

RAISING BACKYARD

Chickens FOR BEGINNERS

BRAD CALLAN



**SIMPLE
GUIDE TO
KEEPING
HAPPY &
HEALTHY
CHICKENS**

Raising Backyard Chicken's For Beginners

**Simple Guide To Keeping Happy & Healthy Backyard
Chickens!**

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Glossary Of Terms

Introduction

Raising your own chickens can be an enjoyable hobby that will provide you with many years of pleasure, some fantastic pets, and delicious, healthy home-grown eggs.

These eggs are not like any other eggs you've had, they not only taste better but also much healthier for you.

Although many people raise their eyebrows when you mention chickens as pets, these beautiful creatures can become an excellent pet. They require less daily care than a dog and can still grow into affectionate animals that really enjoy interacting with you.

Further, there are over forty different varieties of chicken. They come in a range of sizes with a wide variety of colors and features to choose from. You can get Bantams that weigh only a pound or two or regular sized chickens weighing between six and eight pounds.

The eggs are not only good for you but they also offer choice in appearance. Different breeds lay everything from small to extra-large eggs. They can be cream, brown, white, blue, green, or pink and can also be speckled.

Different breeds will produce eggs of different colors and size. All of the eggs, regardless of appearance, have the same nutritional value and taste and you won't believe how much better they taste than the eggs you buy in the supermarket!

Raising Backyard Chickens 101

There are a number of reasons to raise chickens in your backyard. Everyone will have different things that they enjoy most about their flock.

Like some people, you may start out seeking a different kind of pet or just looking for a way to enjoy fresh eggs at home.

Regardless of why you decide to raise your own chickens, you'll soon discover that there are many benefits to having them around.

Benefits of Raising Chickens

Here are some of the cool perks of raising backyard chickens:

Fresh Eggs

This is one of the best benefits of having your own flock. Eggs that are collected at your own home are not only fresher but they are also higher in beneficial components like Omega 3s.

Eggs you buy at the store are often weeks old by the time you get them. They don't taste as good as fresh eggs and they aren't as good for you as your home-grown, fresh eggs.

They Make Great Pets!

Chickens have their own individual personalities, just like any other type of pet. Raised carefully and handled properly they can grow into affectionate pets that enjoy being handled and even hugged.

They don't need to be walked and are far less work in terms of maintenance care than having a dog.

Natural Fertilizer

Chicken manure is an excellent fertilizer. It is high in nitrogen, phosphorus, and calcium.

With chickens, you have a free source of manure for use in your garden and to keep your lawn green and healthy.

Lawn Care

Not only do chickens provide great fertilizer, they also love to eat various lawn pests like slugs, grasshoppers, snails and crickets.

They aerate the lawn by scratching it and will gladly consume weeds, lawn clippings, and other detritus that you would otherwise need to take care of yourself!

Instant Composters

Do you love the idea of composting? Do you feel the composting bin in your yard attracts too many unwanted vermin? Well you don't have to worry any longer..

Chickens are perfect for this, and will eat any leftovers that would normally go into your compost bin. And they turn it into great fertilizer faster than a compost bin will, too.

If you still have excess, you can place it in the area your chickens roam in and they will take care of turning it when they scratch through it looking for goodies, allowing it to turn into usable compost that much faster.

Natural & Sustainable Living

People choose to raise their own chickens for the same reasons that some choose to grow their own vegetables.

You have more control over what the chickens eat and the medications they are exposed to. You know how they are raised and you can develop a sustainable supply of eggs and fertilizer for your own personal use as well as to gift to family and friends.

For those who wish a more natural lifestyle that goes back to some of the basics, raising your own chickens can be an excellent way to accomplish this.

****Warning: Consider This Before Getting Started..**

Just like all pets, chickens are living animals that require shelter, food, water, and daily care.

If you go away for an extended period of time, you will need someone to come and care for your flock. If you don't feel you can devote at least ten minutes a day or longer once a week to clean out the coop, then this is not the right choice for you.

Left uncared for, your chickens will suffer and can also develop conditions that can be hazardous to you and your family.

Raising your own chickens is not necessarily cheaper than buying your eggs. There is an immediate outlay of funds in terms of buying the chicks or chickens, feeders and waterers for your flock, building a coop, and then there are ongoing expenses in terms of feed and occasionally veterinary care.

If your family eats a lot of eggs and you normally pay extra to purchase the high Omega 3 eggs (healthier than regular eggs), you might find this slightly less expensive but not necessarily.

If for any reason you do not enjoy interacting with birds, the idea of cleaning the coop repels you, or you are allergic to birds, then raising your own chickens is a bad idea.

You should also check into your local bylaws. Some communities will allow backyard chickens while others prohibit their ownership. Some areas that do allow you to raise your own chickens, have limitations on the number of chickens, space restrictions, or do not permit the keeping of roosters.

To avoid running afoul of the authorities, thoroughly research your local bylaws before you begin to raise your flock so that you meet all municipal guidelines.

Types of Chicken Breeds

There are over forty different breeds of chicken! For the sake of simplicity, we won't discuss all them but instead, focus on the most popular and common breeds.

Each breed has their pros and cons, your own personal preferences will have a great deal of influence on what breed is best suited to your situation.

In the next few sections, we'll take a look at the most popular breed, its benefits, and potential issues with each of them.

- **Ameraucana**
- **Australorp**
- **Chantecler**
- **Cubalaya**
- **Delaware**
- **Easter**
- **Eggers**
- **Faverolles**
- **Plymouth**
- **Rock**
- **Rhode**
- **Island**
- **Reds**
- **Stars**
- **Sussex**
- **Welsummer**
- **White**
- **Leghorn**
- **Wyandotte**

Ameraucana

This is a beautiful breed but not that common.

Some Easter Eggers are sold as Ameraucana (or variations of the correct spelling) but do not meet the breed standard and cannot be shown in poultry shows.

If you are interested in this breed you will likely need to special order them. They are a derivative of the Aracauna, a blue egg laying chicken.

Like the Aracauna, the Ameraucana lays light blue eggs that are medium sized. They are good layers, typically laying 3 eggs/week. The Ameraucana typically weighs 6 – 7 pounds although they are also available in Bantam size.

They come in a variety of colors including black, blue, blue wheaten, buff, brown red, and silver. They are fairly hardy birds that handle cold climates and confinement well. They are not generally broody. Ameraucana are generally quite docile.

