

Keeping Chickens in your back yard

Information

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Keeping Chickens for beginners



History of keeping chickens

Humans have been keeping chickens for thousands of years. Domestication probably occurred 7,000-10,000 years ago in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Distribution of Chickens occurred rapidly and was widespread because of their ability to provide meat and eggs without being competitive for human food sources.

With the recent prices of egg increasing many people are now becoming more interested in keeping chickens at home.

Keeping chickens can be a rewarding activity and a great learning experience for families to discover more about where their food comes from.

Chickens are hardy birds that can easily adapt to many different environments. As long as basic care and husbandry is addressed chickens can be an easy way to provide fresh food, both eggs and meat.

Getting started with chickens.

Before purchasing chickens there are several issues to address. First it is important to review your local laws and regulations regarding keeping chickens, as well as any restrictions or rules from your local home owners association.

There is nothing more frustrating than getting started on a project and investing time and money on chickens and then find out you are not allowed to keep them.

Chickens typically are hardy animals, but they can carry diseases like salmonella and so proper handling and hand washing when working with chickens is important especially for young children and people with compromised immune systems.

The next issue is to plan plan plan. Where will you keep your chickens? How many will you want? What age chickens do you plan to start with? How much space do you have available? Who will care for them and clean up after them? Why do you want to raise chickens (eggs or meat, pets)?

Most people choose to start with day old chicks. Chicks can be purchased on-line or from a feed store or hatched from fertilized eggs in an incubator.



Day old chicks require some additional special care. These were just picked up from the Higley Post Office.

Getting started with chicks

Live poultry may have Salmonella germs in their droppings and on their bodies (feathers, feet, and beaks) even when they appear healthy and clean. The germs can also get on cages, coops, hay, plants, and soil in the area where the birds live and roam. Additionally, the germs can be found on the hands, shoes, and clothing of those who handle the birds or work or play where they live and roam. People become infected with Salmonella when they put their hands or other things that have been in contact with feces in or around their mouth. Young children are especially at risk for illness because their immune systems are still developing and because they are more likely than others to put their fingers or other items into their mouths. It is important to wash your hands immediately after touching poultry or anything in the area where they live and roam, because the germs on your hands can easily spread to other people or things.

Care for newborn chicks

Producer's
PRIDE
IMPECKABLES



Set up a **brooding area**. When raising just a few chicks (30 or less) use a large box with walls at least 18-inches high and place the box in a safe area away from drafts and household pets. Use a screen or a towel to cover the box. For larger numbers, a metal stock tank can be used in an enclosed, draft free outbuilding. Do not use a plastic bin as a brooder area. The brooder lamp can melt the plastic, fall into the **pine shavings** and start a fire. Chicks need one-half square foot of space for each bird for the first two weeks. They grow fast and after two weeks, increase to one square foot per bird.

Keep chicks warm

Chicks need to be kept in a warm place until they are fully feathered. The temperature at the bottom of the brooding area should be 95-100 degrees for the first two weeks and then reduced 5 degrees each week until chicks are a month old. Use a brooder lamp (we recommend a red bulb) clipped over one side of the brooding area so the chicks can choose whether to be under the light or not. If chicks are crowded together directly under the heat source, then they are cold. If they are around the edges of the brooding area, then they are too hot. Adjust the height of the lamp accordingly and give them enough room to move in and out of the light to regulate their body temperatures.

Bedding for baby chicks

Provide bedding to catch and absorb chick droppings and change this daily. Line the floor of the box with sheets of newspaper and then cover it with pine shavings. Once soiled, then just roll up the paper, pine shavings and all, and throw it away. If using newspaper, make sure to cover with bedding such as 2-3" of pine shavings, chopped straw, oat hulls or ground cobs (not finely ground), so the surface won't be too slippery for the chicks. Without firm footing their legs will not develop correctly, making them spraddle-legged.

