

# Care & Keeping of Chickens

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One of the first steps our family took toward living a more sovereign lifestyle was the ownership of chickens for meat and egg production.

These creatures are easy to care for, a joy to have around, and they eat all sorts of little pests that could otherwise end up in your home! They also provide the opportunity for you to start a small *agorist* side-business in homegrown eggs and allow you to disconnect yourself from a centralized food supply chain, at least for your breakfast!

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## **Chicken Life-Cycle**

Before you engage in the amazing journey that is chicken ownership, I think it's important you understand the lifecycle of a chicken. A chicken develops first from an egg into a chick, then from a chick into a pullet or cockerel, and finally into a full grown hen or rooster. They lay lots of eggs for a few years then slowly taper off until their death.

## **Eggs**

Eggs are developed inside the body of a hen. Once she has become an active layer, she will continuously have several developing eggs inside of her at one time. Our family was able to witness this developmental process when we made the novice mistake of



allowing a stray dog around our chickens. The dog broke the neck of one of our most active layers and we immediately butchered her. During the butchering process we were surprised to find a chain of developing eggs inside of her; there was an egg ready to be laid followed by an egg with a soft shell, followed by an egg with a soft translucent shell, followed by an egg without a shell, followed by just a yolk. You may be surprised to learn that the yolk is not what turns into a chick, it is actually the food for the chick to eat while developing inside the egg!

## **Fertilization**

While these eggs remain inside their momma hen they have the potential to be fertilized by a rooster. He does this by jumping on her back and rubbing his reproductive organs on hers. The hen then lays the eggs for you to eat and you will never know which eggs are fertilized and which ones are not.

### **Incubation / Brooding**

After a fertilized egg has been laid, it will start to develop a chick when kept at 99.5 degrees fahrenheit. This happens when people put the eggs inside of an incubator or when a momma hen becomes “broody” and begins to sit on a pile of eggs. After 21 days of the right temperature conditions a young chick will begin to peck its way out of the egg. This process of breaking out of the egg is also referred to as “pipping”.



Above is a chick just seconds after breaking out of its shell. This was our first and most successful incubation project.

### **Chicks**

Once the egg has hatched the young bird is called a “chick”. At this stage of its life it is fuzzy or furry and looks like a little poof ball on legs. This is the most vulnerable stage of the birds life outside the egg. If hatched in an incubator they will need a heat lamp for



warmth for several weeks. Mother hens provide this warmth until the birds are big enough to sleep alone at night. I love the above photo because you can see that Big Momma was still hatching eggs underneath her.

### **Pullets and Cockerels**

Once the fuzz begins to be replaced by small feathers, the female is now called a “pullet” and the male a “cockerel”. These birds do not yet lay eggs because their



bodies are focused on gaining weight and becoming full sized. Most people cannot tell the difference between a rooster and a hen until they are late in this stage and begin to develop distinguishing characteristics. The birds depicted are the ones you saw hatching above. They are several

weeks old and you can already see the signs of a few roosters (more upright posture, larger comb on head, shorter hind side - the 2nd and 4th birds in this picture are cockerels).

### **Hens and Roosters**

Around age six months your birds will enter the adult stage of their life where they are considered a full grown hen (female chicken) or rooster (male chicken).

Males have a more upright posture, big arching tail feathers, and long talons on the back of their feet (see photo above). While their appearances can be extravagant, the most obvious indication that you are dealing with a rooster is their infamous crow (“cock-a-doodle-doo!”).



Hens (see above) are less ornamental, stand less perpendicular to the ground, and have a smaller overall stature. I should note that some hens in a rooster-less environment have been known to take on the role of crowing, though it is rare.



### **Hen to Rooster Ratio**

The rule of thumb is one rooster for every eight to twelve hens. This allows the roosters to have their own harem of ladies while not feeling overloaded by the workload (too many hens per rooster), or intimidated by the competition (too few hens per rooster).



I have found the ratio is less important when your birds are free-ranging because they have the space to get away from each other if needed.

Although we did have one rooster run off the property by other roosters due to personality conflicts (He is all the way on the right in the above picture). If you notice a bird being run off your property (it hangs out further and further away every day), it's time to eat him or sell him, because you are about to lose him!

While I do think it helps the overall safety of the flock, hens do not need a rooster to lay eggs, so do not fret if you live in a neighborhood where crowing is not an option. Your backyard hens should do just fine absent a rooster.