Australorp

This is an Australian breed.

These are medium large chickens, usually weighing 7 – 8 pounds but they also come in a Bantam size as well. They are always black although the feathers can have blue and green highlights in the sunlight.

They are excellent layers, usually producing 5 eggs per week. The eggs are large and light brown in color. These are nice, docile chickens that manage confinement and colder climates well.

They can be shy, so lots of gentle handling to ensure their comfort with you is necessary. They can be broody birds though.

Chantecler

This is a Canadian breed that is designed to handle the coldest of climates.

They can be hard to find and you may need to special order them. They are a heavy bird, usually 7 – 8 pounds and appear chunky with small comb and wattle. A Bantam size is available as well.

They come in buff and partridge colors. Bred to produce eggs as well as being good meat producers, Chanteclers typically lay four eggs per week. While not especially docile, they do tend to be friendly, quiet birds that handle confinement well.

Cubalaya

The Cubalaya was developed in the East, likely the Philippines, but is extremely popular in Cuba and often kept as an ornamental breed due to their incredible beauty.

They typically weigh 6 – 7 pounds and do not come in a Bantam size. They have gorgeous long tail feathers and come in white, black, black breasted red, silver duckwing, blue wheaten and other colors.

Despite their heritage, they handle winter weather well and are quite hardy. They are good layers, producing four medium sized eggs per week that are cream or lightly tinted in color. Hens can be broody and roosters are prone to being aggressive.

Delaware

The Delaware is one of the newer American breeds, developed in the 1940s.

They are large birds, typically weighing 7 – 8 pounds and do come in a Bantam size as well. They are white with small bits of black and black striations. They are excellent layers, producing 4 large, brown eggs per week.

They have a single comb which can be protected from extreme cold weather with a bit of petroleum jelly. They generally handle cold winter climates well and do not mind confinement. They are a docile, friendly breed that is generally pretty quiet. They can be broody.

Easter Eggers

The Easter Egger is not an actual breed but rather an amalgamation of breeds that produce a variety of colored eggs that can be blue, green, pink, or multicolored hence the name.

The eggs are extra-large and they typically lay 4 per week. They come in a variety of colors but have no breed standard and cannot be shown. They are relatively common though and the eggs make a fun addition to household meals.

Most Easter Eggers weigh 6 – 7 pounds. They handle cold winters well and are an ideal choice for a family pet and egg producer. They are docile and fun loving birds.

Faverolles

This is an unusual looking breed. They have five toes, feathered feet, a beard and muffs.

Although not overly common, there are a number of hatcheries that sell them. The most common color is salmon but they also come in white and mahogany. They are heavy birds, usually weighing 7 – 8 pounds. A Bantam size is also available.

They are good layers, producing 4 medium sized, light brown eggs per week. They are extremely docile which is great if you have a flock of Faverolles but in a mixed flock they can easily end up at the bottom of the pecking order.

They handle winter weather well but can be broody.

Plymouth Rock

This is one of the most popular breeds of chicken and readily available through most places that sell chicks.

They're a heavy chicken, 7 – 8 pounds typically and a Bantam size is also available. The most common varieties are barred and white but they also come in buff, Columbian, partridge, and a few other colors.

They are good layers, producing four large, brown eggs per week. They will tolerate confinement but are happier when they are allowed to free range. They handle cold weather beautifully and are fun, plucky chickens although they can be prone to being broody.

Rhode Island Reds

Like the Plymouth Rock, the Rhode Island Red (RIR) is fairly common and easily obtainable.

They come in white too but the color is not nearly as popular as the red. They are hardy birds and a good choice for beginners. They come in Bantam and regular sizes (7 – 8 pounds usually) and are excellent layers.

They typically produce five extra-large, brown eggs per week. They handle most climates, including very cold ones, easily and are relatively docile. They are not prone to being broody.

Stars

Stars, like Easter Eggers, are not an official breed.

One of their key advantages is that their coloration is sex-linked. Males come in different colors than females so it is easy to know you've got the right sex when purchasing your chicks. Roosters are black with white bars and hens are black with gold tints. The hens are excellent layers, producing 5 large, brown eggs per week.

They are very hardy and will continue laying well when climate changes would have other breeds reducing the numbers of eggs they produce. They're reasonably docile and rugged and not prone to being broody.

As an unofficial breed they cannot be shown at poultry shows.

Sussex

The Sussex is a dual purpose bird, great layers and good eating.

They're heavy birds, typically weighing 7 – 8 pounds and also come in a Bantam size. They can be speckled, red or lightly colored.

Like the Rhode Island Red, this is an excellent bird for someone just getting into raising chickens. They're hardy and typically lay four large, light brown eggs per week regardless of the weather.

Winter does not slow them down at all. They're confident, curious birds that handle confinement well.

Welsummer

The Welsummer is a Dutch breed.

They're quite beautiful and come in red partridge. Roosters look like the stereotypical rooster portrayed on a Corn Flakes box. They're usually 6- 7 pounds and come in a Bantam size as well. They produce four large eggs per week.

The eggs are a deep red brown color and may be speckled. They are intelligent, friendly birds that are excellent foragers if you allow them to free range. They are not particularly docile but they are friendly and not prone to being broody.

White Leghorn

This is the chicken portrayed in the old Foghorn Leghorn cartoons. He's a white bird that usually weighs 6 – 7 pounds.

They do come in a Bantam size as well. They usually produce four extra-large, white eggs per week. Some say they can be nervous. They aren't overly docile but they are hardy, active and intelligent.

They handle cold climates well and are not prone to being broody.

Wyandotte

This is a nice, hardy bird that is another favourite with backyard chicken owners.

They're typically 7 – 8 pounds and also come in a Bantam size. They come in a wide variety of colors including gold laced, silver laced, silver penciled, white, black, buff, partridge, and so on.

This is a bird that tolerates cold weather well and is a dependable layer, usually producing four large, brown eggs per week. They're easy going and hardy, making them a good choice for beginners.

They can be broody and can also be somewhat dominant with other chickens.

How To Choose The Best Breed For Your Needs

You can have as many or as few breeds of chickens as you wish.

There is no harm in mixing breeds, particularly if you do not have a rooster and do not intend to breed your chickens.

Some owners prefer to have only one breed and prefer the uniformity while others like to mix and match.