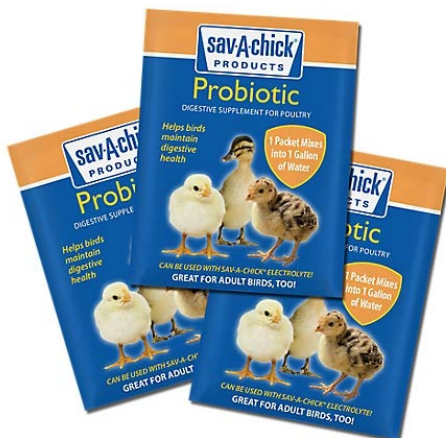
Food and water for baby chicks

Set out water and **chick starter feed in separate containers. Keep food and water clean and free of droppings. If chicks are not drinking, dip the chicks' beaks in the water to get them started.**

I like to add a probiotic and vitamin supplement to the water for the first few



weeks to give them a head start.



A chick fountain is by far the best way to give chicks water. Saucers or other make-shift containers spill easily making the brooder area wet and unsanitary. Never let the chicks go without water.

For feed, start chicks on a 20% protein (24% protein for broilers) starter ration. At 8-10 weeks old, switch chicks to 18-19% chick grower.

Picking problems in baby chicks

Birds between the ages of one and three weeks old may start picking around the tail stub, wing bow or neck areas. If this happens, make sure there is good ventilation in the building. Consult your veterinarian if the picking persists.

Other considerations for raising baby chicks

Chicks love to roost when they're resting. Provide roosting poles or stacks of bricks so chicks have a place to perch a few inches off the ground to keep them from roosting on the waterer and feeder. As the chicks start to feather, on warm days put them in a wire pen outside for short periods of time in a draft free area. Keep an eye on them and provide a tray of sand so they can dust. As you work with the chicks, remember that slow movements are less apt to frighten them. Thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water after handling or working around the chicks. Salmonella, a common cause of food borne illness, can be spread by direct contact with animals that carry the bacteria. Hygiene is very important to keep your birds, you and your family healthy.

Safe handling of chicks

- **Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after touching live poultry or anything in the area where they live and roam.**
- **Avoid touching your mouth before washing your hands.**
- **Use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not readily available.**
- **Adults should supervise hand washing for young children.**
- **Wash hands after removing soiled clothes and shoes.**

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- **Do not let children younger than 5 years of age handle or touch chicks, ducklings, or other live poultry without supervision.**
 - **Do not eat or drink in the area where the birds live or roam.**
 - **If you collect eggs from the hens, thoroughly cook them, as Salmonella can pass from healthy looking hens into the interior of normal looking eggs.**
 - **Do not let live poultry inside the house, in bathrooms, or especially in areas where food or drink is prepared, served, or stored, such as kitchens, or outdoor patios.**
 - **If you have free-roaming live poultry, assume where they live and roam is contaminated.**
 - **Clean equipment and materials associated with raising or caring for live poultry, such as cages or feed or water containers, outside the house, not inside.**

Now that you have prepared a brooding area for your chicks and have food and water dispensers, bedding and a safe location. It is time to decide what type of chickens you would like to keep.

Choosing your breed and type. Once you start researching, the hundreds of breeds available can be overwhelming. To make life a little easier, try breaking it down first by purpose, then by needs then by temperment.

Chickens can be selected to produce eggs, meat or both!

Chicken breeds that are selected predominantly for egg production tend to be thinner lighter birds and convert most of the food energy into egg production. They tend not to go broody (set on eggs with the purpose of raising chicks) and often are described as flighty. They often will fly well and can easily escape out of a back yard block wall fence. Typically this type of chicken should be kept in a closed pen to prevent them from escaping.

Breeds known for high egg production include:

leghorns (a variety of colors)



Red/black Sex-linked



Cream Legbars



Breeds known for rapid meat production are typically cornish crosses. These chickens have been selected to gain weight rapidly and are ready to butcher in 8-10 weeks.



Dual Purpose: These are chickens that combine both egg production and weight gain. While they will not lay as many eggs per year as a leghorn or get as much meat production as a cornish cross, they do produce consistent amounts of eggs and can be eaten when they reach full size.

Examples of common dual purpose birds.

Rhode Island Red



Plymouth Rocks



Australorp



Orpingtons



Now that you've done your research and have decided on a breed you are ready to purchase your eggs, chicks, pullets, or chickens.

