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Joanne, let me address your questions in order first, then add some commentary. Since I'm sure you and your neighbors don't want to enact a policy or rule and then have to rescind it later because you didn't realize what you were getting into, please allow me to elaborate at length (something that Jim will tell you I'm really good at).

1. How many eggs does the average chicken lay per week?

Hens lay on a solar schedule, when the days are the longest you'll get the most production. When the daylight hours fall below 14 they may stop altogether or lay much less. Because of the difference in latitude, I'll get more eggs per year here in Oklahoma than you will in Chicago. You can extend production with artificial light but there are some down-sides to that. Everybody needs a break once in a while.

The 'average' hen will lay about 19-20 dozen per year first year, after molting the production will drop to about 18 dozen a year. If you want a handy average, figure about 2 eggs every 3 days. Hens of any breed are endowed with a fixed number of egg nuclei, around 4,000 or so. Most hens will lay for up to 10 years, or until the egg nuclei are used up.

2. How many hens would provide enough eggs for a family of 4?

Good question. I have 4 older hens that I keep for both eggs and because they don't take any guff from the dogs and so they can roam free. They provide Carol and I with all the eggs we can use. She bakes a lot and I like a couple of eggs most mornings. I would say that 6 chickens will provide all the eggs a family of 4 could consume, assuming they're not living on Quiche Lorraine. Keep in mind that eggs, especially naturally raised eggs, will last for a very long time in the refrigerator. It's not out of the question to keep eggs for up to a month or more with little effect on quality. In fact, if you want to hard boil them, you should let them sit in the fridge for a couple of weeks; it's almost impossible to get the shell peeled from a really fresh hard boiled egg.

Most cities that allow poultry to be kept have a 6 chicken/no rooster policy. Some have no limit (like Chicago) but don't allow butchering. That's the way it is here in Tulsa. Some cities have a setback requirement for the housing as well. Houston has a 30 foot from the house or other domestic structure requirement. If you're on well water then I'd make sure that I could place the chickens downhill or on the opposite side of the property from the well.

3. Got Manure?

First, chicken manure is one of God's great gifts to gardeners. It has the highest nitrogen content of any domesticated animal, hands down. Chicken "output" is roughly 1/2 of input, in other words; feed a chicken a pound of feed and you'll get about 1/2 pound of wet manure. Manure is about 85% water.

Does it smell? Of course it does but management has everything to do with it. My "money" birds are kept in a large run about 25 x 50' so most of the manure is outside. Carol and I sit out there in the evening, watching the chicken antics is way more entertaining than TV. Unless you open the house door there's absolutely no odor and even inside the house in the heat of summer the odor is a pretty natural one, not at all offensive (but then I grew up raising chickens). In the 12' x 10' laying house I put 1/2" welded wire fabric on the floor and put down pine flake and straw in layers, a new layer about once a month. As it

breaks down it drops through the wire mesh and 4 times a year I move the house with the tractor and pull it all out. It's fairly sweet smelling having composted for 3 months. I move it to a composter made from 55 gallon drums and finish it off with forest litter (leaf mold) and fresh cut grass combined with kitchen scraps. The result is a fertilizer that you can't buy in any store for any amount of money. I also compost any mortality and all the viscera, feathers and bones. I wouldn't recommend doing this in a semi-suburban setting. I have the room to do this without offending any neighbors.

Keep in mind that chicken manure is very "hot" in terms of nitrogen. If given an adequate supply of oxygen the nitrogen is fairly volatile and unless it gets wet and compressed it breaks down pretty quickly and with little unpleasant odor. Get it wet and keep it compressed and it will develop ammonium nitrate which you will definitely smell.

I have a range house in the front yard for 4-6 hens and there is absolutely no smell and our settin' porch is less than 20 feet away. Also, keep in mind that given the opportunity, a hen will make up 60% of her diet with flies if they're available. I used to put out fly traps but for the last 2 years they've remained almost completely empty. Also, our tick population has dropped at least 95%. If eating eggs that are essentially recycled insect protein bothers you then stick with the store-bought.

