

5 Reasons to Keep Chickens and 4 Reasons Not To

By Heather Harris

We love our girls, we really do! If you are considering adding some chickens to your backyard homestead, here are my top 5 reasons to do so. Of course, with 5 reasons to keep chickens, we have to add “and 4 reasons NOT to”.

Bug and Pest Control

Chickens are great for bug control. They love to dig around for little bugs, and they are pretty adept at catching them midair as well. Every Summer, when the mosquitoes are all around, it's fun to watch the hens run around and chase them, jumping up and catching them.

Chickens are also really good mousers. As a matter of fact, our hens are better at catching and killing mice than our cats are. This is why we store their food in their coop, covered. We don't worry about mice, because the chickens will take them out.

Source of Eggs

This goes without saying, that having your own chickens will provide a quick source of eggs. Depending on the breed you raise, you will get anywhere from 250-350 eggs per hen per year. A family of 5 having 10 hens will be well kept in eggs with no difficulty. Of course, if you have laws that only allow a smaller number of hens, don't despair. Even 3-5 hens will provide plenty of eggs for you!

Source of Meat

Many people treat their chickens like pets. We do as well, they are “my girls” and they get spoiled often with treats in addition to their regular feed. Each one is named, and I know their personality very well. Some of them will come up to my son and squeak until he picks them up to be petted. But they are also working animals.

When they are done laying, we do make that difficult decision to cull them from the flock and use them for meat. I know that they have had a happy, healthy life and that they are being used to their full potential when we eat them. Some have issues with doing that, and that's okay. We just choose to keep our flock rotated, and cull the non-laying hens.

Source of Entertainment

Chickens are so relaxing to watch. Being social creatures, they have a pecking order, and watching your hens you will soon learn who is “on top” and who is “on bottom”. Watching them interact with each other, pecking around, scratching the dirt for worms and bugs is fun. Really.

We usually will sit outside, on a warm summer evening, and just watch the girls. It's even more funny to watch when one gets a worm or mouse. She'll run around squawking like she's saying “look what I've got” all the while trying to keep the others from

getting it. They will chase each other around, and try and steal the treat until one will finally just eat it.

Of course, when we sit outside with ice cream, they will try and get that as well...so we will have to put a bit of raw milk in a dish just for them at that time. Nothing is scarier than not sharing your ice cream with the chickens! Trust me.

Excellent Composters

Chickens are excellent at turning kitchen scraps into valuable compost. They can easily turn the compost pile over as well, keeping it aerated. Their manure is high in nitrogen, making it valuable for gardens, especially in "teas". We give our girls the scraps directly, in the compost pile, and they go to work. It helps cut the feed bill down for us, and they make compost that feeds the garden that feeds us. Permaculture at it's easiest.

Of course, there are some reasons that owning chickens isn't for everyone. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that, right?

Feed expenses

Especially in cold northern winters when the girls can't go and scratch for bugs, grass and the like, feed expenses can get really high. And unless you supplement with light during the short winter days, you most likely won't get enough eggs to counteract the price of the food. Even with supplemental light, our girls still eat 2x the amount of feed for the same or less amount of eggs.

Holes in yard

We call their dust bath holes "ankle breakers", because if you don't know they are there, you could easily trip and break your ankle.

Having a movable tractor means that you have to fill in new holes each time you move it. Having a stationary coop means that their dust bath areas can be on one spot, but then they can get really deep. We fill them in early spring with cooled ash from our wood stove, and compost from the pile. But they can be all over for our free ranging girls.

We try to keep some DE on areas that are known to be "favorite" spots, to attract them there. It helps some, but not always. They can also get out of their pens/runs/coop area and quickly decimate a garden within minutes. We have one we call "Hendini" because she can escape nearly anything to taste a fresh, on the vine tomato.

Never having a day off

Not even during the polar vortex can you stay inside. You have to make sure they have food; their water isn't frozen and is fresh and collect eggs. Every single day. If you want to take a vacation, you have to have someone watch them for you.

If you have family nearby, that might not be too hard, but if you are like us, with no family nearby, you have to rely on friends who sometimes are not willing or able when

you want to leave. They are a 365-day job. You also have to make sure their coop and nesting boxes are clean, eggs are collected, as well as cleaning out feeders and waterers on a regular basis, even in cold winters.

Having to decide if you need to cull them.

This has to be the hardest of all. For many, the chickens themselves become as pets. Deciding if you need to cull one for some reason is not easy. Many choose to just continue to feed a non-layer and keep it as a pet. Deciding on “pet” or “production” will never be easy. But, it’s one you may need to make as you look at keeping chickens.

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