Here are 6 key factors to consider when forming your flock:

- 1. Effects Of Climate**
- 2. Egg Production**
- 3. Chickens As Pets**
- 4. Heritage Breeds**
- 5. Looking Out For Local Predators**
- 6. Noise Levels**

Effects Of Climate

It is important to consider your local climate conditions when choosing your chicken breeds. A species that thrives in really hot weather is not usually a good choice if you live somewhere that tends to have very cold, long winters.

Some breeds are heavier and they tend to fair better in colder climates. Large combs and wattles can be susceptible to frostbite. You can try rubbing a bit of petroleum jelly onto them to help protect them but most cold climate breeds will have small combs and wattles.

Some people go so far as to remove the combs and wattles to prevent frostbite if they live in a particularly cold area. In really hot climates, having large combs and wattles can help a chicken cool itself.

Larger chickens do better than smaller breeds and the latter does better than Bantams as a general rule when dealing with extreme cold.

If you live somewhere where heat is a factor and you routinely get brutal summer temperatures, Bantams and smaller breeds can be an ideal choice over their heavier brethren.

Egg Production

How much does your family enjoy eggs?

If having fresh eggs is one of your prime reasons for having chickens then you'll want a breed that produces lots of eggs. The color of the eggs does not affect their taste nor is one color healthier than the other.

However, many adults and children, tend to enjoy the multi-colored eggs such as those of Easter Eggers.

Bantams will produce edible eggs but they are often small and they do not lay as often as their regular sized counterparts. Bantams are usually kept more as pets and ornamental birds than as egg layers.

You can have both Bantams and regular sized chickens in your flock if you wish. It does not pose a problem.

Chickens As Pets

Handled properly and well cared for as chicks, many chickens can grow into fun and affectionate pets.

Some breeds are known for being more docile and social than others. If you and your family intend to spend lots of time interacting with your flock and wish them to be pets, you should aim for one of the more docile breeds.

Heritage Breeds

Heritage breeds are rare chickens and people are actively working to build up populations of them again.

Just as you see heirloom vegetables that are unusual and being raised to help promote diversity and keep a variety alive, so too do heritage chickens. There are several breeds that are quite rare.

You will most likely have to special order them from a hatchery that specializes in the breed but they are worth the extra time and effort to obtain when you know that you are helping to preserve a rare breed.

Looking Out For Local Predators

Local predators are going to take an interest in your flock.

You'll need to carefully construct a run and coop to keep potentially dangerous interlopers out. Chicks and Bantams are at a particularly high risk due to their small size.

While hawks may hesitate to grab a full sized chicken, a Bantam or chick is easy pickings and definitely at risk.

Be aware of what type of wildlife operates in your area so that you can create an environment that will keep your chickens safe.

Noise Levels

Some breeds are noisier than others and roosters are much noisier than hens.

If you live close to your neighbors' residence, quieter breeds can help keep the peace with them.

Be aware of local bylaws and limitations, as these vary from where you live.

All About The Eggs!

The prospect of fresh eggs is one of the prime reasons many people get into raising chickens.

Being able to enjoy them within hours or days of being produced and knowing that the chickens have been raised and cared for in a manner that you chose adds tremendous value to the taste and enjoyment you and your family get from your eggs.

For those who prefer to have their foods be organic and naturally produced, raising your own chickens gives you the ability to ensure that about the eggs and at a lower cost.

You can let your chicken's free range and feed them only all natural, organic feeds to ensure that they meet the high standards you set for your food. Fresh eggs have lower cholesterol levels and higher levels of omega 3 fatty acids and vitamin E than eggs purchased in the supermarket.

Trust me, once you've had eggs from your own chickens, you will never want to buy your eggs again!

□

Hens And Roosters

All hens will lay eggs but some breeds are much more prolific than others.

If you and your family wish to have lots of eggs, make sure that you select breeds known for producing at least three eggs per week. Some breeds have been selected more for egg production than for their meat.

Others are considered dual purpose breeds that not only produce lots of eggs but are also good eating. Bantam chickens do produce eggs but they are often small and they do not produce as many as their regular sized counterparts in a given breed.

Unless you wish to have your hens hatch their own clutches and raise the chicks, you do not need to have a rooster. His job is strictly to fertilize the eggs. The hen will lay eggs whether you have a rooster or not.

They just will not be fertilized and cannot become baby chicks if you don't have a rooster.

Even if you do have a rooster, not all the eggs produced will be fertilized. Some hens may be too fast and stay out of reach of the rooster and he may take a dislike to some hens and simply never mate with them.

When Do Hens Lay Eggs?

There are some individual and breed differences in when a hen will begin to lay eggs.

Most hens begin producing eggs between the age of 16 and 22 weeks. Breeds like Leghorns and Stars tend to begin early while Wyandottes and Easter Eggers tend to be late bloomers.

There are some signs that can help you know that your hen is within a week to a month of beginning to lay. The combs and wattles will often darken to a bright red.

People who are new to raising chickens may even begin to wonder if they didn't accidentally get a rooster because of the color change. The hens will also become somewhat more docile and begin showing behaviors that indicate they are ready to be mated. They may stop, squat and spread their wings out from their body suddenly in the middle of running.

If you examine your hen's vent and pelvic bones, you can see physical changes that also indicate she is getting ready to lay eggs. To examine the vent, hold your hen firmly and turn her over. The vent should be moist and pink looking if she is ready to lay.

Place your fingers on her breast bone and gently move them downward until you can feel her pelvic bones. Gently, see how many of your fingers will fit between her pelvic bones.

You will most likely be able to fit two fingers between her pelvic bones when she is ready to lay. A hen whose pelvic bones are close enough together that you can only fit a single finger between them is likely still about four weeks from beginning to lay.

The Seasons And Its Effect On Egg Production

A hen's natural cycle tends to slow down throughout the winter months.

This coincides with the decrease in daylight which is a cue to the hen's body that egg production should slow down and possibly even stop altogether. If you wish to, you can circumvent this by providing artificial light in your hen's coop to fool her body into maintaining its spring and summer production levels.

The light does not have to be overly bright but it should provide enough light that you could comfortably read by it. You only need to use it a few hours a day to extend the amount of daylight by a few hours to make up for what Mother Nature is decreasing during the winter months.

Ideally, you want to ensure that your hens receive 14 hours of light per day to maintain normal egg laying levels. You can install a light in your coop but it is very important that you make sure it is somewhere that the hens cannot knock it over.

