

# Raising Chickens

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## Why Chickens?

Understanding your own reasons for growing chickens will help you choose the right flock and get setup with the right equipment. The main reasons people grow their own chickens are:

- to have a supply of fresh eggs,
- for fresh meat,
- pest and weed control,
- and a supply of nitrogen-rich manure.



What you plan to do with your flock will determine (to some degree) what you will need to do to get set up. For example, if you want to let your chickens run through your garden once in a while to gobble up insects, you will need to set up some means for controlling their access to the garden so they can't get in to eat tiny seedlings. If you want chickens for eggs, you will need to include nesting boxes in your hen house design.

The end purpose will also determine the composition of your flock. Some chickens, such as Leghorns, have been bred as layers, others have been bred for rapid meat production. Yet others, such as Rhode Island Reds, are good dual-purpose birds. If you are raising chickens to show, you will become very selective about their breeding.

## The Brood

A good way to get started is to buy baby chicks. They are usually available from feed stores in early Spring. You can also start by getting fertilized eggs and keeping them in



an incubator until they hatch. Either way, you will need to get a brooder and keep it in the house or put it out in the garage where cats and other predators can't get at the chicks. For heat, be aware that chicks need 95 degrees for the first week. You can drop this by 5 degrees every week until they're 6 weeks old. Then they are fairly feathered out and unless you live in a very cold area, they are able to withstand normal

temperatures.

If you don't have a formal brooder, your heat source is usually a light bulb or heat-lamp. Be careful with these not to leave them low enough for the chicks to burn themselves. Also, especially with heat-lamps, be careful that the bedding can't catch fire.

Fresh water should be available to the chicks at all times. As an energy supplement, I add one tablespoon of sugar per quart the first time I water newly hatched chicks.

A chick starter feed should be fed to all chicks until they are 6 weeks of age. You can get this at your local feed store. After this time, feed them a pullet grower feed until about 20 weeks. Then they can be switched to a laying feed.

## Bedding For Chicks

Never start young chicks on a slippery surface such as newspaper. If you are using newspaper as bedding, for the first 4 days spread paper towels over it. Be careful using wood shavings on young chicks until they learn what their food is. They may start eating them which will block them up and kill them.

My favorite surface is wire! I take a piece of hardware cloth or an old window screen and cut it to the dimensions of the brooder. Then I put down a layer of newspaper and lay the wire on it. At cleaning time I just lift out the wire and hose it down, replacing a clean layer of newspaper beneath it. Be careful to make sure there are no sharp wires to hurt their feet. Either bend the edges under or tape them up.

## Inside The Coop

As the chickens mature, you will need to provide them with a shelter that meets their basic needs. The ideal chicken coop will protect chickens from rain, wind, and temperature extremes. There should be perches adequately spaced and arranged so that the chickens can perch comfortably.

Chickens do better when they roost at night up off the ground. And they're happier, also. It is the natural way for a bird to sleep. It helps prevent external parasites and keeps them from lying in their own droppings. You also don't want them to start sleeping in the nest boxes. These are for egg-laying, and we really don't want to collect our eggs out of a nest that's been slept in by a chicken, do we? (Chickens aren't house trainable!) Some kind of litter such as straw or wood shavings should be spread underneath the perches and needs to be changed when it becomes wet or soiled. A mixture of straw and chicken manure is ideal for garden compost.

## Special Accommodations For Egg Layers

Hens for laying will be benefited by special nesting boxes. These should be constructed so that they don't serve well as perches but will appeal to the natural instincts of a hen when she becomes "broody" especially if you want your hen to incubate a batch of fertilized eggs. The nesting boxes need to be somewhat enclosed and nest like. Hens are known to lay eggs and establish a brood wherever they feel conditions are best. Sometimes they have to be coaxed into using the nesting boxes by using artificial eggs.

Clever arrangements such as a rear trap door can facilitate the gathering of eggs for eating.



