



Eli Ziser, Andrew Wong and Piper Brandy, right, pose with one of seven chickens at Birch Lane Elementary School in Davis. Brock Sippola, left, picks an herb from the school's garden. After the students clean the coop, chicken manure is converted into compost, then recycled into the school garden as fertilizer.



KIDS OF A FEATHER

Schoolchildren raise a flock of chickens together

Enthusiasm has come home to roost at Birch Lane Elementary School in Davis, where a group of third-graders tends to the school's flock of seven chickens.

"Mr. Tickle Wickle is really calm and likes to be petted," said Piper Brandy. "And sometimes if she is comfortable, she likes to fall asleep in your arms." Sophia Spangler, who hopes this class project will lead to her family raising chickens at home, said, "I like the chickens because they are nice, but sometimes they are funny." Brock Sippola thinks the school birds are "kid-friendly" and "not aggressive."

The excitement felt by teacher Brian Bennett's students spreads from classroom to classroom at the K-6 elementary school, as chickens of various

breeds, shapes and colors provide inspiration for countless assignments. The chickens are part of Birch Lane's school garden program that cultivates farm- and garden-based education.

"In past years, the kids didn't have a lot of access to the chickens, so we decided that the kids really needed to take ownership of them," said Hope Sippola, Birch Lane's school garden coordinator and the mother of Brock. "Now, during recess, all of the chickens are out."

The goal of the program, she said, "is to teach the students about where food comes from, nutrition and how the chickens help our school garden through compost. Not many schools have chickens, but

Davis really loves chickens; you are allowed to have them in your backyard."

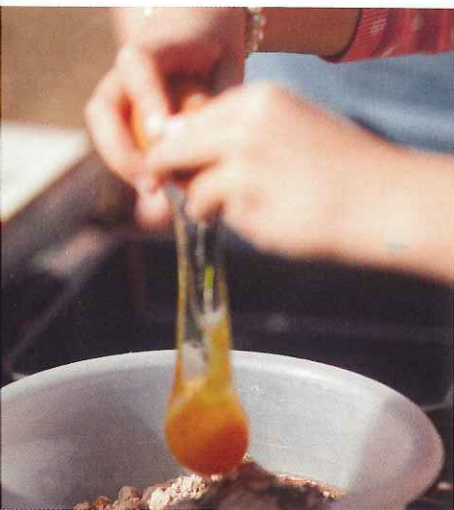


Teacher Brian Bennett and some of his third-graders stand in front of the school's chicken coop. Students learn how to grow fruits and vegetables, and care for the chickens through Birch Lane's school garden program.

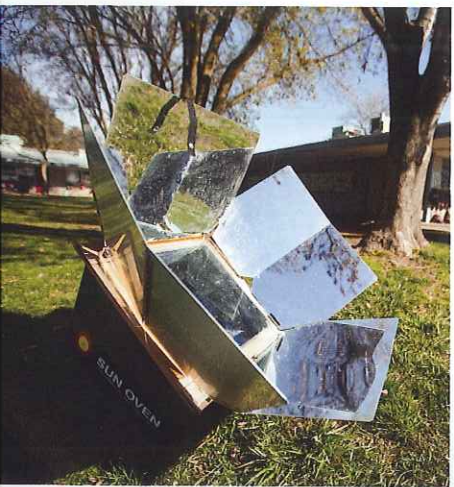




"Chicken Coop Rules," above, are posted to ensure the chickens are handled correctly and fed easily digestible produce from the school garden.



The eggs students gather are used as the basis of many assignments, including science, math, writing and art. Students above work as a team and follow directions while using the eggs to make brownies in the school's solar oven, left.



The students observe, feed and care for the chickens, and enjoy gathering the eggs they lay.

"By caring for the chickens, my students are able to see and understand another life form. In science, chickens fit right into our science life-forms unit," said Bennett, whose class inherited the chickens this year from another class. "Kids learn about life cycles, from hatching to laying."

