



BACKYARD PALEO

How To Raise Backyard Chickens
For Eggs, Composting, Gardening
And More

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ALTERNATIVE
DAILY



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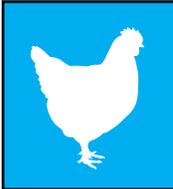
**ALL YOU NEED IS A LITTLE
CHICKEN CONFIDENCE**



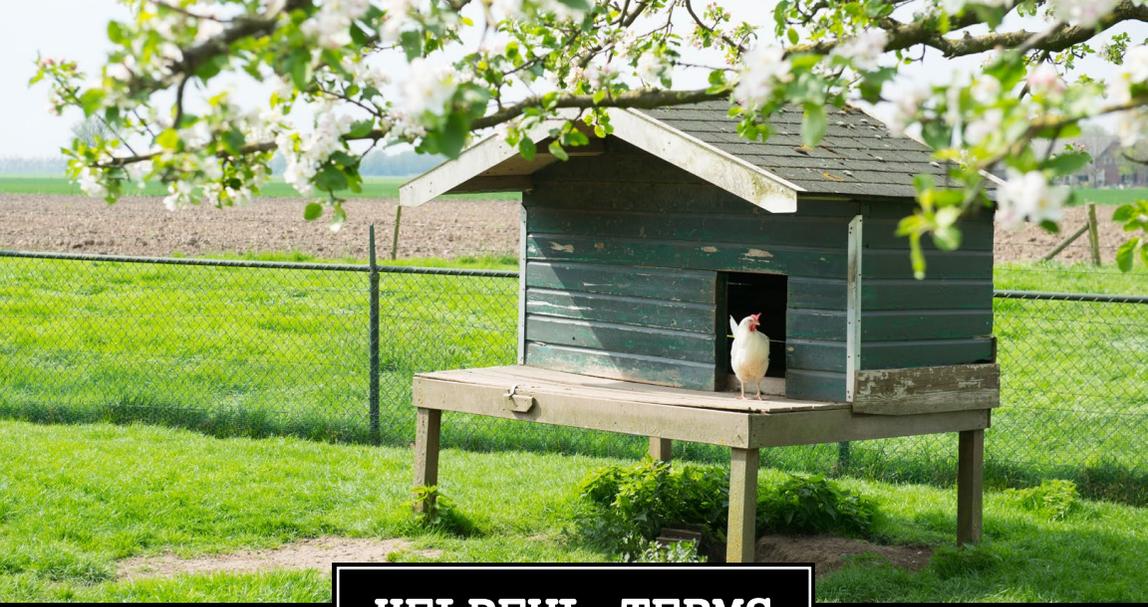
RAISING CHICKENS IS FOR EVERYONE

With the paleo movement gathering momentum, there's no better time to begin raising backyard chickens. Once reserved for longtime farmers living in the countryside, raising chickens is now sweeping backyards across America in a new wave of urban agriculture. And it's no wonder why—chickens make the best pets! From fresh eggs in the morning to improving your garden to endless entertainment for you and your family, the benefits of raising chickens are numerous.

In this book, we'll teach you all the basics: how to find the right chicken breeds for your family, how to build a coop and how to care for your flock so you have eggs year-round. With the tips and tricks throughout each section, you'll have a productive backyard coop in no time. Let's get started!



Fun Fact: With at least 25 billion chickens in the world, they outnumber humans three to one. There are more chickens than any other bird on the planet!



HELPFUL TERMS

In this book, certain terms related to raising backyard chickens will pop up again and again. Here is a glossary of some helpful chicken terms to know, listed in alphabetical order:

Brooder: A heated enclosure designed to raise baby chicks.

Broody: A hen who sits on eggs in order to hatch them. This is useful for trying to hatch fertilized eggs, but can be problematic if hens won't leave unfertilized eggs alone.

Cockerel: A male chicken under the age of one.

Coop: The house where a chicken lives, usually inside an enclosed run.

Dusting (or dust bathing): A natural chicken behavior that consists of thrashing around in the dirt to clean off their feathers.

Flock: A group of chickens that live together.

Grit: Sand or small pebbles eaten by the chicken in order to help break down grain and plant material food for digestion.

Hen: A mature female chicken.

Pecking order: The social rank of chickens in a flock.

Pullet: A female chicken before the age of one.

Rooster: A mature male chicken.

Roost: Where chickens spend the night, or the act of resting on a roost or a perch above the ground in order to feel safe.

Run: A fenced or enclosed space to give your chickens a spacious, safe place to roam.



Fun Fact: Researchers have found that chickens may be as smart as toddlers. In studies, hens have exhibited mathematical reasoning, self-control and even structural engineering.





CHAPTER 1

THE MANY BENEFITS OF RAISING CHICKENS

As more and more people look to grow their own food and return to a paleo-inspired way of living, it makes sense that raising backyard chickens is growing in popularity. After all, they are relatively easy to take care of and endlessly rewarding—not to mention fun. Here are a handful of benefits to inspire you to bring home a flock.