The light bulb will get hot and can burn the hens and also become a fire hazard if it comes in contact with any flammable materials. So be careful of where you install them. You can use red or white light bulbs.

There are some studies that show red lamps may be more soothing to hens than white lamps and reduce incidences of bullying.

To help keep your coop warm in the winter, you may wish to choose a heat lamp as it will provide enough light as well and help generate additional warmth for your hens. Of course if you live in a hot climate, this is unnecessary.

Nothing says you have to add light and keep your hens laying. By allowing them to rest up a bit in the winter, you can prolong their egg laying years. You can increase the amount slightly or not at all if you choose. It is completely up to you.

Age And Its Effect On Egg Production

A hen is born with a specific number of eggs.

The number of eggs she can produce in her life is finite and once they're gone, she's spent and will produce no more eggs. Hens produce most of their eggs during the first few years of their life. Her first and second life will see her highest production levels.

After that, she will continue to lay eggs but the number of eggs she lays per week will slowly decrease.

By the time a hen is five years old, she will most likely be laying half as many eggs as she did when she was one or two years old. The number of eggs produced will continue to slow down until she is only laying the occasional egg and eventually lays none at all.

At that point, some will choose to have her slaughtered for meat while others will simply keep her as a beloved pet that has made her contribution to the family and is now enjoying her retirement years.

Left to live a natural life, most hens will live ten or more years and some have reached well into their teen years.

Broody Hens

Some breeds are more prone to broody behavior than others but there is also some individual variance within each breed.

A broody hen is one that wishes to raise a clutch of eggs and hatch some chicks. If you do not have a rooster, she will never get that opportunity but she may still exhibit the same behaviors that she would if her eggs were fertilized.

Signs of broodiness include sitting on her nest all day without more than a brief break and getting very grumpy if disturbed. She may peck at your hand if you attempt to move her. If a hen goes broody, she will stop laying eggs for 2 – 3 months.

You can discourage broody behavior if you want her to continue laying eggs and have no intentions of having her raise a clutch of eggs. A broody hen wants to stay on a nest box and hatch eggs, so you discourage her by removing that possibility.

Take her from the nest box and confine her somewhere safe without bedding or nesting materials. This will get most hens back on track relatively quickly but some determined hens may need to be in a raised cage that has air flow underneath it.

Some hens remain determined to be broody and will frequently become broody despite all your best efforts. If you have such a hen and have no intention of ever having her raise a clutch, it may be kindest to find her a home where she will be able to raise her own chicks.

The Eggs Themselves

The color and size of eggs tends to be related to the breed of hen.

Some eggs are also naturally speckled depending on the breed. Regardless of exterior color, the interior of the eggs all look basically alike and they all taste the same. No particular color is better for you than another.

Eggs have a protective coating that helps reduce the risk of bacteria entering the egg.

It occurs naturally; for this reason you should not wash your eggs until just before you intend to use them.

Fresh eggs collected from your own hens will stay fresh approximately four weeks if refrigerated but will taste their best if you eat them within a few days. The fresher they are, the better they will taste.

If you are unsure as to whether an egg is still good, there is an easy test you can perform in your kitchen. Place the egg in a container of water. The freshest eggs will stay on the bottom of the container. A slightly less fresh egg may stand on its end but remain at the bottom of the dish. Eggs that have gone bad will float.

Sometimes hens will produce an irregular egg. Since there are a number of things that can go wrong, an occasional irregular egg is not cause for concern. Simply dispose of it and carry on. However, if your hen(s) begin consistently producing irregular eggs then you may need to investigate further.

Common Reasons For Irregular Eggs Include:

- **Infestation of lice or mites**
- **Poor nutrition**
- **Injury to the hen (usually by other hens higher in the pecking order)**
- **Parasitic, viral or bacterial infection**
- **Stress**

- **Overcrowding**
- **Antibiotics**

If your hens are producing irregular eggs, start by ensuring that they are healthy and free of parasites. Make sure your feeding a balanced diet that meets the hens' calcium needs.

If your hens are gorging on treats, scraps and scratch they may not be eating enough of their feed and suffering from a lack of calcium and other nutritional elements necessary for egg production.

Stress can be caused by predators, overcrowding, and other aspects of your hens' coop. Make sure they have sufficient room. If your hens are typically confined, you may wish to let them free range occasionally.

Getting No Eggs?

Sometimes you go through periods where you have no eggs that you can find.

If this occurs, start by checking for diseases, infestations, proper nutrition and signs of stress. Provided that your hens are healthy and at a good age for egg laying, they should be producing eggs. Remember that older hens will have reduced egg laying schedules and will eventually stop producing eggs altogether.

Hens also tend to moult periodically. During the moulting process their energy goes into shedding old feathers and growing new ones and they often stop laying altogether. Offering extra protein can help keep your hen laying but you generally need to wait the process out. This can take two to six months.

If all these needs are being met and you still have no eggs it is time for some detective work. Free ranging hens may decide to lay their eggs in unique locations including under bushes.

Look around your property for unexpected egg caches. To encourage your hens to lay their eggs in their nest boxes, try putting some eggs or golf balls in the nest boxes. Hens are followers and if they think others are using the boxes, they will too. Golf balls will fool them as well as real eggs.

Make sure that your coop is properly protected against predators. Many animals will eat eggs, including animals that may be too small to take on your hens. Larger egg stealers may also kill your hens.

Some hens will also eat eggs. You'll find remnants of egg yolk on the nest box. You can train a hen not to eat eggs but it does take some work. Your best bet is to try to prevent the problem from beginning by making sure your coop meets the size and nest box descriptions in the section on coops.

Items like pinless peepers and special nest boxes that prevent the hen from reaching the eggs after they are laid can also be used to stop the problem. Collecting eggs at least once a day and preferably more often can also be very helpful.

How To Get Started..

So, you've decided that you want to raise your own chickens? Great!

Now you just need to choose a few breeds that interest you. It's time to make some key decisions so you can get your flock started.

For the following sections, we'll address the following questions:

- **How Many Chickens Should You Get?**
- **Should You Get Roosters?**
- **Bantams vs Regular Sized Chickens**
- **Should You Get Baby Chicks Or Adult Chickens?**
- **How Much Space Do You Need?**
- **Buying Baby Chicks & Supplies**

How Many Chickens Should You Get?

