
Becoming a Flock Family

The pros and cons on the new trend

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The backyard chicken craze is sweeping over Tulsa and surrounding areas, and the storm of cute little flocks popping up in the suburban backyards shows no signs of stopping.

My family and I jumped on the chicken boat a little over a year ago. After a solid two years of research, and convincing, we brought home a small coop, six chicks, two ducklings, and a few armfuls of chicken accessories from a local feed store. The journey was not always a smooth one, however. We bought the ducklings at the insistence of an old man who was concerned about the fragile lives and possible mortality of the chicks and its affects on our two small children. We no longer have the ducks, as they went to live at a pond with other ducks and space to run around, but the chickens we adopted that day and the ones we have adopted into our flock later have become an integral part of our family.

Living on barely a quarter of an acre with neighbors on all sides, it took quite a bit of research into city ordinances and codes to ensure that our coop was up to snuff. The city limits not only things like the number of hens allowed, but how many roosters (if any) you can keep, as well as where your coop must be located in relation to your house. Your zoning code can change from area to area, so this is where you should start if you are debating getting chickens. Don't forget to check your neighborhood code as well! You don't want to set up a coop only to have to take it down and sell off your new pets.

The library or local book store is a great first stop to begin to gather resources. Flip through a few books, find one or two that work for you and your style. Highlight, tab and make notes for easy access. I suggest one book on the breeds and chick development, and one general resource on chicken health. "The Chicken Health Handbook, 2nd Edition: A Complete Guide to Maximizing Flock Health and Dealing with Disease" has quickly become an easy go-to reference for anything from breeds to how to clip flying wings.

My primary concern was that I was not allowed a rooster. Many of the chicks you buy can't be accurately sexed (telling the gender of a baby chick) until they are juveniles. Luckily I found that our family vet not only took care of chickens herself but also was willing to take any roosters off of my hands and add them to her flock. Having a solid "rooster plan" is imperative for chickens in rural settings.

There are a lot of questions and things to think about before you decide that chickens are right for your family. As chicks, they are cute. They are tiny. They seem snuggly and so easy. What most people don't realize is just like having a cute, snuggly and easy newborn, they don't stay that way for long, and they go through many phases of development,

including mischief, before you can start enjoying the fruits of your labor- the eggs. On average, it takes about 6 months from the day of birth until they lay their first egg, and 1 year until they are laying regularly. Depending on the breeds of the chickens that you decide to obtain, the average number of productive years, meaning the number of years the chicken will be laying regularly, can vary.

Children and chicks; while they may generate many “likes” on your social media account, are not necessarily a good mix. Recent reports from the CDC have reported a drastic spike in chicken-born illnesses across the countries. Salmonella is only one of the possible nasties that you can get from your friendly flock. It’s nothing to scoff at. The CDC reports 1,120 cases of Salmonella in 48 states, 249 of which lead to hospitalization, and one death. The increase in the rate of infection is being linked to the rise in chicken pets. Salmonella won’t cause harm to your flock, in fact its part of the intestinal bacteria in healthy poultry. However, it can cause severe symptoms in humans, especially serious for tiny humans, and the elderly.



For this reason, My husband and I, both medical professionals, decided to wait on starting our backyard flock until our children were old enough to understand how to properly and safely handle the new family members. Chicks are so fluffy and adorable its even hard for adults not to hold them to their faces and shower them with love and kisses. With children, even older children, its almost impossible to stop the kissing faces from coming into contact with the adorable petri dish that is your baby chick. Proper sanitation is much easier once hens are outside within the coop, but the concern doesn't stop there. The germs and potential for illness can become airborne. So those baby chicks scratching around in cedar chips in your open concept living room, while you work to prepare dinner for the family, (hopefully not chicken), just put your family at risk. Let me tell you from personal experience, you really can't control the dust, and as the chickens grow, so does the amount of feces in their area and in the air.

Juvenile chickens can be moved to an outdoor coop. Do some research on exactly when the move should happen. This will depend on your area, the type of coop purchased, the amount of potential predators and the breeds of chickens you have selected.

Once in the coop, weekly cleaning is recommended to keep your flock healthy and happy. Regardless of if you choose to free range your girls or keep them in the coop, cleaning and sanitizing the coop needs to happen to keep everyone healthy and happy. Airborne bacteria is always a risk, and a non-respirator mask and disposable gloves should be worn.

After the cleanup is my favorite part. What to do with the droppings?

It wouldn't be a Master Gardner article without mentioning a garden, am I right?

That nasty poop and litter you just removed from your chickens is garden gold! Extremely high in nitrogen and other micro nutrients, the feces can be composited with your other organic matter into some of the best free fertilizer mother earth has to offer. Talk about recycling!

If you have decided to pull the trigger and become a fellow "mother clucker" (that's my chicken-mom name that I love calling myself, because what can I say? I think I'm funny,) then let me be the first to welcome you to the chicken underground. The first rule? We never stop talking about our chicken pets, we are worse than cat people... kidding.

Watching the flock interact and figuring out the dynamics of the pecking order, and the individual hen's personalities will quickly become your favorite new past time. My hens are known to regularly come and greet guests who come to the backyard to visit, and even to be protective of my two young girls.

Having handled them on a regular basis, we have not only adopted them as members of our family, but I believe that we have become part of their perceived flock. Even my dog has learned from them, and now regularly takes dust baths along side the girls.

The flock can tear up a yard quicker than the Tasmanian Devil, but they make up for it in eggs and affection. If you come over to my house while the girls are out and about, it would not be strange to see me sitting in the yard, with a chicken on my lap begging for pets, and a line of chickens also waiting their turn to hop up and get some hip rubs.