### **Getting Started**

I recommend that first time chicken owners start out with full grown laying hens aged six months or older. At this age the bird is a lot less vulnerable and your rate of loss will be lower than if you start with chicks or egg incubation. At six months of age hens begin to lay eggs and thus provide immediate reward for your initial hard work in the setup processes. Not only will your breakfasts taste better from the day you pick up your first egg, but your grocery bill will be reduced that same week! Fresh daily eggs will help you feel inspired to keep moving forward with chicken ownership!



Once you have mastered the full grown chicken you might consider ordering a batch of day-old chicks to raise for the next season's meat or eggs. Then, once you have mastered raising chicks into adulthood, you can look into incubating fertilized eggs.

### **Selecting Your Birds**

When you set out to purchase your first batch of full grown chickens it is important to look for birds that come from an environment similar to the one you will be providing them. This will allow for an easier transition from their old home to their

new one. Chickens that have been raised in a coop may not know how to properly protect themselves from hawks or other predators in a free-range situation. Chickens that have been raised in a free-range setting may become distressed if transferred to a coop.

This means you need to have already considered whether your birds will free-range or live in a coop. You will have purchased the supplies needed to feed, water, house and properly protect your birds. Then and only then are you ready to start looking for your chickens.

### **Chickens for Sale**

In our experience, community internet forums such as Craigslist have provided us with access to local small farms that sell a handful of birds per year. We are able to visit their locations, see how the birds are cared for, and make sure the birds we get come from a safe and healthy environment.

The first place we purchased chickens from was called “Slap Dash Farm” located in Elgin, Texas. We found them on Craigslist selling seven hens and one rooster. We were blown away by their farm when we arrived. Their garden was surrounded by a chicken tunnel where the chickens had access to bugs before the bugs had access to their produce. They had goats roaming the property and the largest pigs I’d ever seen. The owners host a monthly potluck swap meet and even make their own goat-milk soap. Needless to say we left inspired to grow our little farmstead as fast as possible. It’s that sort of inspiration that leaves me inclined to suggest buying from a small farm if you can.

A second option is to get birds from your local feed store. Here in Austin there is a great “general store” called Callahan's that sells everything farm supply, including

live animals in all stages of life. Their chickens come from various sources, so you can find ones that were raised until adulthood in a free-range environment then brought to the store for market, or you can find ones that have been raised in the pen at the store their entire life. Again, this matters if you're trying to reduce stress to the chickens by bringing home birds who grew up in an environment similar to yours.

You can also buy birds from hatcheries that sell all types of birds online and send them to you through the USPS in boxes with slits cut all over for air. We have done this with chicks and the truth is we had a very low survival rate. I believe this is because a mail-shipment can be traumatizing for the birds depending on who handles them on what day. It is not a risk I would recommend others take, especially with adult birds.

### **Food**

When it comes to feeding your chickens it is important to remember that what they eat outside in your yard becomes what you eat inside at the breakfast table. Their diet will not only affect the taste and color of your eggs, but the nutritional content as well. You will want to provide your birds with the highest quality food possible to ensure you are providing your family with the highest quality food as possible!

You have several options for feeding your birds. Our family has found a combination of free-range, chicken feed, table scraps, auto-bug feeders, and supplemental oyster shells creates the most happy and healthy chickens.

### **Free Range**

I do not think it is possible to achieve maximum quality of eggs without allowing your birds to free-range and eat the fresh food mother nature provides for them on

your property. This means you should consider the mobility of your birds when designing your coop.

The first preference should be for the total free range of your birds, meaning they can go where they want when they want at anytime of day or night. I suggest this because dusk and dawn provide the best bug hunting for chickens and unless you are able to wake up before daybreak and lock them up just after dark, you are doing your birds a disservice. Free-range is not always possible due to various circumstances including local predators, city ordinances, neighbors who don't like chickens, etc....

In neighborhoods where fence-jumping is discouraged or even dangerous for chickens (big dogs on the other side for example), you have the option of clipping your bird's wings so they can keep the nutritional benefits of free-ranging on your property. By clipping their wings the chickens cannot jump as high and will be unable to leave your yard. This also means they will have a harder time escaping predators who enter the yard and should be properly protected.

If you live in an area where free-range is not possible for whatever reason, there are mobile coop setups that can be literally rolled across your yard to allow the chickens to catch the bugs and fresh greens found wherever you move their coop. This situation is not ideal, but provides the birds with fresh foods they would never have access to in a stationary coop.

