

Getting Started with Chickens

New chicken owners frequently have a number of questions about how to get started and maintain a happy, healthy flock. We have gathered these questions and answers here to help you establish your own backyard hen house.

What you will need to get started

Basic care of chickens requires a water dispenser, food dispenser, coop (with or without a run), chicken food, chicken scratch, bedding (usually wood shavings), nest boxes, and a roosting pole.

Food and Water

Appropriate food and water dispensers

It is best to purchase a waterer designed for chickens that releases water from an inverted container into a narrow strip for drinking. Otherwise chickens will soil a bowl of water very quickly by standing and eliminating in it. Smaller chickens may also climb into a bowl and be unable to get out, risking hypothermia or worse.

Like the water, it is best to provide the food in a container designed for chickens. These containers usually have some sort of lid with holes in the top for chickens to access the food. Chickens will stand in an open container and soil the food and can become ill from eating the contaminated feed.

Provide food designed for chickens

Your hens will need to have chicken food, which comes in the form of mash, crumble or pellets. This provides them with protein needed for egg laying along with trace elements. You should also provide them with chicken scratch, made of grains and which is rich in carbohydrates.

Minimize table scraps

Chickens need the appropriate nutrition to lay eggs regularly and so should be provided with chicken feed and scratch. They can probably survive on your table scraps, but it will greatly impact their egg laying and potentially their health, and some may not lay at all. Think of table scraps as a treat. Also, be sure that your table scraps don't contain a lot of salt which is bad for their health. You should also avoid strong flavors like onions, which will impact the scent and flavor of the eggs.

Hen House and Run

Chickens require a safe, ventilated and dry place, called a hen house or a coop, to sleep and lay their eggs, and it should be lockable at night to keep out predators. Chickens also need access to fresh air and the ability to scratch in the dirt and stretch their legs. To provide outdoor time, you have the choice between adding a run to the coop, enclosing the coop in a fenced-in area or just letting your chickens free range. The run is the most secure option against predators when you cannot be around to monitor your chickens in your garden.

Keeping the coop clean

You should spread shavings on the floor which will help insulate and absorb waste matter. Depending upon the number and size of chickens, the coop should be cleaned out every 2-4 weeks to keep the coop and the chickens smelling fresh.

Nesting

You will need at least one nest box for chickens to lay their eggs. It should also be filled with shavings. You can place a small fake wooden egg or even a golf ball in the nest box to encourage them to start laying there. Chickens typically do not release their waste in the nest box so it will keep your eggs cleaner to have them deposited there rather than on the floor of the coop. Chickens also prefer to have a little nook to lay their eggs rather than laying them in the open. If they free range every day, they will likely hide their eggs in your garden and you will need to hunt for them.

Free Range

Letting chickens wander freely to scratch for bugs, sun themselves and search for seeds is called 'free ranging'. Chickens enjoy this and it is a pleasure to watch them in your garden. It is important to keep in mind that chickens are defenseless against most predators so ideally you will only let them free range when you are close by to monitor their safety

Getting chickens back into the coop

One of the many great things about chickens is that you do not need to herd them in every evening. Once they know where they live, chickens will return to their hen house around dusk. You merely need to shut the door to secure them from any unwanted cat –or other chicken eating - burglars at night.

Pesticides and Poisons in the Garden

Keep in mind that when chickens forage, they may consume things like poison sprayed on plants. In addition, if you are consuming their eggs, you too will be consuming these substances. Avoid the use of rat and bug poisons and other harmful chemicals anywhere that your pets have access.

Keeping Chickens in the Yard

Most chickens do not fly very well and cannot fly very high. Some of the very small bantam breeds may be able to fly to the top of a fence. It is important to keep gates closed to keep chickens in and wandering predators, like neighborhood dogs, out.

Health

Chickens are very sturdy and generally remain healthy as long as they have adequate food and water, fresh air and a clean, dry place to sleep and nest. However, we suggest you become familiar with some of the common chicken illnesses so that you can treat your hens should they begin to show symptoms of illness. There are a number of reference books on the market. Like other pets, you should also monitor your chickens so that you notice if one is not coming out of the coop, stops eating, begins to lose weight, or develops diarrhea or other symptoms. You may need to seek professional care in these instances.

External Parasites

All wild and domestic birds can get mites. Depending upon whether your chickens free range and how many wild birds you have in your yard will depend on the frequency and severity of mites. You can check for mites by pulling back on the feathers away from the skin. If you see tiny white bugs, smaller than a grain of rice, your chickens have mites. There is a non-toxic, organic spray that you can spray on chickens that is sold online and in pet stores. Read the labels, but most of these are non-toxic and you can continue to eat the eggs after you spray the chicken. You likely will only need to spray them once or twice per year. Always read the instructions before consuming eggs whenever you medicate your flock.

Intestinal Parasites

Like cats, dogs and other pets that eat items off of the ground, chickens may get worms or other parasites. Signs of worms are either the chicken losing weight or if you see small movements in their fecal matter. We advise treating all chickens for worms at the same time since you will not be able to consume the eggs for a few days afterward, and this way there is no confusion about which eggs should be kept or disposed of. Check the de-worming label for instructions on how long to dispose of eggs before consuming them.

Toenail Clipping

While it is not common, some chicken nails do not seem to wear down as fast as other chickens, just like with some dogs and cats. You will notice if one chicken has nails much longer than the others. This can make it difficult for the chicken to walk and to scratch for bugs and seeds, and the nails may curve up and infect the toes or legs. You can use toenail clippers to trim the nails.