A laying hen will produce an egg every one to two days. Frequent gathering will assure freshness, keep eggs clean and minimize breakage.



All chickens lay eggs in a series - never more than one or two per day. If the eggs are not collected, and a sufficient number of eggs are allowed to remain in the nest, the hen may stop laying eggs and start brooding. When the hen leaves the nest after laying an egg, it cools which suspends the development of the embryo inside. If the ambient temperature remains between 45F and 65F, the embryos will remain viable for as long as two weeks. When the hen becomes broody and sits on her eggs for three weeks, all of the eggs will hatch at about the same time.

The hen does not start to incubate the eggs until the whole clutch is laid. The physiology of a hen changes after she's laid her clutch. She will remain on them, with her wings slightly spread to help keep them warm, for 21 days. She will make muttering, growling sounds if disturbed, and may even peck or otherwise try to defend her nest. She will only leave the nest once a day to eat, drink and defecate. You should make sure the hen does do this at least every other day so she will not either starve or get the eggs dirty with her droppings. (Broody droppings usually come out in one large, very bad-smelling glob.)

Once the chicks start to hatch she will remain on the nest with them for 24-48 hours. Any eggs that have not hatched by then will be left behind when she takes the chicks for their first walk. At this time water and chick feed should be available for the chicks.

A hen is also called broody when she is raising her chicks, protecting them, teaching them to find food, and hovering over them to keep them warm.

## **"Breaking Up" A Broody Hen**

When we remove the eggs, the hen supposes: "There are not yet enough," and continues to lay. We don't always want to have our hens hatching eggs. When we want to stop one, this is called "breaking up" a broody. Sometimes just putting her in a pen where she can't see her old nest and keeping her there for 4 days will do the job. She should, of course, have feed and water. Some strong broodies will just continue to set even in a pen with no eggs. For the more stubborn hen, a wire-bottomed cage is necessary. The airflow up through the wire keeps her underside cool and after a few days she will usually give up. Again, she should have feed and water available at all times. Some commercial people and old-time chicken raisers deprive a hen of feed and water when trying to break her up, but this is cruel and also not good for the bird. Lack of feed weakens an already weak bird (since they don't eat much when broody anyway) and lack of water for several days can damage the liver.

## **The Hen's Cackle**

Wild chickens are forest animals. They live in small groups called flocks. They scratch in the dirt and forage for things to eat. While one hen sits on the nest to lay, the group may wander away through the undergrowth searching for food. The hen's cackle serves to renew the contact with the group as if to yell "where are you?". The cock (with the other

hens) answers "here we are!".

## The Yard

Various arrangements are possible for the poultry yard. The basic requirement is a good fence to keep predators (sometimes including family pets) from getting in. Sometimes a yard will be split into two halves with a gate connecting the two. The chickens are kept in the first half while a green cover crop grows in the second half. When the crop matures, the chickens are moved into the second half where they can nibble on the greens. In the mean time a new crop is started in the first half.

If you're going to introduce chicks over 6 weeks old to an older flock of birds, here is a good way to make sure they can get enough feed. In your chicken yard or coop, construct an area that you can keep a supply of grower feed and water in. It should have entrance holes that are too small for the older birds to get in. Confine the young birds in there for a few days (at least during the day-- you could return them to the brooder at night). They'll learn where the food is and when you open the entrances they will soon start going out. The older birds will pick on them, but it should be fine as the chicks will have a safe refuge to retreat to.

