

# Choosing Chooks

By Alethea Morison

The death of our 16 year old cat Phantom at the start of 2008 was a milestone for our family. The children had never known life without her and all of us went through a grieving period before the inevitable question arose, "Should we get another pet?"

The obvious answer seemed "No", at least to another cat. Our ecological conscience had developed in the last 16 years and, backing onto Artarmon Reserve, we felt we couldn't knowingly add to the local population of pet predators. Rabbits and guinea pigs were considered or even just enjoying our proximity to the teeming wildlife of the Reserve, but that isn't the same, of course, as looking after and bonding with your own pet.

Another possibility presented itself when the family attended a World Animal Day event at Figtree Vet. While we took the opportunity to become entwined with a small python, it was not this that caught our fancy – it was a display of 'Rentachook' chooks. This seemed a low-risk solution given that the deal included the option of returning them in the first 6 weeks if we weren't happy.

So I put my name down with Rentachook and a few weeks later the package arrived. For \$360 plus delivery, this consisted of two large handsome Isa Brown chickens at laying age, a compact fully enclosed coop with roosting beam, egg laying area and wheels so it can be moved around the garden, 25 kg of organic feed and a large bag of straw. We named the chooks Cleopatra and Nefertiti (Cleo and Titi for short).

The children and I liked them immediately. They fossick busily and happily for food and rush up to be fed their pellets and kitchen scraps, snatching up the odd grape or strawberry and trying to steal them from each other in mad chases around the yard. In their more relaxed moments they roll in the dust

and cluck soothingly. They quickly established their pecking order with Cleo as top chook, which means she bosses Titi but also stands up for her when there are competitors in the yard. We worried the food would attract rats and mice but so far the chooks are kept busy fending off kookaburras, magpies and blue tongue lizards.

My husband was less happy at first and would suggest several times a day that I ring up and have the chooks removed. They rampaged through his beautifully tended garden of native and exotic plants, exposing roots with their giant claws, shredding the leaves from all things green and covering every centimetre of path and lawn with chicken poo. Nor did they fully perform as children's pets. When my daughter, Laura, was sitting on the ground cuddling Titi, Cleo marched up and tore a tuft of hair from her scalp, eliciting screams of, "I hate Cleo! I hate her, I hate her, I hate her."

At each call to ring the chook-man, I tried a new action. I dug out a bush we didn't like to give them a dust bath area so they wouldn't make so much dust themselves and then, though it made them less 'free range', I built a simple run at the rear of the yard with some chicken wire and stakes. Every day I clean up the poo with a trowel as it's odorous and attracts flies and I also worry that it's too nutrient-rich to be allowed to leach into the Reserve unchecked. I have a vegetable plot laid out and some seedlings started where I plan to apply the composted poo.

While these measures dealt with some

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concerns, at 6 weeks we still had a problem – the chooks weren't laying. I almost began to wonder if it was all a con that eggs came out of chooks' butts. Then miraculously, a single egg was discovered and, now, they diligently produce an egg each every morning, laying them neatly in the straw at the back of their coop where a little door opens so we can collect them.

The eggs have a wonderful rich flavour though I have learnt, with the help of Jackie French's Chook Book from the Artarmon Library Sustainable Living Collection, that eggs can be too fresh for some purposes. For example, if you hard boil a freshly laid egg (as I did for a Christmas Day

salad), the shell sticks when you try to peel it.

I've also learnt that chooks are susceptible to heat and very reliant on plentiful supplies of cool, fresh water on hot days. On the whole though, they seem happy, healthy robust pets who are easy to care for and, as the member of the family without a green thumb, I find them a wonderfully simple way to raise my own food.

It's early days yet but at this stage we are content with our chooks – I enjoy the moments of rural life in suburbia before heading off to work in the city and the concept of using our food waste to feed the chooks which then feed us with their eggs and supply fertiliser for vegetables. I'm also happy that the only food miles directly associated with each egg are the few steps to the backyard.

Chooks may not be for everyone but they are well worth considering as a family pet and part of a sustainable home.



Laura with chook