

PEEPER



She was such a little thing when I first set eyes on her. I had heard that you need to let a chicken break her own shell when she's first emerging into our world – it helps make them stronger just when they need to be – so I held back that urge to help. I can't say she was beautiful at that moment, but when she saw me she decided that she was mine, and I couldn't have been happier!

I never had chickens when I was young – it wasn't a popular thing back then if you lived in town. But, we had a winter home in Florida and my husband came home with a pair of chickens one day. I resisted, but only for a short time – they were a delightful addition to our garden. We let them have free reign during the day and kept them in a covered fenced area at night to protect them from the other critters that roamed the garden. I was just fascinated with them.

The male was a beautiful big red rooster. And he sure could strut his stuff. He would scratch at the mulch around our bushes until he found something he thought was delectable, then he would cluck to the female. She would come right over to enjoy whatever morsel he found, and he would stand guard while she ate. He was such a gentleman! Who could have thought?

The hen was a happy chicken, as you can imagine. And, she showed us so by laying eggs just everywhere. She would leave them and lay some more somewhere else. We decided to try incubating them. And, sure enough, after three weeks, that special little chicken pecked her way out of that shell and into my heart. She became my "Peeper" – you can probably understand why – and followed me everywhere. She didn't have any idea she was a chicken – after all, she had bonded with a person! She'd sit on the game table while we played cards and just have the best time – and so would we. (After she grew up a bit, I found that I probably should have changed her name to "Pooper".)

Peeper stayed my friend. She grew up quickly and enjoyed being wherever I was. However, when I had to come back to Fairbanks – we were only half-time Floridians – I had to find her a new home – a friend of mine who had many other chickens and a soft spot for those "special ones" took her and promised to make sure she had a good life.

“Backyard chickens” have become extremely popular, even in our cities. I would be a little careful about having roosters – I had a neighbor once who had a rooster that didn’t understand that he was supposed to crow only in the morning – but hens make such good gardener helpers! And, most cities allow you to have them.

They give you high quality eggs. Your kitchen scraps go in one end and nitrogen-rich fertilizer comes out the other. Composting it with leaves gives you great soil additives and reduces landfill costs. They are organic pest exterminators and they love to eat weeds. Their natural scratching and digging is good for your soil. They make the cutest noises. And, having chickens garden by your side helps unleash a stress-lowering chemical in your body so you can garden happier – and I can certainly personally vouch for that! Many call them “therapy chickens”.

Be careful not to let them too close to your seedlings, though. They seem to like tomatoes and zucchini, so plant a little extra to share. A little fence can help protect the things you don’t want them on top of.

According to Justin Rhodes, AbundantPermaculture.com, one chicken can de-bug 120 sq. ft. a week, convert 10 lbs. of food “waste” into eggs, fertilize a 50 sq. ft. garden in a month, break the life cycle of pests and diseases of one fruit tree within an hour, level a pile of leaf mulch in 2 days, till 50 sq. ft. of sod in 4-6 weeks, help do a quarter of the work turning a compost pile, and produce enough manure in a month to make 1 cubic yard of compost from leaves!

Add a chicken or two to your garden – help save our beautiful heritage chickens from possible extinction – and hopefully you’ll experience a “Peeper” in your life as I did.

Becky Hassebroek, Wildlife Gardening