

Chicken Gardening for You and Your Flock



Are you chicken gardening? What kinds of vegetables should you plant in order to supplement your chicken's diet? Chicken gardening is slightly different than gardening only for people. Our flock of chickens, ducks, turkeys and guinea hens, love all sorts of vegetable products and scraps. In the winter months, I ask the local grocer for the trimmings from the produce and then a feast occurs. During the rest of the year, we are able to grow fresh garden produce and herbs for our chickens, ducks and rabbits.



Timber Creek Farm

Beginning in early spring, we plant the cool weather leafy greens such as romaine, kale, spinach, and cabbage. Also, broccoli and cauliflower like cool temps. Getting these plants started before hot weather hits is a must if you want them to survive a hot spell. Greens are one of the favorite treats for our flock and we save every bit that is not consumed by the humans, for the flock. If your property lacks abundant grass, feeding some other leafy greens can add essential vitamins and minerals into your chickens diet. Don't over do the greens however. large amounts of fresh greens can lead to intestinal upset and runny feces. Cucumbers are a refreshing treat for the flock. Placing a large chunk of cabbage into a wire basket

and suspending the basket at beak level adds a boredom buster the the flock's day.

Herb Gardening for Chickens

I grow as big an herb garden as I can each year. Starting in the early spring with some seeds and some started plants, I tend the herbs and frequently harvest and disperse to the flocks here on the farm. Since some herbs are tender I grow them in raised beds or container gardens away from the chicken flock. I don't want them trampled or the roots destroyed by a scratching chicken.

There are very few herbs that your chickens can't have as a treat or a health boost. In addition to garlic, pumpkins and dandelions, herbs will do the most good for your flock if fed fresh in small amounts frequently. In addition to herbs, many other plants are safe for chickens to consume. The herbs can be used to make infused oils, salves and teas to help correct health issues in the flock, too.

Many herbs will [lend specific benefits to your flock](#), marigolds, borage, carrots, and parsley, in particular, will boost egg laying and egg yolk color.

Don't forget the [benefit of growing herbs for the coop](#) environment, too. Not only will the herbs freshen the air, calm the hens, and relax the egg laying mechanism, herbs are great at repelling rodents and insects naturally. I love snipping herbs on the way to the chicken yard. Sprinkle the herbs on the nests, in the feed bowls, and even in the water! An herbal "tea" will add many health benefits to your flock.

Edible Flowers for Chickens

A great addition to your vegetable garden are edible flowers. Not only are some garden flowers good for insect repellent in

the garden but [chickens can eat some of the flowers](#) too. Violets, roses, mallow, daisies and sunflowers are good choices for a garden that you share with chickens.

Pumpkins Take Room to Grow, But the Chickens will Love the Treat

Pumpkins are an essential treat on our farm. Last year was a great year for pumpkins and markets in our area were selling pumpkins at the most reasonable price I have seen in years. I supplemented what we grew ourselves, with a huge box of small pumpkins from the farmers market. We had fresh pumpkins to give the chickens up until March.

An added, essential benefit of feeding fresh pumpkin is the natural worming properties. The seeds of the pumpkin contain a substance that renders the worms paralyzed. The worms are then expelled with the feces. We do not have a worm problem in our flock, but I still help prevent it with fresh pumpkin. Eating pumpkin seeds may not cure a heavy presence of intestinal worms but feeding pumpkin can help the gut stay healthy and unwelcome to future worms looking to stay. Pumpkins are also high in Beta carotene which helps promote good overall health. Make sure you give your pumpkins plenty of room to roam while they grow and provide well draining soil and almost full sun.