If you order chicks through the mail often there is a minimum number of chicks to order at a time, usually around 25. This is to help keep them warm during shipping. Ordering in the late spring is helpful here in AZ as the temperature doesn't get too cool at night, but the chicks will be coming from Northern states. If you don't want 25 chicks consider splitting an order with someone or buy a smaller number from a local feed store.

One advantage to buying chicks locally is that you can inspect them first to make sure they are eating and drinking and do not appear sick. Healthy chicks are active and make lots of peeping and cheeping sounds. They should actively run around their enclosure and react quickly when someone disturbs them. Avoid chicks that appear puffed up, have closed eyes, mucus or runny nose, or that are lying on the ground. Often it is better to avoid purchasing any chicks from a store if there are several sick chicks in the batch as the others may get sick over the next few days as well. Another advantage is that you can select a few different breeds to have a variety in your flock.

If purchasing chicks, you will need supplies for the brooding period before they are ready to live in a coop. Make sure you have your brooding area set up before you buy the chicks so you can bring them home and get them set up right away. When you put the chicks in their pen dip their beaks into the water source so they know where to go for a drink. It is best to use very warm water in the first introduction to help gently warm the chicks up if they have gotten cool during transport from the hatchery or store.

Sprinkle some chick starter feed, on the floor of their cage and gently tap the feed with your finger. This will introduce the chicks to their food and most will start pecking at the food and eat right away.

Try not to handle your chicks too much the first few days to allow them to settle in and eat and drink. Excess handling when they are young can increase stress and death. Children love to hold chicks but again wait a few days . Make sure to wash your hands before and after handling chicks to reduce spread of diseases to your chickens as well as to yourself and others.

Make sure your chicks have a reliable heat source. An ideal brooder allows for the chicks to move around and find the right temperature for them. If you find all the chicks are huddled together under the heat source they need more heat. If they are all sprawled out at the other end of the pen, they are getting too hot.

Chicks eat and drink constantly and should always have fresh food and water.

After 4-6 weeks your chicks should have developed quite a few feathers. Wings and tail feathers develop first followed by feathers on their heads, neck and back. During this period of time chicks produce a lot of fine down and dust which gets all over everything. Be ready to clean their pens and the area around them daily.

Once the weather is warm enough or when the chicks have enough feathers it is time to move them outdoors.

Do this gradually to allow them to adjust to a cooler setting. If night time temperatures are still low make sure to have a heat source in the coop.

Chickens do NOT like damp drafty living conditions and this environment can lead to infections. Keep their coop dry and draft free.

Graduating chicks to adults

Chicks are ready to graduate to the hen house at 6 weeks old, depending on the weather. Allow at least 1½ to 2 square feet per bird. Use litter, which can be the same kind you used for the brooder. Two to three 1-cubic-foot straw-filled nest boxes in a dark corner will serve a dozen hens. Roosts, which allow chickens to perch, are preferred by chickens but are not necessary.

Design your coop recognizing that chickens are gourmet fare to hawks, dogs, coyotes, raccoons, skunks, opossums, foxes, rats, weasels, and other carnivores.

Some predators climb walls or fences; others dig under. One-inch chicken wire measuring 5 to 6 feet high and fixed to the ground usually keeps chickens in and predators out. Add netting to the top for added protection.

If you let your chickens scratch outside the coop, be sure to secure them each evening.

Coops should be cleaned regularly. Keeping a deep layer of dry material under the roosting area helps to prevent odors and flies. The faster the manure dries out the less of a problem it will be. A damp wet coop will smell horrible and invite pests and disease.

Straw, dried grass, dry leaves, hay, pine shavings, pine needles, paper bedding can all be used to keep the coop area clean and dry.

When are chicks ready to lay eggs? Be patient.

Most hens from breeds selected for egg production can start laying by 20 weeks, but more commonly 6 months. Dual purpose birds are more likely to take longer to produce eggs. A young hen will have a light pink comb and wattles and as she matures and gets ready to start laying eggs they will turn dark red.

To stimulate laying, increase light artificially in the coop by two hours then add 15 minutes more per week until reaching 16 hours.

Hens usually lay in the morning, he says. After several days of production, they rest a day or two before laying again. A flock of 15 hens will produce about a dozen eggs a day during their peak. Chickens are born with all the eggs they will ever lay and each day they use up one of their eggs. Chickens tend to be the most productive in laying eggs in the first 12-18 months of life. After that egg production will drop and a hen who is 3-4 years old may only lay 2-3 eggs per week.

