



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 32 Free Range Chicken Gardens Interview with author Jessi Bloom

Show Notes: www.LivingHomegrown.com/32

This is the Living Homegrown Podcast, episode #32.

Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast, where it's all about how to live farm fresh, without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host, national PBS TV producer and canning expert Theresa Loe.

Theresa: Hey there everybody. Welcome to episode #32 of the Living Homegrown podcast. I'm your host, Theresa Loe, and this is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm. And that's through artisan food crafting, like canning, preserving and fermenting, growing your own organic food, backyard critter keeping and just living a more sustainable lifestyle. If you would like to more about any of these topics, or my online canning courses, just visit my website LivingHomegrown.com.

Now as you know if you're a regular listener I kind of alternate between episodes that are mini lessons and episodes where I interview others so that they can share their expertise with you. And this week is an interview episode and I have a really special guest. I'm very excited. We're going to talk about how you can have chicken and a garden at the same time. And I know to a lot of you that sounds like it's mutually exclusive but trust me, it's not!



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

This week's guest is Jessi Bloom, who is an author of a couple of books. One of them is called Practical Permaculture for Home Landscapes. And the book we're going to talk about today is her other book called Free Range Chicken Gardens: How to Create a Beautiful Chicken Friendly Yard.

Now I promise that I will have Jessi back on another episode to talk about the permaculture because that's a really hot topic right now and it's a lot of fun. I thought it might be a better topic to dive into in the spring time. So today we're going to focus on her chicken book which is sort of a revolutionary sort of book. When that whole backyard chicken keeping craze started several years ago a lot of people were either keeping their chickens closed up inside an enclosed run all the time or if they let their chickens run free they immediately had problems with the chickens tearing up the yard or not being happy and in their space. Or they weren't happy with chickens in their personal space. And it can be a real problem. And Jessi's book takes you through step by step through how either you can design a garden from scratch that allows you to have both chickens and beautiful garden at the same time, or if you already have a landscape the the book helps you make adjustments to your current backyard so that you can introduce chickens and not have any problems. So it's kind of a pain free way to have a garden with your chickens at the same time.

And I really don't know of any other book that tackles this in such a fantastic way. Now before I go any further, let me just give you a little bit of background on Jessi. She is really multi-talented. But according to her resume, Jessi is an award winning ecological landscape designer and she's also a certified arborist and she is the lead designer and the owner of the company NW Bloom. Now NW Bloom is up in the Seattle area. It's a design company and it creates these ecological landscapes that are known for innovation and sustainable landscape design, construction and maintenance. And Jessi has this great approach to her garden design where she really creates a sanctuary for her clients that is also a sanctuary for the wildlife and for the earth. And that's what I love about her. She has this fantastic outlook and she looks at everything from a lot of different angles and at the same time creates the most beautiful landscapes.



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

So in addition to designing and consulting Jessi also does a lot of teaching and speaking nationwide. So she has a lot of talents and she's a very, very busy girl. It was hard for me to be able to get our two schedules to come together so that I could talk to her on this podcast but I am so glad that I did. She's a dear friend and she is incredibly giving of her information so if you ever have a chance to hear her talk or meet her in person absolutely go because you will walk away with a slew of information in your back pocket. She's really great. Now she's so incredibly knowledgeable that I featured her on an episode of our PBS television show, Growing a Greener World. So I will be sure to link to that in the show notes so that you can kind of connect a face to a voice and you'll also get to see more of what she does. So just a reminder that in the show notes for every podcast I always have a lot more information. So in this case I'll be including a lot of great resources on where you can get started with chickens, and links to Jessi's book and her website and a complete transcript of the episode. And I will also include a link to the PBS episode if you want to watch it online. So just go to LivingHomegrown.com/32 for all of that information after you listen to this episode.

Alright, so let's get started with my interview of Jessi Bloom, the author of Free Range Chicken Gardens.

Theresa: Hi Jessi, thanks so much for joining me today!

Jessi: Thanks for having me I'm so excited to talk chickens!

Theresa: Yeah and I know you're having a storm right now so if anyone hears anything weird in the background flying through the air I know you're having a big windstorm. So hopefully we don't cut out or anything but I think we're ready to go so let's go for it. I wanted to ask you first of all right off the top I know that you're an ecological landscape designer and I wanted you to just kind of explain that to the listener so they kind of understand where you're coming from.

Jessi: Okay, well basically my job involves a lot of different tasks. And generally I am a consultant and a designer and I help people construct



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

gardens or landscapes that honour ecological systems. So basically I create habitat. I create habitat for humans, I create habitat for chickens, I create habitat for wildlife. And I look at all landscapes as an ecosystem.

