

Backyard Chicken Facts - 5 Things No One Told Us

2015-01-20 09:19:43 By Mother Earth News

[Our backyard chickens](#) are now 12 weeks old and are well on their way to being full fledged layers.

We're still a ways from collecting fresh eggs every morning, but they look happy and healthy and, well, just 'right' wandering around the yard. Now it feels like a real homestead!

But there have been a few surprises along the way - some of them pleasant, some not so much. Here are a few things we've learned that might help you as you [decide whether or not to get chickens for your backyard](#).

#1. Backyard Chickens are Poop Machines

OK, I knew chickens produced a lot of manure, but I really didn't realize how much. Apparently, it's about 45 pounds per hen, per year. So for us, that's 45 lb x 15 hens = 675 pounds of poop. Pardon me, but holy cr*p!

Now that our 15 girls are out ranging in the yard most of the day, it's not so much of an issue. Except that we can't walk outside barefoot anymore (not that we really did anyway). But much of that ends up in the coop, as they spend upwards of 12 hours a day there, and will be more as the days get shorter. So what to do with all that high-nitrogen manure? Put it this way - I'm building a new composter! You can also make something called manure tea - you can [find chicken manure tea instructions here](#). Essentially, you can take care of a good chunk of your vegetable garden's nitrogen requirements with your chickens' well-composted manure. Pretty efficient, huh?

I've heard from others about the fact that their chickens pooped all over everything - furniture, vehicles, porches... you name it. So far, we're working on 'aversion training' to try to teach them what's off limits for perching and pooping, and we have no manure on anything other than the ground. I know some of you are probably rolling on the floor laughing right now, but I'm sticking to the plan. I'll let you know how it goes...

#2. They Come Running When They Think You Have Yummies

I have to admit, I never really thought of chickens as pets but livestock. But when they all come running when I walk outside, it's pretty darned cute. Of course, it could have something to do with the fact that they associate my presence with yummy snacks like canteloupe and fresh lettuce. But still...

#3. They Put Themselves to Bed at Night

This one really surprised me. I thought we'd have to be rounding them up at night if they were out ranging during the day, but that shows how much I knew about chickens! Turns out the term 'return to the roost' is actually a real thing. Come a certain light level, the chicks turn tail and trot on into the coop to settle in for the night. Who knew? Well, lots of people, but it was a really pleasant surprise to me. You gotta like pets that that walk themselves, put themselves to bed AND provide you with breakfast.

#4. They're Intensely Curious

I'm amazed daily by the hens' curiosity at just about everything in their environment. Watching them hop up and down to pick huckleberries, listening to them peck at various materials for the sounds they make (like the downspouts on the house - ladies, there are no bugs there), and seeing them explore various ground textures and materials. They really are quite fascinating to watch. But of course, this can work to your detriment, particularly if your hens are restrained in a small run or tractor. When bored and unable to access a varied environment, chickens can begin a slow slide into anti-social behaviour: pecking at each other, fighting... you get the picture. Something like siblings stuck in a long car trip. Just transfer, 'Mom, Maya hit me again!' to poultry and you'll get the picture, but with blood. If your hens do need to be cooped up, one of [our Facebook friends](#), Evy, has some super ideas to help keep them occupied:

- Dissolve unflavored gelatin in warm water in a pie pan or plastic container according to the package directions, place a length of string long enough to dangle out and be tied to something, then fill with molasses, grains, cracked corn, sunflower seeds, etc. Finally, pour in the gelatin (making sure the string reaches out of the container), cover it with cellophane (pull string through the center) and put it in the fridge to set. Once it's read, pop it out and watch the show!
- Attach frozen bagels or firm boiled noodles on string and hang them from the coop or run ceiling at hen-head height.
- Popsicles work great as a diversion, especially in the hot weather. They love it!

The key is to ensure they don't get bored and start to turn on each other. Chicken psychology - fascinating...

#5. They Like Lullabies

We have this one hen (her name happens to be 'Lucky', thanks to my son), [who falls asleep at the hum of a lullaby](#). So cute, and quite interesting. Singing to chickens - how can it get any better than that? Of course, I just heard that chickens will fall asleep if you put them on their backs, and Lucky is just tame enough to let him do it. Should I tell him?

The Wrap-Up

So far, our chicken raising adventure has been pretty uneventful. Alongside our chicken co-parents, we've raised them from day-old chicks to the young ladies I see running around the yard today. Their voices have just changed, and they no longer sound like chicks, but full fledged hens. They seem happy and healthy, curious and balanced. The things we've learned that no one told us have all been really pleasant revelations, actually, but it does go to show that there is no learning like practical experience.

That said, I'm sure I'll be able to write another 'things no one told us' when they start laying!

Article first published on [MOTHER EARTH NEWS](#).



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