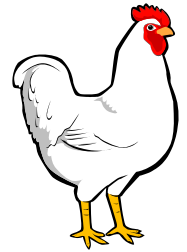




Raising Backyard Chickens



Why Keep Chickens? – The benefits of raising backyard chickens are numerous:

- Eggs, meat, manure, and more!
- “Poultry Predation” will keep insects and weeds to a minimum.
- Chickens can be trained to make good pets and are an entertaining backyard amusement.
- Excellent Composters. They eat most food scraps and will turn over compost and soil.
- Free Fertilizer. Dried chicken manure has an N-P-K value of 2-2-2.

The “Eggonomics” of Raising Backyard Chickens – Is it worth it?

- Baby Chicks – \$3-\$5 per chick for most breeds. Rare breeds significantly more.
- Brooder, Feeder, Waterer – Free to \$100 for startup supplies.
- Coop – Free to several thousand dollars. Durable, long-lasting coop can be built for \$400-\$700.
- Feed – Average sized mature laying birds eat about 3 lbs of feed each week. Meat birds average about 10-15 lbs of food per bird over their lifespan. (6-15 weeks)
- Miscellaneous – Chickens may require veterinary care, nutrient supplements, heating/cooling equipment, and coops can be embellished for aesthetic purposes.
- Cost of organic eggs at Farmers Market - \$6-\$7 a dozen.

“Fowl” Disposition – Choosing a Breed

- Chickens are highly social animals. A minimum of 3 chicks per flock is required but more is better. At about 6 weeks your chicks will begin to establish a “pecking order”.
- Laying Breeds – Breeds known as “layers” will lay eggs for longer periods of time with less time between non-laying periods. Laying breeds are generally smaller in size and are less likely to go broody. They do tend to be more flighty however. The best layers include the Mediterranean breeds such as: Ancona, Leghorn, and Minorca. Laying

breeds will begin laying at around 18 weeks, non-layers will start at around 30 weeks. All breeds will lay fewer eggs as they age.

- Meat Breeds – The best meat birds are those that reach butchering weight in the shortest time possible. Commercial hybrids are the most efficient meat birds, reaching butcher size in only 6-7 weeks. The most efficient pure breed meat birds will take a little longer, about 9-10 weeks. These non-hybrid meat breeds include: Cornish, Shamo, Brahma, Cochin.
- Dual purpose or old fashioned “utility” breeds – These birds generally do not begin to lay as quickly as laying breeds and do not reach butcher weight as quickly as the meat breeds, therefore they are not as desirable for production purposes. Utility breeds will reach butchering weight at about 12-15 weeks and they begin to lay around 30 weeks. The best utility breeds include the American varieties such as New Hampshire, Plymouth Rock, Delaware, and Wyndotte.
- Noisy and Flighty Breeds – Any rooster. Ancona, Andalusian, Leghorn, Modern Game, Old English Game. Most bantams are flighty as well.
- Docile and ornamental breeds – Birds that are not raised for production are often raised as pets or as show birds. The calmest breeds include the Jersey Giant and Cochins. All make good pets but require lots of space. If space is an issue, try the Silke or Serama, the smallest of all chicken breeds.
- Aggressive Breeds – Any breed can turn aggressive, however as a generality most game birds tend to be more aggressive. These include Modern Game, Old English Game, Aseel and Shamo. To this day many breeds are still bred to fight.
- Broody Breeds – When a chicken lays a clutch of eggs and begins to sit, she has gone “broody.” A broody hen will not lay eggs again until she has stopped the brood. Any breed can go broody but heavier breeds tend to go broody more than light breeds.