4. How many chickens on 2.5 acres?

I have 5 acres of which about 1/2 is cleared, so not much less than you. I have a layer house with 25 "money" birds and the range house with 5 in the front yard. 6 chickens in a rolling range house would easily fit into a 2.5 acre lot without any issue. I know people in Tulsa metro that have 6 birds in a 1/8 acre lot.

5. Coyotes...

Out here in the county we have coyotes, feral dogs, bobcat, I've even spotted cougars. Fortunately, I can shoot on sight pretty much anything that would come after my stock. That's probably not an option for you and certainly not a safe one. I have five big, black Oklahoma ranch dogs and they keep the place pretty secure. Coyotes don't like dogs and the feeling is mutual. Remember that most coyote attacks on stock are going to occur at night. Realistically speaking, I've never seen a coyote carrying a pair of wire cutters so build a good solid hen house and put a secure door on it and you're going to be fine (assuming you remember to close the door at night). A fellow cooked up a pretty good gizmo to help with this: <http://www.automaticchickencoopdoor.com/?gclid=CMGVnLPq0akCFQbt7QodCjfuMA> Once your chicks are about 7 weeks old you can put them in the housing. Leave them confined for about 2 weeks and when you let them out to range they'll put themselves to bed as soon as it gets dark without a fuss.

The average coyote can clear a 6' fence without breaking a sweat, so don't waste your money. You're best bet is probably electrified net. This has the advantage of being able to be moved easily so you can let the girls range around different areas and allow the turf to regenerate. This is a good product: http://www.maxflex.com/Nets_page1.HTM Our dogs got one zap each and we realized that Dr. Pavlov was right all along. I rarely have the fence charger turned on and all I have to do now is string the yellow electric tracing string around my garden, or anywhere else I don't want the dogs, and they won't go anywhere near it. I suspect that coyotes and bobcats would do the same. And no, chickens don't usually get zapped by electric fencing; they're feet are too small and their beaks don't conduct electricity.

Keep in mind that weasels, possums, snakes & foxes are going to be as big, if not more of a threat than coyotes. I pull a 4' snake out of the hen house at least once a year.

Now that I've answered your questions, allow me to make some comments.

Any keeping of livestock requires a complete commitment on your part. Who's going to take care of them when you're on vacation? They're going to require daily care, food and water. Eggs come like clockwork and you have to get them out of the laying box. You're going to have to educate yourself on symptoms of illness, parasites, social issues like pecking and cannibalism. It's not always pleasant and you have to prepare yourself for the occasional problem. I can tell you that if you take the time and care upfront on good living quarters and good care that most breeds are pretty low maintenance. Parasite checks are easy, just get a sample of fresh manure and any veterinarian can analyze it for a couple of bucks. If you have the chicks vaccinated for Marek's disease and Coccidiosis, which can be done at the hatchery for very low cost when you place your order, you've pretty much covered all the bases. You have to make sure that their feed doesn't get wet and that they have clean water at all times. Do that and serious problems are pretty rare.

We encourage anyone getting into chickens on a homestead to really consider a holistic approach. When you ask the question "how fast does the manure pile up", I start to wonder if you're not thinking through the whole process. On our little farm, we practice permaculture; very little in the way of external inputs are brought in and very little leaves the property. If you're going to have chickens then you need to have a composting capacity, otherwise it's just a very valuable product being wasted and you'll treat it like a onerous chore. We produce about 2 tons of compost per year, and it in turn supports the gardening production.

With 6 chicken in fixed housing and some yard to run in I would expect to clean it out every few months. Straw and pine shavings laid in every couple of weeks will allow it to build up cleanly and add to the compost value. If you're going to raise them in confinement then you're going to be in there about every 3 weeks. Build or buy a house that allows you easy access to do this.

