



1. The original chipboard floor before the new easy-clean linoleum was installed.
2. Side fence completed and oiled.
3. Inside Chooktopia, looking out - plants and mist-tint paints add colour and interest.
4. Nearly finished!
5. Flooring and recycled drawers in place.
6. Elevated plantings on the fence are safe from both chooks and dogs.
7. Dog and fox proofing was an essential part of the entire project.

Creating Chooktopia

What started out as a simple idea to get a couple of chooks and produce fresh, organic, ethical eggs, grew into a life changing sustainability journey.

BY ELLA BOYEN

We had received a small chook hutch for Christmas and, having three robust dogs, decided that the safest option was to set it up down the side of the house and erect a gate to secure it from the dogs and the rest of the backyard.

We started with two chooks from a pet store, and two days later obtained another four from a battery farm to give them a better life, having been inspired by my mum telling me how satisfying it had been when she released her first ever battery rescue hen and it instinctively knew to fluff and scratch in the dirt. I was sold.

It wasn't long though, before 'our girls' found their wings, and started having encounters with the dogs. One chook down, and another half bald, it was time to create something a little more secure, and a lot larger. After all, what's the point of having animals if you can't spoil them rotten?

Recycled cubby house

We had a cubby house in the corner of the yard and decided to convert this. The cubby walls and back and side fences would make up the boundary of the area, thus minimising the amount of extra materials needed to completely fence it off. We had to check the local laws and see how many chooks we were allowed to have without an excess animal permit. As the cubby was an existing structure we didn't need any building permits.

We also had to check about the easement and trees, as the water authority told us we have to remove trees that are impacting on the underground pipes. Council advised that the trees were not protected and with a small

enough girth at chest height, did not need a removal permit.

Design

After a few weekends of line marking paint, conflicting ideas and discussions of 'this isn't going to work' versus 'we can make it work,' construction could begin. With no budget and a lot of debt, we pooled our resources. Being the hoarder that I am, we had all the timber left from a decking fence we had pulled down a few years prior, some recycled plastic posts, a couple of bags of quickset concrete and a shovel.

Working at a local waste transfer station, there were regular conversations with customers along the lines of, 'You're not honestly throwing that out, are you?' Some clay pots, chicken wire, two screen doors and a range of other goodies later, we had half the materials we needed; we could begin to begin.

I was inspired by a range of community gardens that I had visited recently, and incorporated the colour and lack of uniformity into the design - this made it quite forgiving when using salvaged materials that didn't necessarily match.

For the first few weeks the design changed almost daily, until our vision, the restrictions of our budget and existing infrastructure, and the laws of physics, found a happy medium. It was a project that would lead to paradise for me, and send my husband, Mark, to madness, but it was worth the effort.

Every weekend became groundhog day, with trips to the hardware store for different nuts, bolts, braces and brackets, followed by hours of digging, painting, concreting, hammering, laughing and cursing, all the while juggling free-ranging

chooks or dogs (never at the same time) trying to explore the holes and paint and generally getting in the way. I was in bliss; utopia, even. And the name grew. We were creating Chooktopia.

Some old...

The materials used for the chook house were:

- reclaimed security screen doors
- reclaimed wire mesh, and new wire mesh
- existing cubby house converted into hen barn
- second-hand rabbit hutches off eBay as nesting houses
- second-hand drawers off eBay as nesting boxes
- second-hand decking for fence rails
- mis-tint paints
- quick set concrete (some existing, some new)
- recycled plastic poles (two used)
- fruit trees and vines for espalier along fence
- new posts for fence stability.





... some new

Compromises were made on some items that were difficult to find second-hand. We bought new linoleum to install over the existing chipboard floor, which would have rotted from the chook poo and it's easier to clean. We also needed to buy some extra sheets of strong chicken wire (protection from the dogs) to complete the project.

Again, because of the strength of the dogs we purchased some cypress pine posts. The recycled plastic posts from Replas unfortunately weren't tall or robust enough.

Chooktopia achieved

All up we have approximately 6m² inside the chook house and 24m² in total. We spent about \$800 and saved about \$1,500 by using reclaimed materials.

Although Mark would describe the journey as torture (standing in dog poo seemed to be a day-ruiner for him!) it was so fulfilling to have that end result – happy, safe chooks in a huge enclosure with comfy beds, and dogs able to 'look but please don't touch' giving them hours of fascinating observation.

Chooktopia is not only sustainable, it is colourful and we are sure it will add value to the house. We have plans in the future to install a small water tank to collect rain off the roof for use in the chook water bowls, but as there are no gutters, this is a little down the track as we have other pressing work needed around the house.

We compost all the waste from the chook beds and the left over egg shells. When the compost is a bit slow we also use the worm farms, as we have a few on the go. The chooks and dogs eat all our food scraps, so we have very little waste. As a treat we occasionally give the chooks a half hour session in one of the worm farms or compost bins.

The journey of sustainability in the backyard through having chooks, veggies and fruit trees, is something at the heart and soul of how I live my day to day life. I have discussed with council the possibility of running sustainable home tours of Chooktopia and our other sustainable retrofits, which was positively received. I have since completed some training with my local council to deliver sustainability training courses at our local community centre.

Ella has recently launched her website www.chooktopia.com where she promotes sustainable products. ■



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