Chickens are social creatures. They do not do well as solitary animals.

You should always have at least two and preferably three so that no one is left alone if something happens to one of your chickens. Beyond the minimum, you'll need to make sure that you have enough room to support your flock.

Chickens need at least 10 square feet per bird as adults. You also need to consider that you may wish to add hens as your flock ages and the number of eggs they produce decreases.

It is easier to start with a small flock and gradually grow it as you learn what your time and energy limits are.

Should You Get Roosters?

If you intend to have your hens raise clutches of chicks, then you will need a rooster. If you only wish to keep your hens for eggs and as pets, you do not need a rooster.

Roosters can be very loud. Many crow at all times of the day and can become disturbing to your neighbors.

Some municipalities that allow backyard chickens do not allow roosters. It is important to be aware of what is and isn't allowed in your area. ***Keeping roosters is not necessarily a good idea for a beginner.*

If you do not wish to end up with a rooster and are buying your hens as chicks, make sure you choose chicks that have already been sexed. Lots of unsexed chicks or straight run chicks are often composed mainly of roosters rather than hens.

Bantams vs Regular Sized Chickens

Size is very much a personal preference.

If your goal is strictly to have pets, Bantams can be an excellent choice. They're smaller and require less space. However, if you want lots of eggs, regular sized chickens have the advantage.

Bantams generally produce fewer and smaller eggs than their regular sized counterparts. Both produce edible eggs though.

Should You Get Baby Chicks Or Adult Chickens?

You can purchase chicks and raise them yourself or purchase already grown chickens. There are advantages and disadvantages to both choices.

Chicks are super cute but they are also much more fragile than a mature chicken. You'll need to keep them warm enough and make sure they get the right food to grow into healthy chickens. They won't be able to go outdoors until they are about four weeks old.

Sometimes, even when you do everything right they still don't make it which can be heartbreaking. If you don't think you can handle losing chicks, you may be better off purchasing mature chickens.

One of the nice things about chickens is that they are already ready to lay eggs and can go outdoors immediately. Mature chickens can still make excellent pets even though they may not get the same imprinting advantages as chicks you raise yourself.

Like an older dog, they can bond just as tightly with their owners; it may take more patience but they can be won over even if they were not previously kept as pets.

How Much Space Do You Need?

As noted above, adult chickens need about ten square feet of space per chicken if you intend to keep them confined at all times.

If you plan on letting them free range in your yard or an enclosed area, you can get away with them having about two to four square feet per bird within the coop as long as they have about ten square feet per bird in the area they are allowed to roam in.

More space is better. Chickens love to forage and roam about. Overcrowding is very stressful and can lead to all kinds of problems including bullying, poor quality eggs, and hygienic issues.

Remember that most people will end up acquiring more chickens as time goes on. If you fill all your available space immediately then you will need to do some renovating if you add to your flock.

Buying Baby Chicks & Supplies

Your local feed or farm store can be an excellent resource.

Most carry feed, coops, supplies like feeders and waterers, and also sell chicks. The downside is that they generally only carry the most popular breeds and may have a limited selection of supplies.

If you are good at making things yourself, there are many plans out there for building your own coops, feeders, and waterers. But if you would prefer to buy your supplies, there are a number of hatcheries and farms that sell chicks and the supplies you will need for your flock.

If you are interested in a particular breed, especially if it is a less common breed, you will likely need to order your chicks from a hatchery or farm. Some places have a minimum number of chicks that must be ordered. In cases like that, consider asking friends or family if they wish to split an order.

Shipping can be stressful for chicks and it is not uncommon to lose a few to stress from shipping conditions. Always order a few extras if the hatchery does not automatically include them. Be careful and inquire about extras.

Some hatcheries include them automatically because losses are expected. However, they often include roosters which can be problematic if you only want hens so ask questions.

Also make sure you clearly understand how the chicks are shipped and when they will arrive. They will need to be picked up immediately and you may need to make special arrangements with your post office.

Everything About Chicken Coops

If you are a talented carpenter, you can easily build your own coop.

One of the advantages of building your own is that you can customize it with any extra features you'd like as well make it suit your unique taste. There are many layouts available online if you wish a bit of help when drawing up the plans for your coop.

***If you're looking for an easy, [step-by-step guide](#), which helps you outline and build your very own chicken coop. You must check out this awesome book. [Click here for more info](#)*

But if you're too busy, or not that talented with a hammer and saw, you can save yourself the headache and purchase a pre-built coop.

Don't worry though; there are tons of gorgeous coops to choose from. You can get anything from a very basic coop to one that will be the envy of the neighborhood.

Regardless of whether you [build it yourself](#) or decide to buy one, there are some important considerations when deciding on a coop for your flock.

The Size Of Your Coop

Size is one of the most important aspects of a coop.

Overcrowded chickens will be stressed; lay fewer eggs and may engage in picking on one another and bullying their coop mates. The size of your coop depends on whether it will be the main location of your flock or if they will be allowed to spend time outside of the coop.

You need to plan for a minimum of ten square feet per bird if they will be in the coop all the time. If they will be going outdoors too, aim for about four square feet per bird indoors and they will need at least ten square feet outdoors per bird in the area they get to range in.

It is advisable to build a coop that is bigger than the needs of your current or planned flock. Most people who begin raising chickens end up acquiring more than they planned. Sometimes it is a new breed that you've discovered and really want to add to your flock.

Other times, an older hen has ceased laying and you'd like to add a new hen to take over her egg laying duties while keeping her as a beloved pet for her remaining years.

Regardless of the reason why, many owners will add to their flocks over time. It is much easier to have extra unused space than to try to add on to your coop when you add to your flock.

Feeders & Waterers

Whether you make your own feeders and waterers or reach them, you'll need to have a location for them in your coop.

Ideally, they hang about 6 – 8 inches off the ground. This makes them easier to keep clean. Make sure they are not hung near the roosting poles or you risk feces dropping into them and contaminating the feed and water.

Hygiene Considerations

You want to have a floor and walls that are easy to clean and disinfect.

You'll be cleaning them on a regular basis. Easily cleaned surfaces make bacterial contamination less likely and you will come to appreciate them very quickly when you clean your coop.

Roosting Poles

Your chickens will want roosting poles for sleeping on.

The poles can be made of virtually anything you'd like including branches and wooden dowelling. They should be about two inches wide with rounded edges. You'll want to have sufficient roosting pole length to provide at least five to ten inches of space per bird.

