



**For Your Backyard Hens:
Growing Your Own Chicken Food**

Do you know that if you are using cover crops in your garden, you can actually save work and money – just by choosing seed that is chicken friendly? Many gardeners and homesteaders prefer to keep the flock out of the garden most of the time. But, when winter cover crops are ready to be tilled in (or mowed down for no-till cultivation), the chickens can process that ground for you.

They love doing this work because they eat like little kings and queens! They will also clean up any pests. Any permanent plantings or crops that are still in the ground can be protected from the chickens with row cover or bird netting. So, while the chickens clean and manure the garden, they are getting fresh grain, legumes, greens, and protein.

When planting time comes, just rake the area smooth, add a layer of fresh finished compost, and you are ready to plant. The layer of finished compost covers the raw manure just enough to keep it from splashing up onto the spring crops and keeps any manure just below the top surface where microbes can process it into nutrients for the plants. This system mimics nature and optimizes the health of your garden ecosystem.

Improving Your Pasture (or Run)

While the chickens are busy preparing the vegetable garden for spring planting, you can start another tasty surprise for them in their pasture or in the greenhouse. A chicken pasture can be created from any unused lawn area or weedy meadow. If you don't have the extra space to create a chicken pasture, an ordinary chicken run can be improved using these same techniques.

First cover the area with any organic material you can find – cover all exposed ground with wood chips, hay, spent crops, etc. This layer of organic material keeps bare ground covered and creates a base for recycling manure. Keeping the surface moist as it breaks down attracts more insects for the chickens to eat, and preserves beneficial microbes and nutrients in the finished compost.

A mulched surface is healthier for the flock, is better to walk on for people tending the chickens, and prevents valuable manure from drying out and blowing away. Consider too that a barren, empty chicken run is a haven for neurotic behavior in the flock. Busy chickens are happy chickens, and when there are bugs to catch or prize morsels to scratch up, pecking a hole in a neighbor's head becomes a lot less interesting – it's simple chicken nature.

Growing Chicken Feed

Create small patches of seeded forage, protected by a length of fencing that is wired into a circle. Remove the fence when the plants are ready for use as fodder. A height of 4 to 6 inches of growth is optimal for maximum health benefits.

The seed mix you use can be varied according to the season. This system is perfect for small flocks, because the fodder will be consumed before it becomes overly mature. This system is also helpful for those with a large pasture, because you can test different seed before you commit to planting your entire pasture with it – which can be costly.

***Farming Secrets says: Take A Little Time To Set Up Systems That Once Established
Require Minimal Labor And Save Money.***