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# Backyard Chicken Keeping

## Myths and Facts

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**Myth:** Chickens are noisy.

**Facts:** The main rule for keeping urban chickens is “NO ROOSTERS ALLOWED.” Hens do not make a ruckus in the morning like their male counterparts and they are fast asleep in their coop by the time the sun goes down. (As you probably know, hens do lay eggs without the aid of a rooster. Roosters are only needed if you want to have fertilized eggs for baby chicks.) Hens make a soft clucking noise that is less noisy than a barking dog or a leaf blower.

**Ordinance:** Roosters and crowing hens are prohibited.



No Roosters Allowed!

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## Myth: Chickens are messy and smelly.

**Facts:** Chickens themselves do not smell. This is a fact. It is only their feces that has the potential to smell which is also true of feces from dogs, cats, rabbits or any other animal that is outside.

A 4-pound laying hen produces 0.0035 cu ft of manure per day. According to FDA, an average dog generates  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a pound of manure a day that cannot be composted because of the harmful bacteria and parasites (hookworms, roundworms and tapeworms) that can infect humans. This waste is considered a major source of bacterial pollution in urban watersheds. Source:

<http://www.pacshell.org/projects/petwasteinfo.htm#facts>.

Dog waste contains higher concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus than cows, chickens or pigs and is a major contributor of excessive nutrients that flow into ground and surface waters through runoff from city sidewalks and lawns. Source:

[www.csld.edu/Downloads/Sussman\\_2008\\_DogParks.pdf](http://www.csld.edu/Downloads/Sussman_2008_DogParks.pdf).

The reason people fear an odor problem is because their only experience with chickens, if they have any at all, is on a farm or commercial poultry operation. Under these circumstances, hundreds if not thousands of chickens are sometimes kept in crowded conditions with poor ventilation and without proper cleaning. As a result, ammonia can build up and these facilities can stink. There is a huge difference

between these environments and the the very popular and rapidly growing hen movement. A backyard chicken coop housing 6-8 does not create the odor issue that is concerning some residents.

**Ordinance:** Maximum number of chickens allowed per residential lot is no more than 8 chickens. Coops must be kept clean, sanitary and free from standing water at all times.



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**Myth: Chickens attract rodents/predators.**

**Facts:** The truth is that rodents already exist in Dunwoody and are attracted to any unprotected food source like bird seed, dog food, cat food, open trash cans, fruit trees, and even koi ponds. There are preventative measures (chicken feed containers and coop designs) to nearly eliminate this concern.

**Ordinance:** Feed and any other food sources provided to the chickens shall be stored in predator-proof containers. Coops shall be designed and maintained in such a way as to be impermeable to rodents, wild birds, and predators, including, but not limited to, cats coyotes, dogs, raccoons and skunks.

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## **Myth: Backyard chickens will decrease property value.**

**Facts:** There is absolutely no evidence that keeping pet hens within the ordinance guidelines would have any affect on property values. This is property rights issue and while it is necessary to protect neighbors from any potential nuisance, homeowners should have as much freedom as possible with minimal government interference. If property values decreased with backyard chicken keeping, why would major cities like Atlanta, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Madison, WI, Denver, not to mention our surrounding and similarly zoned cities – Roswell, John’s Creek, Sandy Springs, and Decatur support backyard chicken keeping?

Urban chicken keepers, like all good pet owners, are concerned about how their chickens might be affecting their neighborhood. They want their chickens to be a positive experience for everyone and they make an effort to keep an open dialog with their immediate neighbors to ensure any concerns or issues are addressed. The American Poultry Association advises that the rights of neighbors must be considered when raising chickens in the city, and that structures and materials used should blend into the neighborhood’s existing structures. Actually, chickens can be kept in a yard so inconspicuously, that it may not be apparent that chickens are even around. There are eggs to share, and a chicken coop in the neighborhood can actually be a conversation starter, and thus it can enhance a neighborhood community.

**Ordinance:** A lot owner shall be required to apply for and obtain a permit for housing of chickens from the City Community Development Department. As part of the application, the lot owner shall provide the City with documentation that the proposed or existing coop will be in compliance with this ordinance. Prior to obtaining a permit, the City shall inspect the applicant's lot for compliance with the City Code and this section, and the issuance of the permit shall grant the right to a City Code Enforcement Officer to enter onto applicant's lot at any time to investigate any chicken-related complaints.



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## Myth: Chickens will create a health hazard.