### **Chicken Feed**

When you go to your local feed supply store you will find many choices to purchase for your birds. The first choice you have to make is the nutritional content. They have specific mixes for chicks, pullets, and laying hens. If you are

starting with full grown birds you will want the “laying” feed.

### **Textures**

These nutritional mixes come a variety of textures you can choose for your birds. including mesh, crumbles and pellets. I have found the laying mesh to contain a lot of powder that the birds just leave behind (wasted feed). The crumbles have less feed dust and are great for chick starter mixes. Pellets provide the least waste and greatest bang for your buck. I have found this opinion to be true amongst my chicken lover friends and suggest for your full grown hens you purchase a laying feed in a pellet form

### **Organic vs Conventional**

The next choice you have to make is organic or non-organic. Remember, you are what you eat, and so are your chickens. Many people have decided to remove pesticide riddled food from their diet by eating organic foods. While there is much controversy about organic food actually being better for you, I can testify from first hand experience that my health increased dramatically after switching to an organic diet. If you haven't thought much about this issue for yourself and your family, I highly encourage you to do so. If you value organic food in your diet, you should consider feeding your birds organic as well. (Learn more about organic food [here](#))

### **GMOs**

Another factor in this decision is that many non-organic feeds contain yellow corn or soy which are usually genetically modified organisms, or food that has been genetically altered in a laboratory by scientists. Research has shown that GMO foods can affect the reproductive systems of people, especially young boys, and can even cause infertility. Because of this, many wish to avoid GMOs in their diet and will thus need to choose the organic non-gmo feed options for their chickens.

### **Cost**

Our family has bounced back and forth on this issue many times, mostly because of the extraordinary cost of organic chicken feed. Right now I can buy a 50lb bag of non-organic feed for \$12 or a 50lb bag of organic feed for \$40. The cost difference for organic is extremely unsustainable, especially if you have a large flock as we do.

Ultimately, after spending several hundred dollars a month on chicken feed, we decided to go back to “conventional” or non-organic feed. As an organic-only eater myself I still have trouble coming to terms with this decision, but ultimately we decided to spend that extra \$27 a bag growing our garden and our ability to feed our birds fresh foods instead. This way we can reduce our need for chicken feed in the long term.

### **Buy in Bulk**

One suggestion to reduce the price of feed is to contact your local supplier and find out how to buy your favorite brand in bulk. If you have enough neighbors or friends who like the same feed for their birds, a group of you can go in and buy a large amount together (1,000 lbs or so will get you the lowest cost). This will cost a lot up front, but will save you on each bag of feed in addition to saving you weekly or monthly trips to the feed supply store!

I would make the following suggestions for first time owners who will likely have three to ten full sized birds : If your birds can not free range your property, consider buying organic feed. Since the feed will make up a majority of your flock’s diet, they will need the best feed found on the market to maintain high nutritional levels in your eggs.

If your birds can free range, then I would suggest you decide based on your budget. The more they free range the less they need to eat feed. If your birds eat a lot of bugs, you may not need to spend the money on organic feed to maintain a high nutrition content in your eggs.

### **Table Scraps**

Another way you can supplement your chicken's diet and reduce your dependency on chicken feed is to give the chickens your leftover table scraps every day. They love all types of scraps including dairy, fruit peels, veggie cutting, and even meat or egg scraps! By providing your birds with your table scraps you will allow more diversity into their diet and improve the taste, color and strength of your eggs!

### **Auto-Feeders**

To ensure you're attracting or producing lots of protein rich bugs on your property you can set up a variety of auto-feeders. On our property we have a maggot bucket that we use to provide our birds with one of their favorite treats around the clock. Other options are black soldier flies and mealworms.

### **Maggot Bucket**

The Maggot Bucket is simply an elevated bucket that can be suspended by rope or sit on risers with holes poked all over it which contains meat scraps. Flies come to eat the scraps, lay eggs, maggots form, fall out of the holes and the birds have a tasty treat! I only recommend this method if you have room to hang it away from your house because freshly decomposing meat does not smell well. You can add hay to the top of the bucket to mitigate some of the smell.

We not only put our table scraps in this bucket, but we include chickens who have died from predator attack, snakes we have taken care of ourselves, or guts from chickens we have slaughtered. This method allows for the rapid decomposition of

meat and the continual production of healthy living food for our birds! The flies literally only leave bones and feathers behind!