If you require multiple roosts, make sure they are separated by at least ten inches, using ladder-like grading that gradually rises with each successive roost so that the furthest roost is highest.

Under each roost, make sure you have a tray to catch droppings. The tray(s) should be removable and easy to clean.

Nesting Boxes

If you have laying hens, you'll want to provide nesting boxes for them to lay their eggs in.

The nesting boxes should be raised off the ground by at least a few inches but lower than the roosting poles. You need at least one nesting box per four to five hens.

Ideally, they are located in quiet, darker areas of the coop so that the hens feel safe enough to lay her eggs in them.

Predator Protection

There are a number of predators that enjoy chicken and even more that like fresh eggs.

Your flock is bound to attract the attention of your local predator population. They will do their best to get into your coop and the areas where your chickens are allowed outdoors and they will go under, over, and through your protective measures if they can.

Wire can be an excellent deterrent for predators. Chicken wire is actually a bit too large in terms of the hole size though. You are better off using something like hardware cloth which has smaller sized holes. Do not hesitate to use it anywhere you feel may be vulnerable including under the floor of your coop.

Outdoors, you should also do your best to provide some aerial protection from hawks and other predatory birds for your chickens. Hardware cloth or wire can be an excellent cover for areas your chickens will be unsupervised.

Because many predators dig, you should bury and extend wire underground for a foot or so both out from the coop and outdoor run and also straight down from the coop or run. This will deter animals that would burrow into your coop or run to get at your flock and their eggs.

Rodents & Vermin

Chicken feed and droppings can be very attractive to rodents, bugs, and other vermin.

Using wire or hardware cloth will help deter rodents and other vermin. Keeping your feed safely stored in inaccessible containers will go a long way to deterring pests.

Clean up the coop on a regular basis to keep droppings to a minimum as well.

Bedding

You should have bedding on your coop floor at least two inches deep.

You can also use bedding in nesting boxes to provide a safely cushioned spot for egg laying. Although there are many materials you can use for bedding, pine shavings are generally considered the best choice.

They will help absorb odors and make clean up easier. You can also use straw or other bedding materials but make sure you do not use cedar shavings. The oils can be toxic to your hens.

Dust Baths

Chickens love dust baths and they help prevent infestation of mites, lice and other parasites.

If your chickens go outdoors, they will most likely create their own dust baths but if they remain indoors you will need to provide one. It should be a reasonable sized box with at least six inches of the dust bath material in it.

An ideal mixture you can create yourself is one part fireplace ashes, one part road dust, one part sand and one part diatomaceous earth (DE).

Feeding Your Chickens

Feeding your chickens is probably one of the easiest aspects of raising chickens. Between your refrigerator and your local feed store, you will likely have access to everything you will need.

Nutrition is an important requirement for production of eggs and maintaining a healthy flock. Chickens are not usually gluttons and you should have food and water available to them at all times. They will self-regulate.

What you do need to keep an eye on is that they do not overdo the treats and neglect their feed in favor of treats and scraps. This is particularly important for laying hens as they need certain amount of calcium and other minerals in order to produce eggs.

Feeding Baby Chicks

You can purchase a complete feed for chicks from your local feed store.

It's called "starter feed" and comes in crumbles or mash, the latter is more finely ground than crumbles but that's the only real difference between the two. Different manufacturers have slightly different formulations.

You'll want to read the label carefully and follow the directions for how long you should feed it to your chicks before switching to a feed designed for adult chickens.

It is important to know what vaccinations your chicks received before you get them. If they were vaccinated against coccidiosis and Marek's Disease then you will want to offer them an "unmedicated feed".

If they were only vaccinated against Marek's Disease then a "medicated" feed can offer additional protection to your flock. Consult your avian veterinarian for more information about which vaccinations are recommended in your area and always find out what has and hasn't been given to your chicks before their arrival.

You can offer chicks occasional treats like yogurt, bits of hardboiled egg, and small mealworms or insects. Do not offer too many treats though.

The starter feed is a balanced diet and offers everything the chicks need to grow into healthy adult chickens. You do not want them to concentrate on eating treats instead of their feed. Occasional treats can be a nice way to introduce yourself to your chicks and gain their trust and friendship.

Chicks can be very messy and will poop right into their dishes. Although you can make your own feeders, you can also purchase ones that are designed in a manner that prevents as much contamination by chick poop. Clean the dishes frequently to prevent contamination.

Feeding Adult Chickens

Again, your local feed store will carry a variety of balanced diets suitable to adults.

The needs of laying hens are different than those of chickens that don't produce many eggs. Laying uses up a lot of nutrition and especially minerals like calcium. If your hens are laying, make sure you choose a layer diet that is balanced for the needs of laying hens.

As with chicks, your chickens can and should have food available at all times. They will self-regulate. So, have feed available at all times and keep an eye on the feeder to ensure that it is clean.

Healthy Treats

Chickens love treats and there is nothing wrong with offering your flock treats provided that they do not become their major food source.

If you find that your flock is eating mainly treats and neglecting their balanced feed, cut back on the treats.

Favourite Treats Include:

- Yogurt
- Hard Boiled Eggs (Never Raw Eggs)
- Mealworms
- Crickets
- Greens
- Fruits Like Bananas (Peeled)
- Apples
- Cooked Squash
- Watermelon
- Sunflower Seeds
- Melon
- Pomegranate Seeds
- Cooked Oatmeal
- Grains
- Corn (Raw Or Cooked, On Cob Or Off)
- Scrambled Eggs
- Berries

Scraps

Some people like to let their chickens do their composting for them. Most of the items you would compost are safe to offer your chickens. Avoid any of the items known to be toxic to chickens (listed above) and keep an eye on your birds to ensure they aren't just eating scraps rather than their feed.

Grit

Chickens do not have teeth. Instead, they have an organ called a crop at the base of the neck where items get ground up before being digested. Because they have no teeth, your flock needs to eat grit to grind up the food they eat in their crop.

You can purchase grit at your local feed store. It is inexpensive and you can leave it out in a dish for your flock to help themselves. They do not need large amounts but they do need some.

Scratch

Scratch is a term that describes a combination of grains, corn and seeds. It is meant to be an occasional treat that you can also use to help alleviate boredom.

Take a handful of scratch and toss it out onto the ground. Your chickens will love the opportunity to dig for goodies.