**Facts:** In the US, there is no need at present to remove a flock of chickens because of concerns regarding avian influenza. The U.S. Department of Agriculture monitors potential infection of poultry and poultry products by avian influenza viruses and other infectious disease agents.

**H5N1 virus (Avian Flu) does not usually infect people, but since November 2003, nearly 400 cases of human infection with highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) viruses have been reported by more than a dozen countries in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Europe and the Near East. Highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) viruses have NEVER been detected among wild birds, domestic poultry, or people in the United States. Source: [www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/)**

Research shows that there are actually more diseases that can be spread from dogs and cats than from chickens. Dogs and cats can spread parasites, bacteria, fungi and viruses to humans. Rabies is an example of a viral infection that can be transmitted to people from the saliva or bite of a dog. Cat Scratch Fever is a bacterial infection passed to people by cats. Each year, 25,000 cases are diagnosed in the U.S. Ringworm, a highly contagious fungal infection, can be transmitted to humans by touching an infected animal's fur or skin and is common in cats that roam freely. Roundworm, hookworm, tapeworm and Giardia are intestinal parasites that can be passed to humans from pet waste. There are also a number of tick-borne diseases that can be brought home from dogs and cats like Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Chickens can actually keep your yard healthier because they eat ticks and insects.

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**Myth:** A chicken coop is an eyesore.

**Facts:** City coops are typically small, clean and attractive because people love their pets and live in close proximity to them. Attractive and inexpensive coop designs are available on various websites for those who are not able to build their own. There are many books and websites available on coop construction.

Currently in Dunwoody, rabbit hutches, dog houses, play sets and workshops are all considered accessory structures and are legal. Chicken coops are very similar to rabbit hutches in size, design and function and should also be considered accessory structures.



Photos of Rabbit Hutches



Photo of a Chicken Coop

**Ordinance:** Coops shall not exceed 6 ft in height above grade and must allow for a footprint of at least 2 sq. ft per chicken housed in the coop. The maximum single coop footprint size is 40 square feet. Coops must be located in the rear yard of the lot.

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## Myth: Backyard Chicken Keeping is a fad.

Facts: Chickens have been domesticated since 10,000 BC and have played an important part of life ever since. Many of our grandparents had victory gardens and knew how to grow vegetables, can food, and raised their own chickens. But this valuable knowledge seems to have skipped a generation (or two) and we are anxious to bring it back on a smaller scale so that our children will not be so far removed from these basic skills that they think food comes only from the grocery store. Raising a 6-8 hens in the backyard is a tremendous opportunity for parents to teach their children about the responsibility that comes with caring for a pet and because of their small size and friendly demeanor, young children can easily handle hens without the fear of being bitten.

Backyard chicken keeping requires extensive planning and preparation. You can't just go to the pet store to get chickens like a dog or cat or any other pet. It takes a great deal of time to conduct all the research, build a coop, acquire all the necessary feeding and watering supplies and then to finally get the chickens themselves.

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# Backyard Chickens and Sustainability

Sustainability, even though a broad concept<sup>1</sup> can best be thought of for our purposes here as an effort to minimize our impact on the resources of the earth. As regards the new urban backyard chicken movement, several outcomes are desired:

**1. Better food source for eggs.** While the nutritional superiority of organic and home-grown eggs vs. conventional store-bought eggs may be debatable, it is certainly true that any harmful affects of antibiotics, hormones, or other chemical additives would be avoided with homegrown eggs. Anecdotally, those who keep chickens may boast about happier chickens yielding happier eggs, but the growing sustainable and humane food movement has exploded—organic groceries in the US going from about \$14 billion in 2005 to an estimated \$24 billion in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

**2. Compost/fertilizer.** Chicken manure is a sought after fertilizer, and chicken litter (the wood shavings on the bottom of a chicken coop to absorb droppings) provide a weekly addition of about 4 pounds of organic material from the average backyard flock of 6 hens.<sup>3</sup> Even if there is no compost pile, chicken droppings or chicken litter may be place directly around trees, shrubs, flowers, vegetables, or other plants as a general organic fertilizer. When chickens are allowed to visit a compost pile, they will perform needed labor: toss the compost pile, shred leaves, and remove unwanted grubs or maggots.

**3. Food waste consumption.** Backyard chickens delight in eating vegetable scraps from the kitchen. All types of fruit and vegetable discards such as apple cores, peelings, stalks, etc., can be diverted to the chickens instead of to the trashcan or garbage disposal. In many cases, it may be preferable to feed such veggie discards to chickens rather than composting them (where they may attract rodents).