A healthy chicken can live for 8-10 years, but egg production will usually stop by then.

Feeding and Care of Adult chickens.

Now that your chicks have graduated from the brooder it will be time to move them to their new outdoor homes. The more space you can give your chickens the happier they will be long term. Minimum should be at least 3 square feet of floor space in the coop per adult bird. If you plan to keep them housed in their coop full time, more space is better. If they are going to be allowed time to free range in the yard they can tolerate being “cooped up” better.

The coop should have a solid roofed area to keep them out of rain and sunshine. In Arizona strategic placement of the coop is necessary as our hot summer sun can be deadly to chickens.

I like to provide as much shade as possible. Placing your coop under a large tree is a great location as the leaves will help keep the coop cooler.

In the summer chickens need access to cool fresh water at all times. Fans can be used to help circulate air in the coop as well. Chickens CANNOT sweat so the way they cool themselves is by panting (much like a dog) and holding their wings out away from their bodies. If you see this behavior, monitor them closely as if they have too much heat exposure they will die.

Chickens will stand in water to help cool their feet so placing large plastic pans of water will give them something to drink as well as a place to cool off. Freezing water in 2L soda bottles is also helpful as you can place them in the water pans to help keep them cooler longer. I rinse the water dishes out daily as the water gets very dirty and smells terrible. You can use the water to fertilize grass, trees and

shrubs, but be careful not to over use it as it will be very high in nitrogen and may burn sensitive plants if used improperly.

Hanging water dispensers are also a good idea. Adding a small amount of apple cider vinegar to the watery (1 TBS to a gallon) will help prevent algae and bacterial growth and encourages chickens to drink more as it tastes good.

Adding ice cubes or blocks to the water containers during the summer can also help cool the chickens down.

When it is hot outside try not to disturb your chickens as when they get scared or startled it can make them fly about and increase body temperature even more.

Adult laying hens will need a daily feed that contains 16-18% protein. There are many different brands of chicken feed. It will come in a variety of forms but the two most common are crumbles (easier for younger birds to eat) and pellets.

There are organic brands, soy free, gluten free available. Your chickens won't care which but you might.

Scratch grains can be provided as a treat but should not make up the bulk of their diet.

Dried mealworms, soldier fly larvae and dried crickets are also good treat items and can be used as a reward or protein boost.

Chickens can also eat many kitchen scraps as well, but it again should not make up the bulk of their diet. Too many wet foods will spoil in the coop, attract flies and pests and can cause diarrhea. Chickens usually won't eat things that are

bad for them; however, you should avoid offering chocolate, potato, onion, garlic, as some of these aren't well tolerated and can affect the taste of your eggs.

Chickens will also need access to some grit. Grit is small pieces of rocks, oyster shells or calcium carbonate chunks. Chickens do not have teeth so they eat most of the food whole or will peck and break it into smaller pieces. Chickens have a gizzard which is a muscular sack in their throat where they store grit or small hard objects that then are used to grind their food into smaller and smaller pieces for digestion. The benefit of a calcium based grit is to improve the quality of the egg shells. If you get soft shells or shells that crack or break easily, add more calcium to their diet. Most commercial layer feeds have the proper level of calcium added already.

Coop Care:

Chickens do 3 things reliably every day, eat, drink and poop. Be prepared to manage all 3. We have discussed food and water, but keeping your coop clean will be important. The biggest issue is keeping the chicken manure dry. Use a deep layer of bedding of some sort so that droppings dry out as quickly as possible. Wet bedding with droppings will quickly create ammonia and smell as well and attract flies and pests. Your neighbor's will not appreciate it either. Good choices for bedding are pine shavings, rice hulls, dried leaves, dry grass clippings, pine needles, shredded paper or a mixture of all of the above. When you change the bedding, you can compost the material but again make sure you

have enough dry carbon sources to offset the nitrogen rich manure or it will smell bad.

There are many different types of coops, but all should have a roosting area and nest boxes to make care easier. Chicken tractors are a coop on wheels that can be moved around the yard to allow the chickens to have access to grass, weeds and bugs, but then give the ground time to heal after it has been groomed by the chickens eating and scratching.

