



# Backyard chooks

**Part of the  
organic  
sustainable  
garden**

Photos: Mike Pignéguay

**Dee Pignéguay** shares her experiences of keeping hens in the urban garden

Chickens have been the flavour of the month for a couple of years now, but North Shore City Council regulations restrict the number of chickens I can keep in my urban garden to six, although once when I had four broody hens arranged in small runs on the back lawn, I had 19 on the property. Each mum and her clutch had to have a separate space. But I did discover that the chicks do know their mums, having once got a couple penned in with the wrong one!

My current run is built around a large, spreading feijoa tree which provides shade and discourages hawks and black back gulls from attacking the hens. The fence height is important and mine is just under two metres. I don't want the hens scratching up the garden or ending up in the neighbour's yard. And to be doubly sure I clip or trim the flight feathers on the outer part of one wing, precluding flight.

## The Hen Hilton

The coop, called the Hen Hilton, has a divider down the middle and two separate entrance ramps. Each section has two nest boxes with a lift-up lid on the outside for easy access when collecting the eggs. It is not necessary to have a nest box for every hen as they will crowd together in one nest box. This layout also allows me to run a temporary fence down the middle of the run. Once a temporary fence is in place I can introduce new hens to the flock, or have a broody hen sitting on eggs without being disturbed by the laying hens.

Hens need to be able to roost at night. The perch is made from dowelling which should be 75 to 100 mm in diameter and 300 mm off the floor, with enough room that when hens fly off the perch they will not collide with walls or nest boxes. The roof is made of corrugated iron which creates a hot environment in the summer

so gaps have been left between the walls and the roof to provide ventilation.

I use hay or dried grass clippings mixed with wormwood, tansy, mint, mugwort and any spare herb cuttings I have available for lining nest boxes and as litter on the floor of the coop. Once a month I rake out the litter and put it straight onto the garden as mulch. The litter containing chicken manure provides a nutrient-rich fertiliser containing nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus.

Chickens are great bulldozers; they love to scratch and will clean up any overgrown area – kikuyu grass, wandering jew or any noxious weeds soon disappear under the onslaught of the raking feet and sharp beaks. Once the area is clear I put down a layer of hay and continue to add garden refuse – a little like sheet composting. The chickens then get to work scratching and eating and adding their valuable manure. Every couple



of weeks I use the pitchfork and fork the material into the compost bins.

### Buffet menu at the Hilton

You learn a lot about chickens by observing them at feeding time. The dominant hen controls the food, pecking others and bullying. I get over this problem by having two or three small troughs placed around the pen, and I often scatter grain and corn among the hay that acts like deep litter in the pen. Should I wish to catch a hen for any reason, I just stand still close by the food, catching them easily as they are distracted while they are eating.

My garden is now producing four crops a year, and instead of letting my hens out to forage, I grow a range of greens in polystyrene boxes. Silverbeet, comfrey, Chinese cabbage, clover, lettuce and chickweed flourish in these mini gardens which, when ready, I put in the pen to provide fresh greens and vitamins. Once the plants are well eaten I remove the boxes. This allows the greens to grow again and stops the hens from pecking and eating the polystyrene.

Nasturtiums grow wild along the chicken fence, providing summer shade and seeds to prevent parasites. I also grow sunflowers, millet and sorghum, and feed the seeds to the hens. And when there are plenty of grass clippings I share these with

**Clockwise from top:** Always popular with children: a home school group on a garden visit.

The Hen Hilton

The completed back end (the trades entrance)

The rare breed club

the hens as well – they love them.

I collect seaweed from the beaches to build compost, make liquid manures and to feed to the hens. I drape the seaweed through the fence and let the chickens peck away. While at the beach I often scoop up a mixture of small pebbles, sand and shell, then dump it into the pen to provide the necessary grit that chickens need to grind up the food in the gizzard.

Chickens are vulnerable to heat stress. They lack sweat glands to remove excess heat. They hold their beaks open and pant, evaporating moisture from lungs and air sacs to lower body temperature. Prolonged hot weather causes hens to lose their appetite and consume extra water. Water containers need to be cleaned daily to remove residue in the bottom before they are refilled with clean, cool water.