Theresa: Perfect, perfect. And the reason I wanted you to come on is you have two fantastic books and so this time we're going to talk about your chicken book and I'll have to have you come back to talk about your permaculture book. But I wanted to have you on this time to talk about some of the information you have in your free range chicken gardens book. It's so fantastic because you kind of took a different angle than most chicken books. I have a lot chicken books on the shelf as I'm sure you do too as you first starting out and they kind of go about telling you how to raise your chickens and how to raise baby chicks and all of that but you took this angle that we can have chickens and a garden too. And that kind of doesn't always sound like it would work and I know a lot of people have issues with that and that's what I love about your book and so could you explain kind of what your book is about.

Jessi: So free range chicken gardens is about creating a habitat for your flock. And making it work so it's not just a chicken jungle but a garden that actually works for both the chicken and the homeowner.

Theresa: So when you say creating habitat for your flock I think the part that someone might not understand is you're really talking about incorporating the chickens in your garden getting them to go through your garden but not losing your garden to them. You can still have a pretty garden and still have chickens too right?

Jessi: Definitely. But there's a lot to know as you've experienced. Chickens don't necessarily differentiate the plants that they want to eat versus the plants that you want to eat so there's kind of a lot of rules of thumb to follow when designing and creating your space and also how you raise your chickens.

So the first thing that I always tell people is get your numbers right. If you want to have a flock of chickens and you have a very small backyard don't

get too many chickens. That's the first rule. There's a term called stocking rate that we use in agriculture or carrying capacity that we look at in an ecological sense in terms of how much land do you have and how many organisms can it support. So if you have 30 chickens on a tiny lot chances are the chickens are going to destroy and decimate anything growing and green and it won't ever grow back. So you really need to get that correct first and I tell people start with three chickens or five potentially, depends on your city and how many you want to raise. But you need to start small when you raise chickens in your garden.

Theresa: That is an excellent point. I know in one of your talks you were talking about someone who was having all these chicken problems and then you asked her how many chickens she had and it was some astronomical number and she had a really small space. So it's hugely important you don't go bonkers. And it's you know it's an easy thing to do. Those little baby chicks are so cute I know a lot of people who go thinking they're going to get 3 and they come with 12. [laughs] They do grow up!

Jessi: Yes.

Theresa: Yeah it can be a problem. Yeah so is there a square footage like how many chickens per square foot?

Jessi: I talk about it in the book and I have some formulas that people can use but basically if you're just starting out there is no reason to go over 3 or 5 until you can really understand how the chickens operate. Especially if you've never done it before. And then you slowly learn with your chickens. I actually got started myself as I was learning horticulture, I was going to college and I wanted to have self-sufficient farm and chickens were a part of that vision so I was learning how to garden at the same time as raising chickens and one of the things is we learn from our mistakes. So when I talk to people and they're hesitant because they think well my chickens will get eaten by predators or my chickens destroy my garden, a lot of that is our own fear. And in some sense we're never going to get over that fear until we try it, until we learn and experience it for ourselves.



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

Theresa: Good point, good point. I know in your book you featured lots of different gardeners, I got to be one of the gardeners that you featured and that was really fun because you and I didn't know each other before you wrote this book. And we met through a mutual friend, Robin Haglund and you were kind of studying how different people in different areas because we all had different issues we were handling and I thought that was so clever because everyone has a different perspective. But the thing that you also cover in the book is some of the gardening benefits of having chickens and a lot of people just think about it they're thinking oh I'm going to have chickens so I can have eggs but there's a lot more that you get from your chickens than just eggs, right?

Jessi: Oh yes, chickens can be the gardener's best friend. And it takes some work. But depending on how the chicken can access your garden, if they have free range, they can take care of pests, they can help you weed, although that's where they can get into a lot of trouble if you don't protect your seedlings, they can actually do so much for us and they are naturally forest critters and they live in mature landscapes in the wild and they are very comfortable in that setting where they can hide and take care of themselves and when you need their help if you have something like a chicken tractor or you have fencing that is really set up to put them to work they can do incredible things for us. And not to mention their manure can be great fertilizer. They can either spread it around for us or we can compost it and apply it to where we really need it.

