively. You can use hay, or “straw’s cheaper”, as the old saying goes, but it may not break down as readily.

In the process of the maintaining your flock you are steadily creating a compostable mixture within the coop. The birds are willing helpers with their constant foraging and mixing of the stuff. If your coop begins to give off an ammonia odor, it means there is a buildup of excess nitrogen and it is time to add to your compost pile. Remove the used bedding, place it in the compost pile and continue to keep it moist by adding water

periodically. Within six to nine months you will have finished compost that is capable of feeding vegetables either by mixing it into the soil or using it as a top dressing.

When considering the placement of your coop think about having the compost areas close by. Another consideration is to design the coop so that you have convenient access for cleaning it. Chickens can be very destructive in even the most established of gardens, so use discretion in determining what their role might be in foraging in and fertilizing your garden beds. However, providing fertilizer should be at the top of the list.

Want to learn more about raising chickens in your backyard and using them to support your gardening efforts? Come to the Saturday, March 24<sup>th</sup> class on “Backyard Chickens”. The class is free of charge and runs from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. It will be held at the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Attend the Master Gardener Spring Plant Sale on Saturday, April 28 from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial Building. It’s a great opportunity to purchase veggie starts and lots of other interesting plants for your garden and landscape.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.