Water

Your flock needs access to fresh water at all times. As with feeders, you can make your own but you can also purchase waterers.

Dehydration is a serious risk to chickens of all ages. Always have water available. Check it frequently to ensure that there is water available and that it is clean. If the water gets dirty, your flock may avoid drinking it.

Storage

Regardless of where you store your feed, there are some important considerations regarding the storage container. It should keep feed protected from moisture and be rodent proof. Rodents and insects will contaminate and spoil feed, putting your flock at risk.

Outdoor Environment

Chickens love to free range and if at all possible, it is an opportunity you should provide for your chickens even if it is just for a day or two a week.

Obviously the area they are allowed to roam in should be fenced. Make sure it has some shaded areas as well that your chickens can make use of on sunny days. Adult chickens are not great flyers and the fence does not need to be overly high but younger chickens and chicks can fly and may go a few feet into the air in search of a perch.

If the area is small enough to manage it, a light net or some chicken wire draped over the top will prevent flying too far and keep them safe from aerial predators like hawks. Most daytime predators are less likely to try to take down an adult chicken but chicks are extremely vulnerable to predators. At night, chickens should always be safely shut into their coop.

Bury fencing at least a foot downward and a foot outward from the edges to prevent predators from digging their way into the run. Be aware that any plants and landscaped areas within the run will likely get destroyed.

It's a great place to let your chickens hasten composting with a bit of scratch though.

Cold Weather

Over time, most chickens will get the hang of cold weather in the winter and growing heavier feathering accordingly.

Some owners choose to put a heat lamp in the coop for additional warmth. If you put a lamp in, make sure it is hung and absolutely nowhere near flammable materials. You do not want to create a fire hazard.

If you live in a cold climate, it is a good idea to choose hardy breeds that are known to be cold weather tolerant. You can put a bit of petroleum jelly on the combs and wattles of your flock every few days to help protect them from the cold.

Make sure your waterer is heated in winter to prevent the water from freezing. Your birds always need to have access to clean water.

Hot Weather

Shade and lots of fresh water are always important but even more crucial in a hot climate.

Make sure your coop is well ventilated and, especially if your birds do not get outside time, cool enough. Some breeds are much better suited to live in a hot climate than others.

Choose your breeds wisely!

Health & Safety

It is not a secret that birds can carry bacterial and viral infections that can not only be dangerous to them but also to you and your family.

There are some precautions you should take to protect your flock, yourself and your family.

- **Keeping The Coop Clean**
- **Keeping Your Chickens Clean**
- **Keeping Yourself Clean**

Keeping The Coop Clean

You should change all the bedding in your coop at least once a month to prevent ammonia build up.

Do spot clean-up of droppings and messes as they occur but make sure everything is removed and cleaned at least once a month.

Keep an eye on waterers and feeders. They should be full and clean.

Chickens are less likely to use them if they are dirty. Once every two weeks take them out and scrub them to ensure that any bacteria is cleaned out.

At least twice a year, empty the coop out completely and scrub it down with cleaner.

Keeping Your Chickens Clean

If you notice any signs of illness or odd behaviour in your chickens, immediately quarantine the chicken to prevent any illness from spreading to the rest of your flock.

If in doubt, always consult your avian veterinarian.

If you are introducing new chickens to your flock, always quarantine them for four weeks first to make sure they are healthy before integrating them with your flock.

Deworm your flock regularly, many recommend doing it every six months.

Use a dust like Garden & Poultry to help prevent infestations of mites, lice and other parasites. Make sure your chickens have access to a dust bath.

Keeping Yourself Clean

Always wash your hands after handling your chickens, collecting eggs, or working in the coop.

Keep clean clothes inside to change into after working in your coop and change once you're done.

Wash the clothes in hot water as soon as possible.

Have shoes that you only wear in your chicken coop and remove them as soon as you leave the coop.

Wear a face mask when working in your coop. Chickens produce a lot of dust. Protect your lungs and wear a mask.

Conclusion

There you have it!

You now have a solid foundation for raising and caring for your own flock.

There are many rewards to be had when you decide to raise your own chickens. They make affectionate, fun pets and you will find yourself spending hours enjoying their company.

Not only will you love spending time with them, but you will never want to buy eggs at your supermarket again. ***The taste difference between fresh eggs and supermarket eggs is unbelievable!*

Not only do they taste better, they're also healthier for you.

In addition, you'll have the peace of mind knowing that the chickens that produce those eggs are well cared for and raised and fed in a manner you approve of.

There are so many benefits to raising these beautiful creatures! So, what are you waiting for?

Start raising your own, happy and healthy backyard chickens today!

About The Author

Brad Callan has been passionate about animals and their care since he was a young man.

Growing up, he has spent many years volunteering with animal rescue and activist groups. As he got much older, he went on to study university level biology and veterinary sciences where he achieved his B.S. in Veterinary Sciences.

Brad has a deep love for all animals but has a special fondness for rescued dogs.

Currently, Brad lives with his wife, three children, and two dogs (rescued) on a rural hobby farm in the Pacific Northwest and enjoys writing and sharing this passion with the world.

****Bonus Topics**

Here are some bonus takeaways tips to raising the healthiest baby chicks and chickens possible:

Things You Should NEVER Feed Your Chickens

There are some food items you should never feed your chickens. Some are poisonous while others simply aren't good for them.

- **Cooked meats** – Meat is okay in small amounts provided that it hasn't gone bad. You can even feed your birds cooked chicken although there is some question about the philosophical implications of feeding your chickens, chicken meat. Do not offer bones, raw or spoiled meat.
- **Citrus Fruits & Peel** – These fruits are not harmful but can lead to a drop in egg production.
- **Garlic & Onions** – Not harmful but they will impart a bit of their flavour to the eggs your hens produce.
- **Raw Potato Skins and Flesh** – Raw potatoes contain solanine which is toxic.
- **Avocado Plants, Skins, Flesh & Pit** – Avocados contain toxic elements in all parts of the plant.
- **Chocolate** – No chocolate for pets of any type including chickens, it is toxic.
- **Any Plant Known to Be Poisonous** – While you would like to think that your flock will avoid toxic plants, don't count on it.

Raising The Healthiest Baby Chicks!

If you decide to purchase chicks and raise them yourself, there are a few key things to remember.