Paleo Protein Source

How many people can say that their pets make breakfast for them every morning? Well, chicken owners can! A healthy hen can lay between five and six eggs a week, which adds up to an average range of 260 to 300 eggs a year. Now that's a whole lot of fresh omeletes!

For paleo-eaters and health-conscious dieters, eggs are an excellent source of protein, containing **six grams** each. More than half of the protein is contained in the egg whites—the part without all the cholesterol—which is why many dieters prefer to remove the yolk. However, whole eggs (including the yolk) contain nutrients that can help lower risk of heart disease, including vitamin B12, vitamin D, riboflavin and folate.

And if you're worried about cholesterol, perhaps you shouldn't be. For years, experts have been debating back and forth about whether eggs fall into the "healthy" or "risky" category. That's because one large egg contains 185 milligrams of cholesterol. If you consume two eggs in one sitting, technically you're exceeding the American Heart Association's recommendation of only **300 milligrams per day**.

However, **research** from the University of Eastern Finland has shown that eating one egg per day does not increase the risk of coronary heart disease, even in those who are genetically predisposed to it. Additionally, a recent study published in the *Journal of American College of Nutrition* concluded that eating one egg per day could actually **reduce the risk of stroke**.



Fun Fact: The color of a hen's eggs is determined by their species—and ear color! For example, chickens with red earlobes will lay brown eggs, and chickens with white earlobes will lay white eggs.



Healthier Eggs

Did you know not all eggs are created equal? As the largest exporter of eggs in the world, America has taken quite a few [shortcuts in egg production](#) to meet high demands. Typically, hens in factory farms are cramped in tiny battery cages with their beaks cut off (and yes, they can feel the pain). The hens are not allowed to participate in natural activities, like foraging, dust bathing or stepping foot into the outdoors. They are also given low-quality feed, growth hormones and antibiotics—which all get passed on to us. Yikes!

Fortunately, [research](#) from Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences showed that eggs produced by pasture-raised hens were healthier... giving you just another reason to open up a coop of your very own! "Compared to the eggs of the commercial hens, eggs from pastured hens eggs had twice as much vitamin E and long-chain omega-3 fats, more than double the total omega-3 fatty acids, and less than half the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids," said lead investigator Heather Karsten, associate professor of crop production ecology. "Vitamin A concentration was 38 percent higher in the pastured hens' eggs than in the commercial hens' eggs, but total vitamin A per egg did not differ."

So, in addition to supporting sustainable farming practices, your backyard chickens will be producing eggs that are better for your overall health! Remember: what's good for the chickens is good for us, too.





A Little Love For Your Garden

There's nothing like tasty eggs first thing in the morning, it's true. But chickens are also amazing at rounding out the ecosystem in your garden as well! In fact, just one chicken can produce eight pounds of manure in a month, according to research from Ohio State University. Because it's rich in nitrogen (10:1), chicken manure makes a great addition to compost. Your plants will love it!

Chicken poop aside, your feathered friends are great as garden workers in general. For example, they love hopping in compost bins looking for bugs and "turning" the pile with their feet, which helps to oxygenate the compost so it can break down properly. Chickens are also masters at pest control, readily eating grasshoppers, flies, worms, grubs and snails that would otherwise eat away at your garden. If you think about it, it's a win-win: your chickens get extra protein and you get to keep your gorgeous heads of lettuce.





Fun For The Whole Family

Owners don't call it "Chicken TV" for nothing! Watching your chickens mill around, dust bathe, squabble, squawk and forage is a great glimpse into bird behavior—and maybe even the behavior of their prehistoric ancestors, the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Chickens will also help your family cut down on food waste, happily gobbling up the extra portions you'd otherwise throw out (by the way, a fan favorite is watching chickens try to eat spaghetti). As if that wasn't enough, raising chickens is a great way to teach your children about sustainability, ecosystems and animal husbandry.

There's also some [research](#) that demonstrates the therapeutic benefits of keeping backyard chickens because of their docile nature. For children on the autistic spectrum, for example, caring for hens can be soothing for conditions including anxiety, depression and attachment issues. Chickens are also being used to help [combat loneliness](#) in the elderly and those affected by dementia.

We could go on and on, but hopefully that's enough inspiration to jumpstart your journey. We're confident that if you spend enough time around chickens, you'll love them just as much as we do!