Shelter or Coop Design

Coops come in many shapes in sizes, from the deluxe “Coop-de-Ville” to the humble A-frame. A coop can be a permanent structure, mobile, or a combination of both. Regardless of the design, all coops must feature the following:

- Adequate space for the number of birds. Spacing requirements depend on age and breed (see graphic).

| | | MINIMUM SPACE REQUIREMENTS | | | | | |
|--------|-----------------|----------------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|---|----------------|
| | | Open House | | Confined Housing | | Caged | |
| Birds | Age | sq ft/ Bird | Birds/ sq m | sq ft/ Bird | Birds/ sq m | sq ft/ Bird | Birds/ sq m |
| Heavy | 1 day-1 week | — | — | 0.5 | 20 | <i>Do not house heavy breeds on wire.</i> | |
| | 1-8 weeks | 1.0 | 10 | 2.5 | 4 | | |
| | 9-15* weeks | 2.0 | 5 | 5.0 | 2 | | |
| | 15-20 weeks | 3.0 | 4 | 7.5 | 1.5 | | |
| | 21 weeks and up | 4.0 | 3 | 10.0 | 1 | | |
| Light | 1 day-1 week | — | — | 0.5 | 20 | 25 | 160 |
| | 1-11 weeks | 1.0 | 10 | 2.5 | 4 | 45 | 290 |
| | 12-20 weeks | 2.0 | 5 | 5.0 | 2 | 60 | 390 |
| | 21 weeks and up | 3.0 | 3 | 7.5 | 1.5 | 75 | 480 |
| Bantam | 1 day-1 week | — | — | 0.3 | 30 | 20 | 130 |
| | 1-11 weeks | 0.6 | 15 | 1.5 | 7 | 40 | 260 |
| | 12-20 weeks | 1.5 | 7 | 3.5 | 3 | 55 | 360 |
| | 21 weeks and up | 2.0 | 5 | 5.0 | 2 | 70 | 450 |

*or age of slaughter

- Ventilation is highly important, but drafty conditions in the coop should be avoided, especially for chicks.
- A good coop will keep your chickens cool in the summer and warm in the winter.
- Protection from predators and closed-off to rodents and other pests.
- Adequate roosting space, at least a 1” diameter roosting bar with 12” of spacing between birds. Chickens prefer a chamfered (flattened) roost as opposed to rounded.
- At least one nest box for every 4-5 hens. Either a 12” or 14” square box is sufficient.
- Bedding material and a dust bathing area. There are many types of bedding, choose one that is cost effective and easily obtainable. Should be highly absorbent and will not compact.

Food For Thought

Chickens are omnivores that will gladly eat most food scraps, weeds, and insects but it is important to provide them with a well balanced grain ration. Chicks start on a “grower” or “starter” feed and switch over to a “layer” feed when they begin to lay eggs. Do not feed young chick’s layer ration or laying hens grower ration. When in doubt, remember the “4 Gs” Grains, Grit, Greens, and Grubs. In the heat of summer, as chickens reduce feed consumption, it is important to supplement nutrient loss with ground oyster shell, rock phosphate, and salt.

Minimizing Heat Stress

- Heat tolerant breeds – Lightly feathered breeds such as Naked-Necks, Mediterranean breeds (Leghorn, Minorca, Buttercup). Breeds with short or tight feathers such as Cornish, Hamburg, and Modern Game birds also tolerate higher temps.
- Heat intolerant breeds – Loosely feathered breeds such as Orpingtons and heavily feathered breeds such as the Asiatics (Brahma, Cochin, Langshan). Also, American breeds like Rhode Island Red, Plymouth Rock, and New Hampshire are better suited for colder climates.
- Be sure not to overcrowd hens and be certain to provide adequate ventilation for shelter. Consider adding a box or ceiling fan. Shade should be available at all times, but sunlight is important.
- Increase watering stations in hot weather and replace with cool water daily. Add ice and keep waterers in shade to increase effectiveness.
- Add electrolyte tablets to waterers to replace lost electrolytes. May affect taste.

- As hens decrease food consumption, feed less and replace rations frequently.
- Do not feed hens scratch in the summer, switch to whole oats instead.
- Do not place small enclosures such as “sin bins” in direct heat.
- Lightly mist adult hens on hot days. Avoid misting during monsoon when humidity is high. Hose down shelter and surrounding area multiple times a day.
- Layers will suffer more in hot weather than non-layers.