Two other types of live feed you can produce for your birds are Black Soldier Flies and Mealworms. We have not set these methods up yet on our property so I will leave you with the idea to research them on your own!!!

### **Calcium Supplements**

Sometimes you'll find your birds have reduced their egg production for no apparent reason, or you'll notice the shell of your eggs is not as thick as it once was. Maybe your birds have even started breaking and eating their own eggs. This is usually a sign of calcium deficiency which can be treated and prevented through supplementation.

### **Egg Shells**

You can crush up your egg shells after you make breakfast and mix into the chickens' feed. Some people will go so far as to hard boil a few eggs and crush them with the shell as a nutritional treat for the chickens. It's important to crush the shell of your eggs before you feed it to them so they do not get in the habit of eating your breakfast eggs before you get to the nest! The shell provides calcium and other minerals!

### **Oyster Shells**

Or you can buy oyster shells at your local feed store. We usually get a big bag of oyster shells every other month or so and mix in with their feed. When we do this on our property we have found a great decrease in calcium issues. Consider keeping a bag on hand for your birds!

Chickens love to eat fresh greens, bugs, small animals, and a variety of grains.

I have found that they are happiest when they are able to free range your property and search for food to eat.

### **Chicken Gardens**

Chicken gardens are planted to grow food specifically for your flock, instead of your family. I have always been interested in doing this and actually tried once, but I planted the seeds in areas of the yard that were very vulnerable to hawk attack. It should not be surprising that we soon discouraged our birds from wandering back there and I lost track of the plants completely.

Chickens destroy young seedlings, especially if you use mulch in your garden. They scratch the soil with their claws to expose the many bugs that exist in the top layers of your garden. In doing so they pull up immature plants as if they couldn't even see they were there. Sometimes the chickens will eat them, but usually after a chicken breach I find the dead carcasses of my future produce uprooted and drying out in a pile of upturned soil. My heart always breaks, but I always know it was I who failed to protect my garden in some way.

Keep this in mind when planning to plant a chicken garden. You want the plants to be mature and fruiting when you bring them in to eat their produce. The chives should be large enough to be eaten and not uprooted, the tomatoes large enough the birds can jump into the vines and eat the fresh fruits, the lettuce large enough to provide a meal without being pulled out to die.

### **Water**

Your chickens will need access to water at all times of the day and night. You can find chicken water containers at your local feed store, but I find them all to be too small and a pain to refill. If you have the room, I would recommend one or two

kiddie pools filled with water. This provides the birds with a cool place to stand in the summer and enough water that you don't have to refill it every day. When the water begins to turn brown, you can pour it in your garden or compost to harness the power of chicken feces!

### **Summer Concerns**

If you live in an area like central Texas where drought and heat make life miserable in the summer, you may also want to consider a mister that will spray water droplets into the air in your or near your coop so that your chickens have an easy time handling the heat. The first summer we had chickens was a record breaking heatwave and drought. With temperatures over 100 degrees for more than seventy days straight, we lost two pullets and one rooster to overheating. We quickly changed our setup to include an outdoor pond, a kiddie pool, and a misting hose. The temperature this summer hit close to the previous summer's, yet we lost zero to heat with our new set up.

### **Winter Concerns**

If you live in the midwest or north you will have to consider freezing weather in your watering plan. The simplest option is to leave the watering containers inside the chicken coop where the chickens' body heat will usually keep the air temperature above freezing.

If that doesn't work the next best options require the use of electricity in or near your coop. To keep the water from freezing you can buy a heated chicken or dog watering bowl or suspend a heat lamp over the water, yet out of the the reach of the birds. It only freezes one or two nights a year in our area, but we still hang a heat lamp in the coop during winter nights and we do keep the water near the heat source.

The third option if your coop does not stay above freezing and you do not have access to electricity is to manually move the watering device inside to a heated area at night and back out to the coop in the morning. With this set up in really cold areas your water may freeze several times a day and require you to change the water out repeatedly. You can have a second watering canister that you alternate inside and outside so you always have one thawing and one freezing.

### **Roosting (Sleeping)**

Your chickens will like to sleep as high as possible at night. When left in the wild chickens will sleep in the low branches of trees where they are safe from ground dwelling predators such as coyotes and most snakes. Unfortunately there are predators everywhere and you must provide proper protection to your birds at night.

If you live in the city I would recommend keeping your chickens cooped up at night. This is because raccoons and neighborhood cats enjoy having access to trashcans and dog food bowls at night, so they most certainly might enjoy a snack of chicken at 2 am. In the suburbs people frequently bring their dogs inside for the night, and most people have fences that would prevent a neighbor dog from scaring off a predator.