**4. Insect and weed control.** If chickens are allowed to roam a small backyard lawn even for a short period, they can perform the useful tasks of weed and insect removal. Weeds with seeds are a prime target for chicken grazing. In the spring chickens will feast espe-

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<sup>1</sup>For a great discussion of sustainability and the UN definition, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline\\_of\\_sustainability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_sustainability)

<sup>2</sup>Oberholzer, L. et al (UGA). Organic Poultry and Eggs Capture High Price Premium. USDA Outlook Report. 2006. See <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/LDP/2006/12Dec/LDPM15001/ldpm15001.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Harrison, J. P. *Scientist's own experience (unpublished) for a period of 6 months in Georgia autumn 2009: about 1.5kg per week, with about 3/4 of the mass being pine shavings (non-dried).*

cially on dandelions, chick weed, and other low seed-bearing weeds to help the lawn. During the winter, warm-season grass lawns can benefit from chicken grazing since the birds will select out the green weeds in an otherwise brown winter lawn. Similarly, chickens spending a short time in the yard will help rid it of many unwanted insects and grubs. Mosquitoes have reduced chance in shallow water exposed to chickens since the birds will feast on the insects in addition to disturbing the larvae. This “animal” solution to weed and insects would be seen as more sustainable in that pesticides and herbicides could be (and indeed should be) avoided, if the birds have access to a lawn area.

**5. Low impact pet.** Contrary to their commercially raised counterparts, backyard chickens are a decidedly easy to care for “low impact” pet. A two-gallon water supply will last almost a week in average weather (for a flock of six), and chicken feed is, well, as cheap as chicken feed. Typically these are the only resources required once an adequate coop is built. Backyard chickens should not require soaps, chemicals, medicines or other intrusive products. Their nesting material is hay (wheat straw), and a single bale will supply more than enough for the season. In terms of the commercial feed used, it is generally made from leftover animal, soy, and corn meal, commonly mixed without hormone or antibiotic additives.

**6. Potential energy product.** Although not commonly part of the backyard chicken cycle of sustainable events, chicken litter can be used as a fuel source in some types of wood-burning stoves. Commercially, chicken litter is pelletized for fertilizer or pellet burning stoves. Should a homeowner have a more advanced “green” heating system, chicken litter could be used in some heating stoves as a supplement.

**7. Flock role in a backyard ecosystem.** Backyard chickens can be part of a larger backyard ecosystem not only in their feeding, grazing, and waste recycling roles, but also by being a component in a symbiotic relationship with other pets, namely dogs. All herding dogs and many other mixed breed dogs gain great pleasure and purpose in watching over backyard chickens, whether they are in the coop or out on the occasional graze. “Guarding” the flock can be perceived as a job and for the herding dog and can distract those hyperactive herding dog from other annoying behaviors. In return, the dogs will definitely deter crows, hawks or other predators from lighting in the yard.

In summary, the raising of backyard chickens yields several bona fide and scientifically demonstrable ways to open the eyes of the average citizen to the world of sustainable behaviors as it provides for a safe source of eating.

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## Final Thoughts



“ Chickens suffer from a PR problem. People think they are dirty, noisy and smelly. The truth, a few cared for hens are cleaner and quieter than one big dog or the three neighborhood cats that poop in the flower bed. Plus you get eggs.....” The Wall Street Journal

FORT COLLINS - The noise over last year’s controversial urban poultry farming ordinance has died down with barely a squawk. Since the chicken ordinance went into effect in September 2008, 36 households have acquired chicken licenses. To compare, in the same time period, animal control in Fort Collins responded to 14,314 calls through last Wednesday. Of those, six calls concerned chickens, according to Bill Porter, director of animal control with the Larimer Humane Society. “Not much has happened,” Porter said. “There were four calls of complaints from roosters crowing. ... The other two regarded smell and location of the coop, and both cases were unfounded.”

<http://m.9news.com/news.jsp?key=216227>

The bottom line is that the proposed ordinance allowing backyard chickens in Dunwoody addresses all of the major concerns that are often brought up by opponents. We want an ordinance that is restrictive but not prohibitive, one that protects our neighbors from potential nuisance but allows freedom and minimize governmental interference. Our pet chickens enrich our lives, teach responsibility, entertain us AND provide eggs. Plus they are just plain FUN!