Cool Treats for Hot Summer Days

By far the favorite treat we plant is watermelon. Cool and refreshing to humans and flock members alike, nothing beats it on a hot, sultry summer day. I chop the watermelon into large chunks and they dive right in. The ducks will gobble up the sweet melon center all the way down to the thinnest rind. The chickens will eat the entire watermelon, rind and all. So the pieces the ducks leave behind eventually end up in the chicken run for the chicks to finish off. No waste here! If you have leftover cut up melon from a cook out, you can freeze the leftovers to bring out on a super hot day. [Water melon Popsicles](#)! It's a nice way to keep them hydrated during the heat. Watermelons also contain valuable vitamins.





Legumes – Cooked First!

Beans, such as green pole beans or peas are another item to plant in your garden for both humans and chickens and ducks. My ducks particularly love cooked green beans. (Feed only cooked or sprouted beans!) Oh the quacking it brings on when I show up with leftover green beans. Tomatoes and Corn are also welcome treats. We have trouble keeping the racoons out of the corn. They seem to know exactly when we are almost ready to pick the corn. The night before that, the racoons start partying in our corn field.



Other Chicken Gardening Cautions

When you are chicken gardening, you may be tempted to throw the entire plant to your chickens. This is not a good idea. The fruit of the tomato plant is an acceptable treat, but the green plant is toxic and can lead to illness in your chickens. Err on the side of caution and only feed the fruit and then compost your plants after garden season is over.

Plants from the nightshade family are toxic. These include potatoes, eggplants, peppers, and tomatoes. The chemical solanine is contained in the plants and green fruit of the plants in the nightshade family. Potato skins are toxic. Some people will cook the skins and feed them to the chickens. I have always erred on the side of caution and not given the potato peels to them, cooked or raw. If I feed the chickens

any potatoes at all, it is cooked first and probably left over from our dinner! We love potatoes too!

For an even more in depth discussion of harmful plants that you should not give your chickens, read Gardening with Chickens, chapter 4. Do you know the difference between sweet potatoes and white potatoes?

Other Potential Problem Veggies

Eggplants – Again, not a big favorite of my flock, maybe because I just don't give it to them.

Tomatoes- This is a tough one for me because my chickens have always loved tomatoes. The green tomatoes and the plant itself are potentially hazardous because of the solanine contained in the plant. I try to limit the amount of tomatoes to a few a week mostly because the flock seems to get some digestive upset from over indulging in tomatoes.

Onions have a different chemical in them that can prove to be toxic to chickens. Raw onions and the thiosulphate chemical can lead to anemia if fed to the chickens regularly. I don't give them onions unless there are some cooked onion in a bit of leftovers from our kitchen.

Peppers- Again, fruit is fine and enjoyed, the plant and any unripened fruit should not be given to the flock. Avocados should be avoided and the leaves from the rhubarb plant are toxic.

Fruit Trees

If your chicken gardening efforts include fruit trees, you should know that large amounts of the seeds of apples can cause toxicity and death. The chickens will enjoy some apples for sure but skip the seeds containing naturally occurring cyanide, to be safe.

Many in the chicken raising community feel that it is acceptable to feed all compost items to the chickens. The argument has been that chickens will eat what is ok and stop or avoid foods they shouldn't eat. In my flock observations, I have not found this to be true. My raptors will eat everything in sight, and they have free choice layer feed, two times a day of free ranging time and occasional treats from the garden and produce aisle.

Chicken Gardening and Destructive Chickens

If you do not fence in the garden with some material that keeps the chickens out when you aren't watching them, you will not have a garden for long. Yes, the chickens will do a fantastic job of eating garden pests, aphids, tomato worms and will help with some weed control. Unfortunately, their ability to know when to stop scratching, and when to stop taste testing every tomato on the vine is limited. When using your flock for true chicken gardening, I suggest supervision!

These are just a few ideas to get you started on your chicken garden. The list of potentially toxic plants is not complete but is based on the more common garden grown produce. There are plenty of sources available on chicken gardening. Here are a few more references to help you get started.



Other Suggested Resources on this topic:

[What Herbs Keep Chickens Healthy](#)

[Free Range Chicken Gardens](#) by Jessi Bloom available through Amazon.

[Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens](#), by Gail Damerow