- Chicks are raised indoors as a general rule due to their temperature requirements. Initially they need very high temperatures to stay warm and healthy. These temperatures gradually decrease as they age and they can usually begin going outdoors by four to five weeks of age.
- Prepare the space for them to live in while indoors in advance. It is referred to as a brooder. It should be somewhere that they will be safe from predators and free of drafts but not in your living space as baby chicks tend to produce a lot of dust and they can smell. Your garage, basement, or workshop can be an excellent choice. You'll want to have at least two square feet per chick. It can be a storage bin, a large box, or other containment system. It is important that it be well ventilated.
- Have lots of bedding such as pine shavings, at least one inch thick, along the bottom of the brooder. It needs to be cleaned regularly.
- Hang both the feeder and waterer to reduce the frequency with which they manage to poop into it or get bedding into it. Keep them full at all times and clean them regularly.
- Suspend a 250 watt infrared light bulb over your brooder to provide heat. Initially, the chicks will need very hot temperatures. During the first week of their life, they need to be kept at about 95 F. It decreases by 5 F each week of their life. Watch how your chicks are spread out in the brooder. If they are all huddled under the lamp, they are too cold. You can increase the heat by lowering the lamp closer to the brooder. If they are as far from the lamp as they can get, they're too hot and you can raise the lamp a bit too cool things off. Ideally, your chicks are wandering about their brooder exploring happily.
- You can provide a roosting perch about 5 inches off the ground. Chicks are much better flyers than adult chickens and will fly up to roost. They will also fly out of your brooder if the sides

are too low. You can drape chicken wire over the top to prevent them from flying the coop.

Keeping Your Chickens Happy & Healthy!

There are many simple ways to keep your flock happy and healthy.

Happy chickens are less likely to bully one another and pick at each other. They also lay more eggs.

- Watch your chickens and get to know their routines and personalities. Being able to detect small changes in behavior can allow you to catch problems and health issues early can mean the difference between being able to treat the problem and a dead chicken.
- Letting your chickens outdoors to range a bit, even if it is just a few times a week, can make a huge difference in their level of happiness. They love to explore. Throw down a bit of scratch for a special treat.
- In the winter, your chickens will likely get less outdoor time. Try hanging a head of cabbage in the coop for them to peck at. It will help alleviate boredom and provide hours of entertainment as well as a tasty treat for them.
- Keep things clean!
- Make sure your chickens have lots of room. Crowding will lead to all kinds of behavioral problems, fewer eggs layed, and increase the risk of disease.
- Interact with your chickens. Offer them treats and spend time with them.

Glossary Of Terms

Here are some common terms you will see in materials related to chickens.

Bantam – A small sized chicken usually only weighing 1 – 2 pounds. Some breeds have regular and Bantam sizes, some have only regular or only Bantam.

Banty – Another term for a Bantam.

Booted – A chicken that has feathered feet and legs.

Brood – A group of chickens, usually they have been hatched together.

Brooder – A heated container in which you raise young chicks until they can withstand normal temperatures. It takes the place of the hen's natural warmth.

Broody – See also setter. A trait that causes the hen to want to incubate her eggs and raise a clutch even if they are unfertilized.

Cape – The feathers between the head and body of the chicken.

Chooks – An Australian term for chicks.

Clutch – A batch of eggs hatched together or a batch of eggs layed by a hen on consecutive days until she skips a day to begin a new cycle.

Comb – The red flesh on top of the head.

Coccidiosis – A parasitic protozoal infection. Can be caused by unclean conditions.

Cock – British term for a rooster.

Crest – A puff of feathers on the top of the head that is seen in some breeds. Also called a topknot.

Crop – Organ at the base of the throat where the chicken's body grinds up feed using grit since they have no teeth.

Crumbles – Food used to feed young chicks; it can also be called starter.

Dustbath – Chickens will immerse themselves in dust and wiggle around in it. This helps remove mites, lice, and other pests.

Feather Legged – Feathers around the feet and legs of the chicken, occurs in some breeds.

Free Range – Chickens that are allowed to roam outdoors instead of being constantly kept in an indoor run or coop.

Gallus domesticus – The scientific name for the domestic chicken.

Gizzard – Also called a crop, this is an organ that grinds up food for the chicken in place of teeth.

Grit – Sand or small stones that the chicken eats and uses in his crop to grind up feed.

Hen – A female chicken that has begun to lay eggs. In poultry shows, it refers to a female chicken over a year of age.

Keel – The chicken's breastbone.

Litter – The bedding used for the hens, usually pine shavings.

Moult – The process by which a chicken sheds his old feathers and grows in new ones. Often occurs in fall.

Muff – Puffs of feathers that occur on either side of the head in conjunction with a beard in some breeds.

Pasted Up – A serious condition in which poop dries and blocks the chick's vent, preventing him from excreting poop. If not dealt with immediately and gently, it can be a fatal condition.

Pecking Order – The dominance order of the flock. All chickens have their own rank within the flock from most to least dominant. The most dominant gets first access to food, water, and basically anything he or she wants and then the next dominant all the way down to the least dominant chicken. Dominant chickens sometimes pick on or push around a less dominant chicken.

Perch – A place such as a branch or piece of dowelling where chickens like to roost.

Pigmentation – The color of the chicken's feet, beak, and vent.

Pin Feathers – The initial feathers that come in on a baby chick after the down. They look like a pin hence the name.

Plumage – The feathers of a chicken.

Pullet – A hen that has not begun to lay eggs. In poultry shows it refers to a hen under a year of age.

Roosting – The act of sleeping in chickens. A roost is where they choose to sleep.

Saddle – A portion of the chicken's back that occurs just before the tail.

Setter - Synonym for broody, it indicates a hen that wishes to raise a clutch.

Sickles – These are the long, curved tail feathers seen on roosters.

Spent – A hen is spent when she is past her laying years and no longer lays eggs.

Spurs – Curved talons on a rooster's feet.

Starter – Food used to feed young chicks; can also be called crumbles.

Straight Run – A newly hatched group of chicks that have not been separated by sex. May also be called unsexed or as hatched.

Topknot – Also called a crest, this is a group of feathers coming off the top of the chicken's head in some breeds.

Vent – A hole at the back of the chicken. It serves multiple purposes. It is where poop exits the chicken, where eggs come out of, and is also used as a sexual organ when chickens mate.

Wattle – The red flesh that hangs down below a chicken's head.