Eggs:

Now after months of raising chicks, feeding juveniles, caring for the birds into adulthood, you are probably anxiously awaiting your first egg. It can take anywhere from 4-6 months before your cute fuzzy chicks provide you with your first egg. Spring chicks will usually start to lay eggs in the early fall after the heat of summer drops. Egg production will fall in the winter when day light hours are shorter so just when they start they will take a break again. Egg production is the highest in the spring with birds between 1-2 years old.

Egg production drops naturally over time so older hens will lay eggs less often.

Eggs should be collected at least once per day, but more often if it is hot. Most chickens will lay eggs in the mid morning after they leave the roost, eat and drink. Make sure to have enough egg boxes for your flock. 1 box for every 4-5 hens is usually enough. Line the nest boxes with pine shavings, nest pads or

some other soft absorbent material. I like aspen shavings as they are clean and easily compostable. I replace it several times per year if they become soiled or worn out.

Eggs often will have dirt or manure on them. When eggs are laid the hen will create a coating called the bloom which helps prevent bacteria from entering the egg. When collecting eggs they can be stored unwashed on the counter for a week or so or in the refrigerator for a month or more. If the eggs are soiled, make sure to wash them well before use to reduce risks of salmonella or e. Coli contamination. If eggs are washed, store them in the refrigerator to prolong shelf life.

Additional information

Molting: Chickens typically molt once per year. Molting is when they will drop all of their feathers and replace them with new feathers. This can make quite a mess in the yard as feathers will be everywhere. Make sure to offer your birds a bit higher protein feed when they are molting to help in building their new feathers. Some chickens will drop a few feathers at a time and others will drop all at once.

Roosters: Make sure you check with your homeowner's association but most city settings do not allow roosters due to the loud crowing in the early morning and throughout the day. A rooster is not needed for egg production; however, if you want to raise your own chickens from eggs you raise then a rooster is needed.

Roosters can make great pets but can be aggressive and attack when they feel their flock is threatened. Use caution when small children are around any animal but especially a broody hen or rooster.

Brooding: Some hens will go broody. This is the term used to describe a hen who wants to sit on eggs and hatch out chicks. This can happen any time of the year but usually in mid to late spring. A hen will spend all day in the nest box leaving only to eat and drink and then go back to sitting on her nest. She may remain in this state for 6-8 weeks during which she will stop laying eggs. Some breeds are more likely to go broody. Egg production hens like leghorns are the least likely to do this.

Pests:

Flies and bugs are the biggest factor to consider. Again keeping your coop or chicken area dry and clean will help the most. Avoid spilled food, wet or damp bedding and manure build up. Fly traps are also helpful.

Rats/mice are also attracted to chicken coops as there is typically a lot of food for them to eat. Keep food cleaned up each day and avoid leaving excess food out at night when the chickens are sleeping and rodents are active. There are special feeders designed to prevent rodents from getting to the food but mice and rats always find a way. I feed chickens early in the morning and give them enough to eat during the day but make sure it is all gone by dusk when they go up to roost.

Picking up the food pans each night would also reduce things left for the rodents. Chickens are messy eaters and kick and scratch their food all over the place so

there will always be some food on the ground but do your best to reduce it. It saves money over time and reduces the chances for rodents.

Predation: People love to eat eggs and chicken, but so does everything else. Chickens can be easy targets especially when they are allowed to free range. Some breeds can fly and escape predators better than others but those birds also tend to escape the yard and may visit your neighbors. Heavier breeds don't fly as well and may be easier to confine in your block wall yard, but may be more likely to be eaten by something else. It is a balancing act.

In Arizona coyotes are very common and can eat most of your flock over night. The more secure your coop the harder it will be for predators to break in. Locking your flock up every night will help. Chickens will return to their roost near dusk and once they are up for the night you can close their door until evening.

Hawks, owls, feral cats, raccoons, skunks, rats, snakes, and dogs will all take a chance at eating fresh chicken and eggs. The longer I have kept chickens, the more creatures I have found that like to eat them.

Keeping chickens can be a very rewarding and fun experience. The more thought and planning you put into keeping your chickens the more successful you will be.

Good luck.

