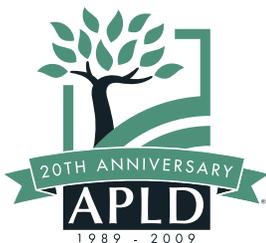


# The Designer



Association of  
Professional  
Landscape  
Designers

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2009 International Landscape Design Awards – Small Garden Gold Award Winner Andy Sturgeon, Andy Sturgeon Landscape and Garden Design, East Sussex, UK



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- Discover how to care for the environment in your own garden.
- Find APLD members in your community using our online directory.
- View stunning images of the featured work of APLD members.





# Chickens by Design & Hens in the News

By: Cheryl Corson, Associate member, APLD

Chickens on home landscape grounds are no longer unusual, and they present some interesting design considerations. As fashion statements, they also offer some good PR opportunities to designers who know how to work with them.

## Why Hens Now?

In our current economy one might wonder if this back-to-the-land chic is a response to lean times. Don't be fooled. The most relevant design precedent for the current trend is Marie Antoinette herself. In 1774 she was given the gardens and chateau *Le Petit Trianon* by her husband King Louis XVI. In 1783 she added *Le Petit Hameau* (small hamlet), with design input architect Richard Mique and landscape painter and designer Hubert Robert. The Hameau featured a "ferme ornee" or "ornamented farm," where the queen's servants grew food crops while she dressed up as a milkmaid, kept chickens and cows, and enjoyed privacy with family and friends away from the main chateau—until the French Revolution intervened.

Chickens have fast become media darlings as the trend of small scale poultry keeping spreads from the farm to suburban and even urban backyards across the country. Not only featured in publications such as *Backyard Poultry*, chickens have been sighted in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, NPR's *All Things Considered*, and even in *The New Yorker* magazine. Martha Stewart's web site shows a video clip of Martha herself lifting specimen chicks out of antique poultry crates to introduce them to her television audience. Noted landscape designer Tracy DiSabato-Aust, APLD, is pictured in her chicken aviary on the dust jacket of her bestseller, *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden*.

Consider too, the recent revival of humble vegetable, or "potager" gardens. Last year the *Wall Street Journal* gave them front page billing in, "The Vegetable Patch Goes Luxe" (July 25, 2008), in which a handful of landscape designers and their clients showed off vegetable gardens costing from \$10,000 to \$70,000 in design and installation fees. Both vegetable gardens and hen-keeping are no longer strictly the domain of do-it-yourselfers. There are opportunities here for designers whose planting expertise extends beyond ornamental horticulture.

So the designed rustic farm is not new and might, in fact, recur in extreme economic climates.

That said, there are real environmental benefits to keeping hens, especially on a smaller scale. When allowed to free range, they consume lots of bugs. The first year I kept four hens I hardly saw a Japanese beetle. Chickens had eaten all the grubs. Moles soon left the area in search of more grubs, and I wound up with fat hens, no grubs, no moles, aerated soil, free fertilizer and fantastic eggs. This seemed like a very good deal.

Having a few backyard hens means the freshest, antibiotic-free eggs and freedom from large-scale, long distance, inhumane poultry farming. Backyard poultry is a natural extension of sustainable land use practices. We are also learning that if well-treated, these creatures have sweet dispositions, form attachments to "their people" and, though vulnerable, have their own brand of chicken wisdom.





### Design Matters

Keeping them alive is the most important consideration in designing for chickens. What all coop styles have in common is exclusion of nocturnal intruders such as raccoons and possums. At dusk, chickens do come home to roost, but after that someone needs to shut the door behind them.

Some people keep their hens in completely enclosed aviaries as protection from flying predators like hawks and owls. Others allow them to roam freely by day. Still others prefer to keep them in coops surrounded by electrified fences made of



lightweight nylon, a practice that usually involves trimming one wing feather to prevent flyovers. Some of this will depend on the bird, available space and the architectural setting.

Chickens need shelter from cold rain, summer sun, and a clean nest box in which to lay eggs. Up to four birds will share one nest by politely taking turns. They also need fresh water. When temperatures are below freezing I set up an infrared lamp in the coop, though electric water heaters are also commercially available.

Some folks build “chicken tractors,” coops on wheels to set over a fresh patch of grass every few days. Some install chicken wire on the bottom of the coop to prevent predator access by tunneling. Each adult hen needs at least two square feet in the coop, plus four square feet in the chicken yard.

Coops can cost a lot or a little. I built my own for under \$100 using repurposed antique wooden shutters, though it took three months of weekends to do it. Others, such as the Omlet Eglu, come in stylish colors and sell for \$665 (<http://www.omlet.us/>).

### There ought to be a Law

Before purchasing your first batch of chicks or designing a poultry yard for a client, check local ordinances. Although web sites like [www.TheCityChicken.com](http://www.TheCityChicken.com)

list nation-wide municipal poultry laws, it’s always best to check further as some are incorrect. In Washington, DC, for example, chicken permitting is on the books, but one overly stringent sub-section serves as a de facto prohibition. As a result of an article that I wrote for a local magazine ([www.cherylcorson.com](http://www.cherylcorson.com)) and effective activism on the part of some Capitol Hill chicken lovers, “The Urban Farming Amendment Act” has just been introduced by a city council member and is awaiting a public hearing.

Chickens are attractive, personable, and productive landscape additions. As they straddle the line between livestock and pet, it can be sad when they can’t be protected from every risk. But I have found over the past three years that they are well worth the effort.

Cheryl Corson practices landscape design in the greater Washington, DC area and has kept chickens for the past three years. See: [www.cherylcorson.com](http://www.cherylcorson.com).



Cheryl Corson, Associate member, APLD