

Friends in the Garden
By Julie Silva

All of us are interested in the quality of our landscapes. It is possible to remove chemical controls of weeds and pests by the addition of home-grown landscape assistants. Many of these assistants come with other benefits as well as pest control and weed abatement. By adding poultry to your yard the benefit of home-grown eggs is a flavorful treat. Poultry may include chickens, ducks, turkeys, geese, and guinea hens.



The size of your yard will determine the number, the size, and the type of bird. The needs of poultry are basic; housing to sleep in at night, food, water, and protection from predators. In turn, poultry will keep the weeds down, grab any insect that crosses their path, provide you with eggs, fertilize the yard, and work up the soil. Housing should have a perch to nest on and protection from the weather. Your coop is a good place for clean water and dry food. The coop should be secure and safe from predators like skunks, raccoons, possums, dogs, and cats, large and small. Some coops have outdoor runs if your birds are not free range daily.

One of the easiest types of bird to obtain is chickens. The sizes range from bantam chickens, weighing a couple of pounds, to giants that weigh up to 13 pounds. Chickens come in many colors with many feather patterns. Some breeds are calmer than others. All do best by learning to be handled at a young age. A flock may consist of only hens, no rooster is necessary. Roosters do have benefits: first, an uncontrollable alarm clock, hatch able eggs, protection for the flock, and keeping the hens in line. Some roosters will become too aggressive especially with children and may be illegal in some communities. A flock of 3-5 hens will do well on a regular city lot. Birds may be selected by the number of eggs they produce a year, cold or heat tolerance, color of eggs, and temperament. All will produce better eggs than you can purchase at the grocery store.



Ducks also provide weed abatement, fertilize your yard, and lay eggs. If you are looking for a slug or snail annihilator, ducks will fit the bill. They are different from chickens in that they do not scratch the ground and they require a water source for swimming. The water source may be a kiddie pool to a pond. Water must be changed to keep it clean and fresh. Housing may be as simple as a dog house but it should be protected from predators. There are breeds that are calmer and need less time on the water, namely domestic ducks. Ducks do have some advantages over

chickens, they are quieter, ducks are hardy, they do not roost, and they are known for their funny antics. Be advised duck eggs are more porous and have a much shorter shelf life.

If you are looking for a watchdog in poultry, guinea hens will take care of your property. Guineas will sense visitors or trespassers alike with loud, shrill calls. Guineas have behaviors different from chickens in that they patrol their domain and advise of any intruders. Guineas also need to be taught to come into the coop at night or they will nest in your trees. If you are looking for an insect hunter, especially ticks, guineas are ferocious hunters. Guineas are very healthy and basically disease free.

Geese will mow your lawn. 70% of a goose's diet is grass. A pair of geese will need about a quarter acre to have enough grass for a year. Geese are great weeders in an orchard or vineyard. Just as with other poultry, they will need a safe sleeping shed and protection from predators. Geese are protective and will guard your property. They are a long-term commitment because they can live up to 20 years. By purchasing your geese as goslings and handling them early, they can and will imprint on you. In other words you are their very best friend.

Poultry is a great addition to your yard. They are weeders, bug getters, and entertainers. Your family will have many benefits and joys from these creatures coming to live with you.

Julie Silva is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County. UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County will answer gardening questions through their hotline at (209) 533-5912. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/Tuolumne_County_Master_Gardeners/. They can also be found on Facebook at Master Gardeners-Tuolumne County.