

Choosing the Right Chickens for Your Backyard

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Lately, with all the talk about urban farming, getting back to basics and eating local, you might be thinking about getting chickens yourself. Raising a small flock of city chickens is a lot of fun, but there are a few things to consider before bringing home some random, albeit adorable, baby chicks from one of our local feed stores. If schlepping to the feed store lacks appeal, it is even easier to place an order for a boxful of domestic fowl from a mail order hatchery.

First, slow down. Pick the breed that is right for you. Most hens that are bred for backyard confinement are dual-purpose birds, suitable for meat as well as eggs. Some lay eggs with blue and green colored shells; some have crested tops or patterned or frizzled feathers. Cool! Some are really good foragers providing great natural pest control as they seek out and eat insects and worms in your garden beds. Chickens will eat dandelions and clover but, if given half a chance, they will also uproot and devour the lettuce and other plants in your veggie patch creating a veritable moonscape. Unfortunately, I've never seen them eat morning glory or horsetail.

Chickens are great decomposers, gobbling up leftover rice, pasta and over-ripe produce giving us plenty of manure to enrich garden soil. Raising exotic or rare breeds can also give us a good feeling in our hearts as we help keep obscure breeds from becoming extinct.

The thing that sways my chicken choice is basic personality. Many books describe chickens by size of bird, number of eggs per year, and type of comb. When it comes to my city chickens, the most important aspect of choosing a breed is not its show quality or size. It must have a pleasant personality. When a book describes how the Phoenix chicken avoids human contact, is flighty or aggressive, I pass. I go for a docile and friendly breed any day.

I want to be able to catch my chickens or at least coerce them to follow me back to their coop or out of the lettuce. Snacks and little whistles or clucking noises work as crowd control, but it is so much easier to be able to pick up my chickens if needed. While I have them in a gentle hold, not too many people think I am weird when I talk to them in funny little voices and stroke their necks or even check their feet.

Consider joining the fun and start building a flock of well-behaved poultry. Take a class to learn about the care and feeding of your city chickens - go to seattletilth.org/learn. For more chicken information and resources, visit the "Resources" pages under the "Learn" link.

Docile Breeds for Backyards:

- Black Australorp
- Buff Orpington
- Barred Plymouth Rock
- Jersey Giant
- Silver or Gold-laced Wyndotte
- Silkie

Seattle Tilth inspires and educates people to grow food organically, conserve natural resources and support local food systems in order to cultivate a healthy urban environment and community.

For more information, visit seattletilth.org.

Where to buy:

Check your local stores for breeds and availability:

- Bothell Feed Center
- Grange Country Store Co-op
- Hayes Feed Store
- Monroe Farm and Feed Corp
- Portage Bay Grange
- Seattle Farm Co-op

Mail order hatcheries:

- *mcmurrayhatchery.com*
- *mypetchicken.com*
- *dunlaphatchery.net*
- *shankshatchery.com*