So there are a lot of benefits and unfortunately if we keep them locked up we're never going to experience them. But I've had a lot of success first hand where I had a pest once come in and it was new to the area and so a lot of horticulturists were trying to figure out how do we manage this pest. And I got it on my raspberries and I decided well I'm going to see what the chickens can do because I am an organic gardener. I don't use any chemicals, wasn't going to spray which was the only solution others came up with and I put my chickens to work. I had a tractor cut down the cans and set the tractor on top so they could aerate through the soil and pull out any larvae or left fruit that may have been harboring this insect. And the

next year I didn't have that insect at all. And so I know that it can be a wonderful thing for gardeners if they let the chickens do the work.

Another great example that I have I was in Kauai a couple of years ago and there is a botanical garden, a United States botanical garden on the island and there's chickens there that run wild, kind of feral, very self sufficient. And I went to the botanical gardens there was chickens everywhere. And some people have an attitude like oh well we don't like the chickens they're a nuisance. And I thought well I should ask the botanical gardens staff how they manage the chickens or how they feel about it because a lot of people don't want chickens in their gardens. And when I approached them and asked how do you take care of them they said we actually welcome the chickens because they do so much work for us. We don't have to weed, they help us with pests, they fertilize and they're stinking cute to see running around. And all the visitors comment about how charming it is to have these chickens hanging out in the garden. So it's not just you know a few of us gardeners. There are more and more people experiencing the benefits of chickens. And the more we let them be natural and do what they do best the more they can help us. We just have to design a system or you know structures, fencing, what not to make sure that they'r not going to do more damage than good.

Theresa: I agree 100% and one of the things that I do in my garden with my chicken tractors I kind of use it in opposite ways versus whether it's in Spring versus it's in fall. In the spring tie I have a lot of seedlings so my chickens are in the chicken tractor. But in the fall I let the chickens run free and are kind of cleaning up the garden and if I have any seedlings the seedlings are under the chicken tractor. So I kind of use the chicken tractor as a cage to protect my seedlings and just let my chickens have the rest of the garden. So I sort of do the same thing. But I know there are a lot of others ways we can protect our garden.

But first of all I want to back up. I know you talk about perennials and how chickens kind of don't usually bother the perennials. And I've definitely found that in my own garden. They won't bother my blueberries unless there's blueberries on it. But they won't rip it apart and they don't bother my



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

sage and some of the other plants that are there. They are more interested in the dirt or seedlings but I know there's a lot of issue with chickens tearing things up. So are there certain plants that we shouldn't put in our garden that they will just go for every time even if they're a perennial?

Jessi: Well there's a lot of plants that chickens like to eat. And a lot of those plants happen to be what we like to eat. So when looking at what the chickens will go for a lot of it depends on how hungry they are, how much other food sources they have to eat from. I can tell you my chickens the first thing they do in the morning is they'll go out and they'll head to the compost bin because in that pile of steamy goodness they will find insects, they will find seeds, they will find all kinds of things. And everyday it's different. And a lot of times that's their breakfast and then they will go forage around on the grass. And on a sunny afternoon they're going to sleep the rest of the day. So I'll find them like dust bathing or their wings spread out in the sun like little solar panels

Theresa: [laughs]

Jessi: And that's their life. They don't have this need or pressure as if they're starving and have to compete for food. And that's one of the things that happens when our stocking rate is out of whack. There are too many animals and they're all competing for the same food source. Again, starting small. To answer your question about the perennials so when I say garden, as a designer I think of the entire landscape. I don't think of just the vegetable patch. And oftentimes when people are getting started with this lifestyle they are experimenting with vegetables to begin with. And I personally push people towards perennials because well there's a lot of reasons. It's longer term benefits. So if you plant a blueberry bush every year you're going to get more and more fruit from that plant and you're going to have to do less and less work. So we've got perennials that come back year after year and become less reliant on our resources. Versus an annual where we have to baby them and take care of them. Harvest one crop and then they're done. And then we start the whole process over again.

So it's pretty critical with chickens especially if they're hungry and they're really competing for food that we don't give them access to that food if it's an annual because all it takes is one incident and then all of your hard work is done, right? So if we start moving our food production into more perennial food sources, even herbaceous vegetables are an example. So like asparagus, sorrel, rhubarb, things of that nature. They are going to come back. So they're regenerative. So we're going to get multiple crops from them. Of course, all crops need to be protected when they're young or when you're going to harvest that crop. Because chickens will go after blueberries. It looks like they're on trampolines.

Theresa: Yes, that's what they do! [laughs] They go jump, jump, jump.

