

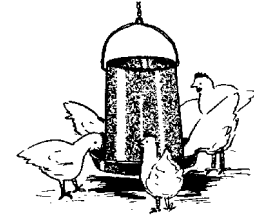


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**Cooperative Extension Service**

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## ***BACKYARD FLOCK TIP . . .***

### **CHICKEN FACTS AND FABLES**

Those of you who enjoy raising chickens as a hobby do not need me to tell you how interesting these animals are. You have the pleasure of observing them in action every day. It is difficult for me to understand why chickens never seem to get the credit they are due. To quote the Reverend Edmund Saul Dixon, nineteenth century author of one of the first published books (1849) on the management of poultry, "poultry has been too much undervalued as a means of study and a field of observation. Insignificant, and, to us, valueless wild animals brought from a distance, about whose history and habits we can learn little or nothing, are received with respectful attention by men of education and ability, are embalmed in spirits, treasured in museums, and portrayed by artists; but a class of creatures inferior to few on the face of the earth in beauty — useful, companionable, of great value in an economical point of view — are disregarded and disdained."

This installment of the "Backyard Poultry Tip" is a compilation of several facts and fables about chickens that might be of interest to you.

1. The domestic chicken is believed to have descended from one or more species of Jungle Fowl (Red, Grey, Java and Ceylon Jungle Fowl) native to southeast Asia. The chicken is thought to have been first domesticated in India, Burma (Thailand) and/or Malaysia around 3000 BC.
2. When the Persians conquered India in the fourth century BC, they were impressed with the domestic chickens they observed there and developed an interest in poultry for food and sport. Subsequently, the Persians introduced the chicken to Greece and Egypt. Romans became acquainted with the chicken through their relationship with Greece.
3. The Roman Empire was completely enamored with the chicken. Every Roman army had its own

#### **PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK**

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flock that accompanied it wherever it marched. These flocks, oddly enough, were used to help commanders decide whether to attack their foes. Supposedly, grain was thrown out to the flock early in the morning before the battle was to begin. If the chickens ate the grain hungrily, that was taken as a sign that the battle would have a favorable outcome for the Romans. If the chickens were unenthusiastic about consuming the grain, the Romans took that as a sign that the outcome of the battle would not go their way. Considering the Romans' legendary success in battle, the chickens must have been hungry more times than not. As the Romans conquered Europe, chickens were taken along for the ride and deposited from one end of the continent to the other.

4. The 1800's were the century of the chicken. In 1834, the port of Canton in China was opened, beginning an era of trade between China and Great Britain. Young Queen Victoria, still a teenager, took interest in a trio of Cochin chickens that she had received as a gift from China. When the young Queen's birds were put on exhibition, tens of thousands of spectators came to see these magnificent birds that were hyped to be "as big as ostriches, roared like lions, were gentle as lambs, and enjoyed petting like cats." Suddenly, ornamental chickens became a mania, spreading to the U.S. soon after. The phenomenal interest in chickens became known as "hen fever" and thousands upon thousands of ordinary people began breeding and raising "fancy chickens."

5. Edmund Saul Dixon's statement regarding the scientific study of poultry in the 1800's could not be farther from the truth today. The chicken has made great contributions to science and medicine. The nutritional importance of a number of vitamins and minerals was first discovered in experiments with chickens. In fact, more is known about the nutritional requirements of chickens than any other animal including humans. The basis of Louis Pasteur's discovery of the vaccine for small pox came from his previous experiments attempting to find a cure for fowl cholera. The chicken has been a great model for scientific research in genetics, embryology, immunology, nutrition and endocrinology.

So next time you are out admiring your flock, remember what significant contributions chickens have made to mankind in the field of science, as a food source, and in providing an enjoyable hobby. Certainly the chicken is "a class of creatures inferior to few ... in beauty - useful, companionable, of great value."

Source: The Chicken Book by P. Smith and C. Daniel. North Point Press, San Francisco, 1982.

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\*\*Consult with your poultry company representative before making management changes.\*\*

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”