Just a personal comment but if you have 2.5 acres you should be able to easily produce at least 2/3 of the annual produce, fruit, vegetable, and protein that you consume. We had 1/2 acre in Pennsylvania before moving to Oklahoma and we produced almost all of the vegetables we used in a year along with apples and peaches. I didn't have the traditional back yard like the neighbors but I sure ate well. Keep in mind that if you use weed & feed on the yard, or if you use Chemlawn or other insecticide on your lawn, you can't run your chickens on it. These chemicals will quickly build up in the fat of the chicken and the egg. Go natural or don't go at all and remember that no insect has ever built up an immunity to a chicken.

After doing this for 6 years we've gotten to the point where nothing of nutritional value is wasted. The chickens are feed on an organic based laying mash as well as all of the fruit and vegetable peelings and garden scraps (except potato). With foraging making up about 1/3 of their dietary input it's a pretty economical deal. They range in the yard and in select areas of our gardens during the fall and winter.

After doing this for 4 years they have so effectively broken the larval/adult insect cycle that my use of pesticide (albeit organic pesticides) has dropped at least 75%. The manure is composted along with all the other kitchen non-meat scrap and yard waste. This all goes on the garden which in turn produces even healthier and more disease resistant crops.

Attached is a photo of my range house. This would easily house 6 hens, more if I put another roost bar in. It's 8' x 8 and I built it for less than \$100 but I've seen ones in the hobby farm magazines going for thousands of dollars which is absurd. It's on pressure treated skids and I can move it easily with the

tractor. Put some implement wheels on it and you could easily push it with two people. We move it to the remote garden beds and put up temporary net fences. I buy the temporary plastic fence posts at Home Depot for less than \$2 each and use deer netting which is almost invisible. I can set up an area in under 15 minutes. We grow cover crops like clover and winter peas on the idle garden beds and then we let the girls loose. They eat the cover crop and any living thing within 3 inches of the surface. We get a bug free garden that looks like you tilled it with a sharp rake, no weeds and a nice layer of manure.

If I was present at your meeting I would encourage everyone to try their hand at it after doing all the homework. My 25 'money' girls (sometimes I feel like a pimp) lay enough eggs to pay for their feed. I have an egg route that allows me to sell all my eggs quickly and easily. Once you see and taste the difference between store-bought eggs and home grown you'll never go back. The Omega 3 fat in chickens raised on pasture/forage and bugs has been clinically proven to LOWER your cholesterol while store-bought eggs from chickens raised on animal protein based feed are a leading cause of high cholesterol.

Also, if I was present, I would recommend that you not allow roosters to be kept. You don't need them for egg production, they really do crow at the crack of dawn (and all day for that matter) and they will be tough on the girls doing, well, doing what roosters do naturally.

If you order sexed chicks from the hatchery there will usually be about a 10-15% error rate in their sexing and they will tell you so right on the packing list. So if you get together with some neighbors and place a community order for the same breed, you're going to have some cockerels in the mix. You're going to have to deal with them at about 16 weeks and I wouldn't let the kids give them cute names if I were you. If you grew up on a farm like I did, this is neither a surprise nor a problem; fried chicken for dinner. You want to consider how well you'll deal with this reality *before* you get into it.

One last thing. A lot of our success is based on choosing the right breed. Attached is a really good breed chart. We raise Barred (Plymouth) Rocks. They're extremely hardy, fend for themselves very well and are very good producers. They're not prone to extreme broodiness but they're good mothers when they do. My flock went from 105° to -14°F last year without any mortality. Not every chicken can do that. We have a tough environment here and need a tough chicken to deal with it. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend them as an all around breed. They're not considered a true "meat" breed but an hour or two in a pot with some carrots, onions, a half a bottle of dry white wine and who cares?

Remember that all chicken eggs are identical in nutritional value and there's absolutely no difference between white and brown eggs (except in the minds of some people). The nutritional value of the egg is determined by the quality of the feed.

Hope this helps. If you have any other questions don't hesitate to ask.

Erik Van Anglen