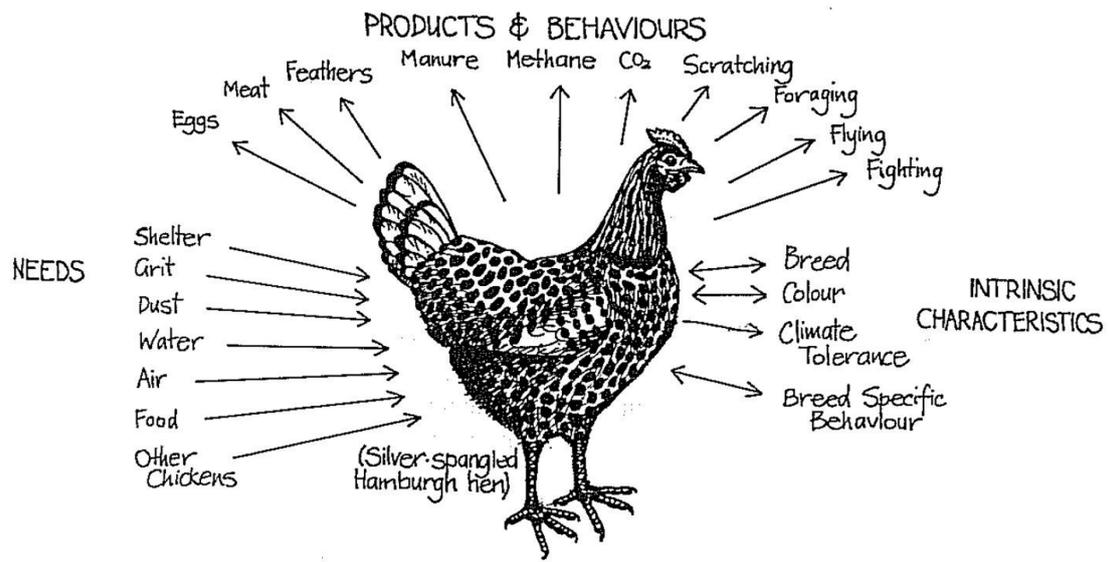


Permaculture Chickens

Everything in permaculture is about “Integration rather than Segregation”, this is especially important for chickens and other animals in a system. By looking at animals as design elements, permaculture shows how to best fit in the system and maximize its potential.



Chickens are wonderful pets and are fun to watch, and regularly produce home-made eggs. But, as shown above, if you provide them with the easily homemade needs of shelter, food (kitchen waste), water and company (several chickens), they provide, eggs, meat, manure, features, soil cultivation, pest removal and weeding, and many hidden ecosystem diversity builders. It amazes me that these animals seem to produce far more than they consume and are truly biology and food production catalysts for your system.

Before getting chickens, you might want to consider a few of their needs.

Housing Chickens

A chicken house (coop) must:

- Be fox and bird of prey proof, so dig in the wire and enclose the roof.
- Be weatherproof with adequate ventilation plus a draft free area for nesting boxes. Chickens are jungle fowl; they like shade and protection, with some warm morning sun.
- Have a perch – chickens like to perch off the ground at night. These perches should be 30cm or more off the ground, allowing 30cm space per bird. The manure will build up under perches, so this should also be a deep litter area. This allows them to scratch it around, stopping the need for continual house cleaning.
- Have food and water containers placed above ground level at about the height of the chickens' backs and must be kept clean and fresh.

- Be easy to access – you'll visit it at least once per day.
- Have nesting boxes where the chickens can lay their eggs in private. Nesting boxes should be about 300mm square. It is ideal if you can provide a hinged opening outside the coop, behind the nesting boxes, so that you can retrieve the eggs without disturbing your chickens (old lawn mower leaf-catchers or wooden boxes are good). Add straw or, preferably, bug repelling tansy/wormwood to the laying boxes. Allow 1 nesting box for every 3 chickens.

Deep Litter Scratch Yard

A deep litter scratch yard – which is a fox-proof fully enclosed area adjoining the coop – is essential for urban backyard chickens to control odours, flies and to scratch that chicken itch. Street tree mulch and any other carbon-based litter can be used to similar effect – as per permaculture principles use what you have. Cover the floor with 30cm deep litter, and every few months put this into your compost systems and replace the litter.

Runs and Chicken Tractors

Chickens need room to move about and, ideally, need a large run broken up into several separately-gated sections. Fences should be at least 1.4m high. This area usually doesn't need to be fox proof, as the chickens are only out in their run during the day. This run area should be your orchard if possible. Note that chickens will scratch the dirt continuously, so runs soon become devoid of vegetation and then become muddy, wet and unsightly – hence again advising deep litter runs.

Consider a chicken 'tractor' – a mobile pen without a floor. This can be moved around the garden, allowing the chickens to scratch the ground and eat weeds or left-over veggies, while spreading their droppings.

Chicken Plants

Comfrey, broad leaf plantain, kale, nasturtiums, weeds are all good fast growing green food.

Southernwood, wormwood, tansy, rue and garlic can all be placed beside the chicken run fence to be grazed for de-worming and general bug repellence.

Chicken Breeds and Buying Chickens

The brown chickens you normally see are Hyline, Hyline Brown, or Isa Brown. They lay up to 320 brown eggs a year for 2-3 years before declining. The Hyline has been especially bred as a factory chicken, calm, strong egg layers. You might also choose other breeds, but as you can't have a roster and 'breed chickens' in the city, meat breeds are not worth having.

You can look up the WA Poultry Breeders Society to find reliable breeders. The Quokka, Gumtree and other places may have some cheap backyard chickens but often you end up with half rosters and half hens so not that helpful, or cheap, in the long run.