Jessi: Yes, so there's times of the year that we need to protect certain plants and then there are types of plants that we need to protect all the time if chickens are going to feel that pressure of being hungry and need that food source. But if you put that vegetable garden in an area and have it adequately fenced then maybe we only need to let them in once a year in the fall. But it's important for them to have spaces where they can you know be under woody shrubs. Or be under tree canopy. Not only does that feel more conformable to them, because that's their natural habitat. But that gives them escape routes. So say there's a multi layered shrub that they can climb up into if a predator comes along on the ground they can hop up or fly up to the branches and stay safe. So they're jungle birds by nature and if we don't provide jungles for them and all they have is a lawn and a vegetable garden, well guess where they're going to be? That's where they're going to get in trouble.

Theresa: [laughs] Right!

Jessi: So if we have more shrubbery they're going to be more protected, they're going to leave the other plants alone. But yeah, anything taller than them they're going to leave alone. Anything woody. I have a list of plants that are kind of the chicken resistant plants and there's lots of lists in my books along these lines but any plant that is really regenerative and grows really easily and quickly and a lot of these are the plants that maybe your

grandmother divided and gave to you or your neighbours had excess so like day lilies or even your rhubarb, things like that that divide. English daisies. So we can add a lot of benefit to them to the habitat for places to hide, food to eat from and then enjoy the beauty of it ourselves or harvest it ourselves.

Theresa: Yeah I was actually doing that without even realizing it because I do have part of my vegetable garden sectioned off and I only let the chickens in there in the fall when I'm doing clean up and man oh man do they do a fantastic job! I spread my homemade compost let them loose and they go out every day and just spread and dig and it's fantastic. It makes the soil so great. But I didn't even really realize that I was doing that until you said it. So okay well what if we have like a situation where we have a bunch of tomatoes and they're mixed into the garden is there a way do we just barricade it so the chickens can't get to them?

Jessi: Well it kind of depends on how much other food is out there for them. So again how hungry are they? The main time to protect the tomatoes of course is when they're ripening. So I have strategies with different plants and I'll usually use bird netting at the time that I don't want the chickens to go after things. So it's just a simple mesh fabric that you can lay over the top of plants and the chickens aren't really going to mess with it unless they're starving. But in the early part of the season they're not going to go after tomato, the foliage itself because it's not going to provide them a food source. And in some cases it might be toxic if they ate too much of it.

Chickens are actually really good at knowing what's good for them and what's not. So a lot of people ask what's poisonous for chickens and when I was doing research and talking to different chicken medical experts they were saying it's extremely rare that chickens poison themselves unless they're confined and fed material that they had no other choice to eat. Because they were hungry.

Theresa: Ahhh.



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

Jessi: So it's very rare. But if we have poisonous plants in our garden we don't have to worry if there's other food sources for them

Theresa: They'll just kind of skip over that and go to the stuff that they know is okay.

Jessi: Yeah.

Theresa: So you mentioned fertilizer several times. And I know that I'm an organic gardener too so I know that you're not just supposed to put the chicken manure straight into the garden so I wanted to talk to you about that in case any listeners didn't realize that. Chicken manure is kind of hot and it can burn plants. So what do you do when you clean out your chicken coop, what do you do, do you compost the manure? That's what I do.

Jessi: Yeah I have I use I rotate bedding actually. So I use straw and sometimes shavings. And some times of the year I actually use garden debris like tall grasses. But what we do is we clean it out a couple times a year. We really don't have to be in there cleaning a whole lot. I have a design where the manure from where they perch at night all slides down this piece of wood and then I can collect that and do a compost with that. But when I clear out the entire coop which has straw mixed in with it I have two choices. I can either compost it in a system where I have access to machines which is really handy. Or if it's the time of the year like right now where my garden is going to bed I can take it and use it as mulch. And then by next spring it'll be okay. But here's something to think about. As the chickens are out wandering around I don't want people to think well they can't poop on the grass because they'll burn the grass.

Theresa: [laughs] Yeah they can do that!

Jessi: It's all a matter of concentration but it's also a matter of what types of plants are growing. So you wouldn't want fresh chicken manure on your lettuce greens or on any leafy green for that matter. Most vegetables aren't going to be too happy with it being applied directly. But if you give it a couple of months with a bedding and you're putting it over an area that's

going to be prepped for later use that's fine. But chickens will wander around and self fertilize as they drop their manure and it's totally okay. You just don't want to eat anything direct in contact with that. But most plants, perennial plants, aren't going to mind at all. So I would say to most people you know have a composting system ready it's going to come in handy for all kinds of other gardening uses anyways. So use that and get started as a way to produce a really high quality compost. And there's a lot more to learn about compost. What goes in it how to mix the greens versus your browns but it is okay that they walk around and drop their fertilizer bombs.

