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Want to See an Odor-Free and Maintenance-Free Chicken Coop?

Visit the Lafayette Community Garden

By Sophie Braccini



Hens get a lot of attention on the inauguration day of their new Lafayette home. Photo Sophie Braccini

added. Since the coop is next to open space it also needed to be protected from foxes and cougars, so the wire covers the run as well.

The coop is odorless and does not need to be cleaned - achieved through a design Papa John perfected over the years. First, the entire run and housing is built on soft soil, a mixture of the original dirt, wood shavings, straw and potting soil. Then the coop (the house where the hens sleep and lay) is built on cement blocks, elevated a few inches off the ground to provide what Papa John describes as 360 degrees of air circulation.

"The chicken poop falls on the soft soil, it dries very quickly and there is no smell," he said. Hens naturally scratch the soil and tilt it since it is soft, creating naturally aged chicken manure.

Maggie Archibald was the project manager of the chicken project. She is part of the community garden and has an interest in the birds. She will be taking care of the coop with a team of garden volunteers. "Those are compostable floors," said Archibald. "I will turn it around once in a while and add wood shavings, and in about six months to a year, we'll move the coop's soil and put it in our compost pile." This will close the cycle that makes chickens a great addition to the garden. "In the spring we feed them the grubs from the garden, in winter they get leftover greens like kale (that's how you get omega-3 yokes), and they will give us eggs."

The clean and pretty coop will also be a great demonstration site for anyone interested in having chickens in their yard. Right now there are code restrictions as to the type of properties that can have chickens in Lafayette - although there are a number of 'out-of-code' hens. Papa John is working with other volunteers and city staff to amend the code; a draft proposal should reach the City Council within one or two months.

"Our quote on the gate is 'In Nature Nothing Exists Alone.' Having chickens here will show that to people and teach how to care for things in a sustainable way," said community garden cheerleader Janet Thomas. "Having the chickens here enriches the educational opportunities of our community."

The coop will be open to the public starting in March, on Wednesdays from 2 to 5 p.m., Thursdays from 9 a.m. to noon, and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. For more information, visit lafayettecommunitygarden.org.

Lafayette Community Garden, off Mt. Diablo Boulevard close to Oakwood, officially inaugurated its sustainable chicken coop Jan. 11. Built per John Kiefer's (Papa John's) specifications, the coop will house 10 hens, require very little maintenance, and serve as an example of best sustainable practices in a semi-rural environment.

Last Saturday morning, adults and children alike were immediately drawn to the handsome structure, entered the run, and started feeding and petting the friendly white leghorns and ameraucana hens. It was exactly what the garden members envisioned: an educational opportunity for the community.

"We have completed the Fort Knox of sustainable chicken coops," said Papa John in his introductory speech. A sustainable coop is a chicken housing that's built for the longterm healthy living of the animals - and 'Fort Knox' means it is built to withstand the attack of any predator.

"The run is 16 by 24 feet and completely enclosed with chicken wire," explained Papa John. An 8-inch-deep trench was dug all around the coop where the 1/2 by 1 inch heavy duty welded wire was buried. "We need this so the underground pests can't get into the chicken's domain," he

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[back](#)

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