



Want Chickens?

By Heidi Napier

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Backyard chickens are becoming more popular as more people discover that fresh eggs make these birds worth the trouble. And they aren't really that much trouble compared to most livestock and other pets. What else can make eggs out of worms, slugs and insects? And they make good pets and are fun to watch. If you are so inclined, you can even teach your chicken tricks.

It's best to purchase young chicks in the spring and raise them yourself. They must be kept warm for the first month or two and fed a special food formulated for growing chicks until they start laying eggs at 4-6 months of age. These young hens, also known as pullets, should be switched to feed formulated for layers. Scratch grains, leftovers, fruits, and vegetables can be fed as treats. Hand feeding treats to chicks also helps make them tamer.

When you buy chicks, make sure they are vaccinated for Mareks disease. All reputable hatcheries vaccinate day old chicks. The vaccine is not very effective if given to older chicks. The disease is the most common cause of mortality in backyard chickens but is not transmitted to humans.

Unincorporated El Dorado County permits chickens. However, if your development has CC&Rs, you should check those documents, and with your neighbors. Placerville's city council recently voted to allow chickens.

When you build a pen for your chickens, you should provide a coop that has perches for roosting at night, nest boxes, and is predator resistant. Raccoons are probably the worst local predators. They dig under and climb over fences, and they can tear chicken wire. The coop should be made of wood and hardware cloth or some other material that will resist raccoons, foxes and coyotes.

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Pine shavings or straw are commonly used as bedding in the coop. They help keep odors down and make manure cleanup easier. As a bonus, composted chicken manure makes an excellent fertilizer for your garden.

Join Master Gardeners on February 24 for a class on all there is to know about Backyard Chickens! Heidi Napier will cover choosing and raising chicks: their behaviors, handling, housing, nutrition needs, and health problems in small flocks. This free class will be 9am – noon at the Government Center, Bldg. C - Hearing Room, 2850 Fairlane Ct, Placerville.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.