Theresa: Right because it's not concentrated because they're moving around. You just have to be careful where you step sometimes. Yeah we have special boots we wear when we go out to collect the eggs and come back because you have to go right through their main pathway otherwise you're going to be marching through the house with that on your feet. I know a lot of people have also had problems where they let their chickens go crazy in the backyard and they get upset because they sit on the furniture and poop on the furniture. But you have to have an area for them. For me they aren't able to access my patio. You know I have that fence off. So they just have the garden part. The garden is for them and the patio is for me so I don't have an issue with that but it is something to think about.

Jessi: Definitely. And this is why design is so critical. If you don't have a good design in place you're going to run into issues that are annoying and gross and that is a big complaint and that's funny I have a lot of people who say they come to my back door and then they poop all over the steps. And I say well are you feeding them treats at the back door? And they say yeah they come and they beg for food and I say well they're training you! So if you don't do that to begin with they're not going to necessarily come to the back door. Or you can fence them off in a very specific area. And every landscape and every garden is going to be different.

So when you look at getting chickens and this is why I wrote the book it's important to go through the steps of understanding okay where is my space where is my space? What kind of food am I going to grow for them? Because the more food they can get from your garden the less you have to

buy. So that's another great reason to have them out and about. The more food you don't have to buy that's less money but also finding high quality chicken food is actually kind of hard. We don't know what's necessarily in all the grains unless it's organic or GMO free is another thing to look for but they can get a lot of their needs met nutritionally by just being allowed to do what they do in your garden.

Theresa: Yeah I think they're happier too!

Jessi: Oh yes, by far! In fact when I was initially researching and trying to find my case studies I would go to chicken coop tours around the different cities and look at how people were raising them and noticed that the chickens who were locked up and kept inside cages or runs or not given a lot of space or that ratio was wrong, what happens is those chickens start to have really social problems. They have health problems. They'll start pecking at each other. They can be really dramatic animals. I'm sure as you know they can be wonderful entertainment too but there's such a thing as a chicken bully and if there's too many in too small of a space and they can't get away from the bully they're going to get pretty beat up and they can get depressed too.

Theresa: Yeah that's true the social aspect is huge. If we keep the chickens closed up like if we take a trip they are closed up for a few days they still have an adequate run but I just know when I show up they're pacing at the door, let us out, let us out! They can't wait! And the minute you let them out they're like woo hoo running through their like party time. So I hate it when I have to close them up for a few days. Otherwise they're out every day and I think it's really important for their mental health that's a really important point.

You know something you said about treats that is something I did you and I talked it was when we were talking about the case study I had done a similar, I wasn't feeding them from my back porch, but I had done something where I trained them accidentally. I am always ripping out extra nasturtiums from my garden and I love the nasturtiums but as you know they go nuts sometimes so I was always tearing them out so I would toss



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

them over to my chickens and they loved them and started thinking of them as a treat. So then when I did let them out that was what they ran to eat. And they would take out every single nasturtium I had. And I was like what the heck they love these nasturtiums and it didn't click until you and I were talking one time and you were like I don't give my chickens treats. And I was only giving them nasturtiums. That was the treat. I wasn't letting them have anything else at the time it was when they were little so I trained them as babies to think of those nasturtiums as oh special treat that Theresa gives us and that's what they went for every time. But now that I don't do that anymore they still love them but they don't just eat those. They're more interested in the bugs.

Jessi: Yeah it seems to change year to year too about what is tasty. It's funny because I have nasturtiums trailing all over the place and they don't touch them at all. But there's a lot of great benefits medicinally for them from nasturtiums. It's good you were feeding them that. They were getting a lot of what they needed!

Theresa: [laughs] Yeah I just wanted to have some left for me. Yeah they went nuts. Well Jessi I really appreciate you taking the time and talking to me about all of this. I think your book is fantastic and I'm going to have information in the show notes and links to the book and your website so people can learn more about you. And I just wanted to say thank you so much for sharing all your information with me today.

Jessi: Yeah thanks for having me!

Theresa: So that's my interview with Jessi Bloom. And there is SO much more information in her book *Free Range Chicken Gardens*. I'll have lots of free information in the show notes for this episode so just go to LivingHomegrown.com/32. I'll be sure to also include a link to our PBS show episode that featured Jessi so you can see exactly what she does first hand. She's got some great gardens. And I think those show notes will help you even if you have chickens already and are just looking for some tips or you are just wanting to get started with chickens.



Live Farm Fresh Without the Farm™

I'll be sure to have a lot of information for you. So that's it for this week. Until next time, just keep working towards living a little bit more local, seasonal and homegrown. Take care!

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. Visit LivingHomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh, without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown podcast.

{bloopers}