Students also learn about where food comes from and, as a result, Bennett said, "they learn how to treat animals with respect." This is particularly beneficial for children who do not have animals or pets at home, he said.

The project also teaches students "how to self-manage and take turns, how to be nice, how to cooperate and above all—get dirty," Bennett added. Rules on a colorful, kid-made sign dictate that only a limited number of students are allowed inside the coop at a time. Children are encouraged to handle the chickens with care and feed them easily digestible treats from the nearby garden, such as soft fruits and vegetables, including greens, melon rinds, corn and grapes. Bugs are also on the menu. However, children are instructed not to feed the chickens garbage, candy, meat or hard fruits and vegetables, such as carrots.

The school has a safety program in place that stresses the importance of washing hands and using hand sanitizer after touching the birds. In addition, a student wears an orange vest as the assigned "chicken wrangler" to point out that he or she is trained to handle chickens, and to ensure that fellow students follow through with the hand-washing procedure.

The school's flock is comprised of three hens about 5 years old and four younger hens about 4 months old. The older birds, no spring chickens, are not laying as many eggs, so the class incubated about a dozen eggs. According to the American Egg Board, hens can lay an average of 250 to 300 eggs a year.

"One of the chickens we raised from an egg—Chocolate Chip—but the rest were duds," Brock said.

Seeking companions for Chocolate Chip, the class added Mr. Tickle Wickle (who is actually a Ms.), Coco and Sweetie.

Birds are housed in a fenced-in coop adjacent to the school garden where they have plenty of room to cluck about, and the coop is sheltered to protect the animals from bad weather. The coop also has nest boxes and a nearby water-drinking station.

Any classroom can check out a key and visit the coop during the day. Often among the first to sign up to “chicken-sit” is Carrie Ziser, a first- and second-grade teacher who raises chickens at home.

“Chickens are amazing,” said Ziser, whose son Eli is one of Bennett’s third-graders. While reading to her class with Mr. Tickle Wickle in her lap, the hen fell asleep and Ziser said with a laugh, “Maybe this is going to be a bedtime story.”

The idea for incorporating chickens into the school garden program originated from the community’s love of chickens and the town’s annual bicycle tour of Davis chicken coops, known as “Tour de Cluck,” held each May. 🌿

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Carrie Ziser, who teaches first and second grades, seats one of the school’s older chickens in her lap while reading a related story to her students.

LET’S TALK CHICKEN

Through the years, chickens have pecked their way into our everyday culture and language. Remember the chicken dance? You might be surprised at how much of our vocabulary is linked to chickens and their relatives. Here are a few examples:

- Nest egg
- Feather your nest
- Strut your stuff
- Flew the coop
- Chickened out
- Empty nest
- Pecking order
- Rule the roost
- A good egg
- Hatch an idea

Keeping flock and family healthy

Davis is one of a growing number of communities in California where residents can raise chickens in backyards. While each city has its own ordinances, Dr. Richard Breitmeyer, former state veterinarian and now director of the Davis-based California Animal Health and Food Safety Laboratory, says protecting the health of one’s family and flock are key considerations. Learn more at www.californiabountiful.com.

10 fun FACTS

- 1 There are more chickens on Earth than humans.
- 2 Some scientists believe the chicken is the closest living relative to the Tyrannosaurus rex.
- 3 A chicken egg takes about 21 days to hatch.
- 4 Asiatic breeds, such as the Brahma and Cochin, tend to be calmer and quieter than others.
- 5 The two red or purplish flaps of flesh that dangle under a chicken’s chin are called wattles.
- 6 Chickens can run up to 9 miles per hour.
- 7 White, brown, green, pink or blue: The breed of the hen determines the color of her eggs.
- 8 It takes a hen 24 to 26 hours to lay an egg.
- 9 Most eggs are laid between 7 a.m. and 11 a.m.
- 10 A chef’s hat is said to have a pleat for each of the many ways you can cook eggs.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture, American Egg Board, Storey’s Guide to Raising Chickens