

“Poultry Pets : : Vellotti’s Raising Chickens in their Back Yard”

BY KELLY LYNNAE ROBINSON ~ OCTOBER 10, 2007



Does your family dog lay eggs? Don't think so.
The **Vellotti** family and their brood. Photo by *Francis Delapena*

Ava Vellotti commits 20 minutes a day to watering and feeding chickens and occasionally changing hay. For her troubles she is rewarded with fresh eggs year-round, natural fertilizer, insect eaters, plus a dozen feathered friends that serve as moving lawn ornaments with lots of personality.

Raising chickens may seem like a daunting task, especially in a city environment, but some Boise residents find keeping chickens a low-maintenance, highly rewarding project. Boise municipal code allows chickens to be classified as pets rather than livestock when there are three or fewer hens (no roosters allowed, hens do not need roosters to lay eggs) on a property.

On lots of one acre or greater, Boise code permits livestock as long as half of the land is dedicated to keeping and raising the livestock. Property owners are allowed 12 chickens per half acre.

Vellotti, who lives off 36th and State streets, keeps chickens in addition to a full organic garden in which she and her husband Daniel raise tomatoes, corn, squash, beans, asparagus and peppers. She has two sons, ages 12 and 8, and she believes that raising her children in a more natural environment has been invaluable. They also use their property to teach at their year-round chess instruction business, **Vellotti’s Chess Kids**. The chickens, as well as, the other friendly animals are a big hit with all their students.

"You can show kids how the natural world works so much better than if you didn't have a live model," **Vellotti** said. "I think that kids who are around animals so much become more sensitive. Students enjoy learning and improving their chess skills on our 'working' farm, and animal tours are given on break-time at classes and camps."



Vellotti has used her chickens to teach her children about adoption. If a hen is presented with an egg that isn't hers, she will nest and raise it with the rest of her brood. **Vellotti** also talks about how the rooster protects the hens and fertilizes the eggs.

Twelve chickens produce almost a dozen eggs a day, which is far more than **Vellotti** and her family can eat. However, the USDA has strict rules about how eggs must be raised and sold, including what must be printed on the package.

Someone who wants to sell eggs must also acquire liability insurance in case someone who eats them gets sick. Most people just give away or trade any extra eggs with friends because the rigmarole of selling them becomes more trouble than it's worth.

Vellotti keeps her chickens in the coop during the day but lets them out for a couple of hours in the morning and evening. They peck around the yard, eat the bugs in the garden and mostly go back in the coop without a fuss.

While they are not strong flyers, chickens are capable of flying over fences or fleeing danger. However, they are dedicated homebodies. If chickens are safe, warm and well-fed, they will rarely try to run away from home.

According to USDA regulations, chicken coops must have four square feet per bird. A chicken coop is a must, even if the birds are free-range

Chicken coops can range from an \$800 Beverly Hills version to an old camper shell propped up on cinder blocks. Chickens aren't fussy. They just need perches, grit so they can grind up their food, nests (with decoy eggs so they know where to lay) and clean water.

Free-range birds, like **Vellotti's**, are healthier because their diets are higher in protein from the bugs and scraps they eat around the yard. They produce eggs with darker yolks and more nutritional value. **Vellotti** says she could never go back to store-bought eggs. "They just don't taste as good."