Backyards can be a dangerous place at night for chickens! This means when designing your coop you will want something that has high sleeping areas and solid walls with no entry points for predators. I've noticed our birds prefer to roost in areas where there are leaves to cover their presence, because of this I would recommend putting an actual tree branch about ten feet or higher in your coop. If this is not an option, try to find a piece of wood that is round like a branch and big

enough they can grasp and hold onto all night.

Be sure you have it secured well enough to hold the weight of all your birds! We've had a few jinky roosts collapse at night, this is not good! Do it right from the start!

### **Laying**

The average egg laying hen will lay an egg a day during her prime two years of laying. This will decrease in instances of extreme weather such as summer or winter and during their annual molt. You know the birds are molting when you start finding feathers all over the coop and yard. This means they are shedding this years feathers and growing in a new round for the winter. During this time their body focuses on new growth instead of egg production.

I look at it this way. Mother nature apparently designed chickens to lay the majority of their eggs in the spring and the fall. During these seasons they hatch their chicks. They then spend the winter and summer raising those chicks who by the next laying season will have become egg laying adults and the cycle continues. There is a natural ebb and flow to egg production, so please don't be discouraged, especially if you are starting your chicken project in the middle of the summer or winter!

### **Nesting Boxes**

While birds prefer to perch high on branches to sleep, they prefer to lay eggs in a natural bedding located closer to the ground. In your coop design you must include a safe area for your birds to nest and lay. The rule of thumb we go by is one laying box for every three birds. So for six chickens you need at least two laying boxes, for thirty chickens you need ten laying boxes and so forth.

In our experience birds prefer box shaped compartments with tight entrances. This makes them feel cozy and safe as they can observe their surroundings for predators and feel secured by the strong wooden box that protects them.

### **Broodiness**

A hen becomes “broody” when she wants to sit on her eggs to hatch chicks. A hen will usually do this when she has secured a nice little clutch of eggs to sit on. At our house broody hens start sitting on 6-8 eggs. In fact, unless we block off nearby nests our broody hens have been known to add more eggs to their nest every day by stealing the eggs other hens lay in adjoining nests. This typically results in a heaping pile of forty-plus eggs. At least one egg usually goes bad or breaks and the pile gets attacked by ants resulting in the broody hen moving to a new nest and starting all over. It's really gross.

I recommend you handle your broody hens differently. If possible, seclude the broody in a pen or cage by herself with her nest. Provide her fresh food and water every day and make sure she can get out to use the restroom a few times a day. I recommend this because we had a broody hen kill another hen this past spring. The broody had jumped down from her nest to get water at dusk. At the kiddie pool she attacked three unsuspecting hens. Unfortunately she stabbed one of her sisters in the neck with her claws and killed her within minutes.

They are not always this aggressive, but they do tend to show minor signs of aggression when they have become broody. This is a basic protective instinct developed by the hen. While she prefers to sleep in the trees, she will spend her nights on the ground tending to her nest until the chicks hatch. It is a very vulnerable position for her to be in.

### **Signs your bird has become broody:**

- She stays on her nest all hours of the day, rising only to eat and drink or use the bathroom.
- She puffs up her feathers when you approach her nest
- She pecks at you or claws at you when you reach for her eggs
- She won't allow other birds near her area
- She squawks at you as if you were a hostile enemy

If you do not want your chickens hatching eggs, just simply remove the eggs from under the birds every day as you would normally. She may be protective or aggressive and you may need to wear gloves or use an object to block her from you. Eventually she will stop trying to nest and you can get back to life as normal.

If you do want your chicken hatching eggs, this is the time to read up on chick care. Baby chicks are extremely vulnerable and must be protected from weather, predators, dehydration, etc.. Even household pets that do not chase adult chickens can accidentally kill a baby chick. You have 21 days from the time your broody hen begins to nest on her eggs. Read up!

### **Conclusion**

Well, there you have it, the compiled "lessons learned" from our first year and a half of chicken ownership. I hope you have found this information useful and relevant and I look forward to your feedback! I am learning more every day and can't wait to hear the fabulous ideas missing from this book.

I have found chicken ownership to be one of the most rewarding and enjoyable aspects of my life, I hope you find the same!

Good luck, and happy egg-hunting!

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We wish you the best of luck on your homestead!