## Feed

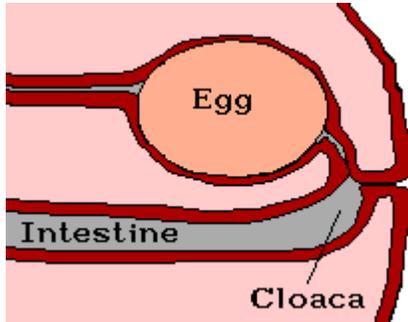
Feeds are available to suit the changing needs of the chickens. Chicks can be fed a starter mix until they are feathered out. Then they can be fed maintenance feed until they start laying. Layers can be fed egg booster and scratch. Feed comes in 3 forms: mash, crumbles and pellets. Mash is powdery, just as it sounds. Pellets are made of compressed mash, and crumbles of broken up pellets. I find mash wasteful and never use it. I use crumbles for my chicks and pellets for the older birds. Then when they kick it out of the feeders they can still pick it up. Some feeds are medicated. Coccidiosis is a disease that can kill chicks that have not built up a resistance to it. They can pick it up outside from the droppings of other birds. If your chicks go outside you may want to give them a feed medicated with Amprolium, which controls the coccidiosis while allowing the birds to build up a resistance. Some medicated chick feeds are sold with antibiotics in them. There is no need to waste money on these. **Note: Don't feed medicated feeds to ducklings. They eat much more than chicks and can overdose and die.**

Adequate storage is needed for the feed to keep it dry and keep rodents out. The galvanized trashcan is ideal. Chickens like other birds need a supply of grit for digestion.

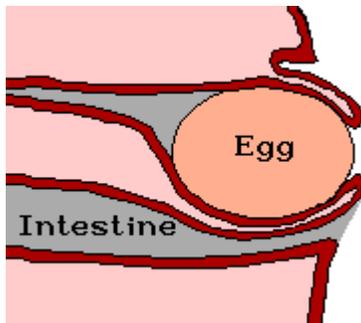
## Grit

What is grit? It is small stones that the bird stores in its gizzard, where they act like teeth and are used to grind up food. For chicks, grit is only necessary if the chicks have access to grain or other foodstuffs. Chicks on mash or crumbles don't need it. You can get a chick-sized granite grit through your feed store. I sometimes use old aquarium gravel if it's small enough. **Warning: Do NOT give chicks oystershell. It is not grit, it is used to give laying hens extra calcium for egg shell production. This extra calcium will cause bone development problems in young birds.**

## Laying Eggs From A Hen's Perspective



Chickens, as well as other birds, have a common opening for reproduction, and for the evacuation of stools and urine. This opening is called the "vent". They do not have a bladder because their urine is not a fluid. It is a white paste, called urates, that you can observe surrounding the droppings. The intestine, ureters and oviduct come together into a common chamber called the cloaca. This is a rather dirty place, whereas the egg is always clean and almost sterile when laid.



The hen turns part of the cloaca and the last segment of the oviduct inside out, "like a glove." The described red membrane is then everted inside of these organs. The egg emerges far outside, at the end of the bulge. So it cannot contact the walls of the cloaca and get contaminated by stools or urine. Moreover, the intestine and inner part of the cloaca are kept shut by the emerging egg, and their contents cannot leave when the hen strains to deliver the egg. Therefore, eggs are always clean as they are laid. However, sometimes a hen, stomping around the nest with dirty feet, will get the egg dirty anyway.

## Conclusion: Self-Sufficiency

There's much more to learn. You will need to know how to prevent diseases, eradicate parasites, and deal with chicken idiosyncrasies like egg eating and cannibalism. But, with good advice to get you started and time to learn, raising chickens can become a rewarding experience.

Unless you are a true vegetarian, you will want meat and eggs in your diet. A flock of chickens is probably the best conventional protein source available to the self-sufficient gardener with the side benefit of nitrogen rich manure. It is possible to find a butcher to slaughter and prepare your chickens for you.

## A Short Chicken Glossary

**chick** A newly hatched chicken.

**capon** A castrated male chicken used for meat.

**cockerel** A male chicken less than a year old. These often make it to the barbecue.

- hen** A female chicken more than a year old. These are the ones that lay the eggs.
- pullet** A female chicken less than a year old.
- rooster** A male chicken more than a year old.
- egg** If you don't know, you shouldn't be doing this.
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