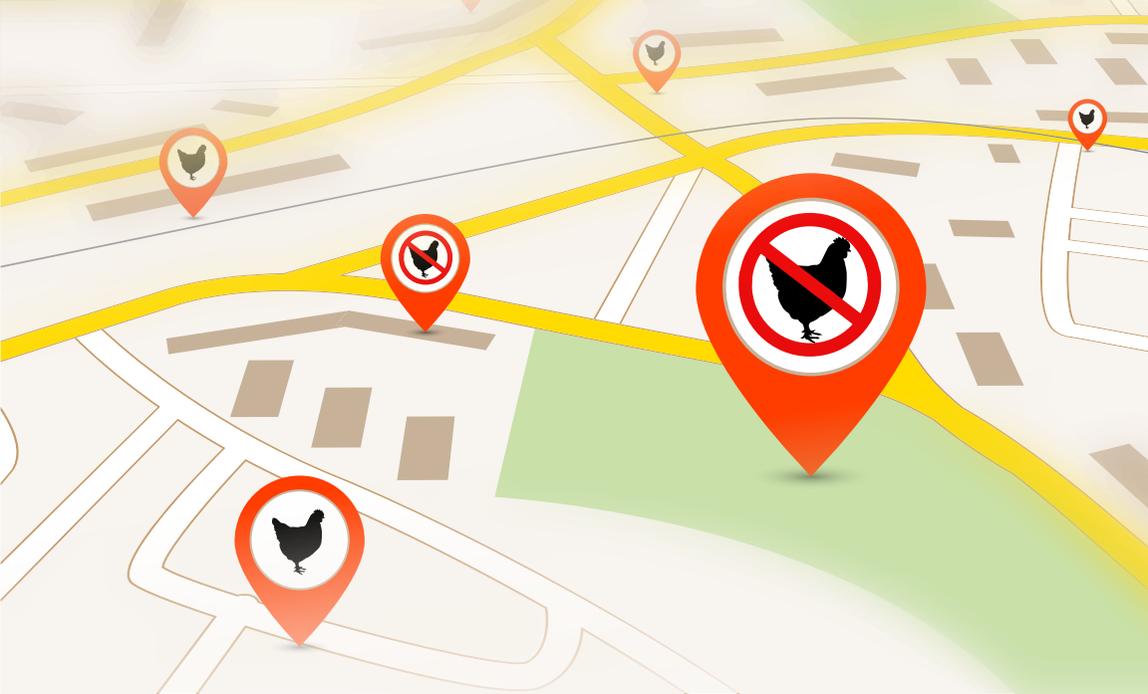


CHAPTER 2

THE 5 QUESTIONS TO ANSWER BEFORE YOU COMMIT

Like any other pet, it's important to evaluate the viability of folding a new animal (or entire flock) into your routine, lifestyle, physical space and budget. Here are some topics to consider before committing to raising a group of chickens.





Are Chickens Allowed In My Area?

With the sharp uptick in popularity of backyard chickens, cities all over the country are revising their ordinances. Even if you've heard chickens in your neighbor's backyard, it's important to check the official rules and regulations in your neighborhood. There may be restrictions on the number of hens you're allowed, how much space you need between the coop and your neighbor's home, and laws surrounding how many roosters you're permitted to have (if any at all).

To check the laws in your local area, look up the website for the health department in your county, and search for "chicken ordinance" or "rooster ordinance." You can also do a general Google search for "Chicken laws in [your city], [your state]" and see if that brings up the city codes directly related to chickens. Finally, if you don't have any luck online, call your city hall and speak to a county clerk directly. They should be able to point you in the right direction.



How Many Chickens Do I Need?

Chickens are social animals and do well when they are together, permitted that they have enough space to participate in natural behaviors. To keep things as roomy as possible in a small suburban coop, we recommend starting off with three to four chickens.

If you're figuring out how many chickens you need by how many eggs you want, the general rule of thumb is three chickens for every two people. So, if you're a family of four, a flock of six should cover your egg needs just fine. If you're a family of six, consider nine chickens. If you'd like to give your eggs away or sell them at farmers' markets, you're going to need a bigger coop, my friend!

Once you've estimated the number of chickens you want, now's a great time to double-check that you have enough space to set up an appropriately-sized coop in your backyard. We'll talk about chicken math in detail on Page 23, but in general, you're looking at three square feet per chicken. Like humans, problems arise when chickens don't get enough space, so please plan accordingly.



Do I Need A Rooster?

While you don't need a rooster in your flock to support egg-laying hens (they will lay eggs whether there is a male present or not), roosters can come in handy for a handful of other reasons.

If you're planning to let your birds roam free-range and you would prefer not to have to monitor them all the time, a rooster can come in handy. They will be on the lookout for danger and alert the hens, who then all run for cover in the event of a threat. This is especially useful if you're trying to protect your flock from hawks hunting overhead. Roosters can also ward off smaller predators, like rodents. They have spurs, which are pointed growths on the inner leg that can cause some serious damage. If needed, roosters will be aggressive and fight to protect their flock.

If at some point you're planning to breed your chickens and incubate eggs, you'll need a rooster for that too. If your hens are struggling to lay eggs in the winter, some owners report that roosters are a great encouragement. Roosters are also known to keep the peace between hens; they will jump in the middle of a hen fight and peck them on the head to end the argument.

While all of this sounds great, there are some drawbacks to consider. First, roosters are noisy! If you live in the city, this could be a dealbreaker for your neighbors. Roosters crow at the crack of dawn, during the day to establish dominance, anytime there is danger and, well, sometimes for reasons us humans just don't understand. They can be aggressive with other roosters, but this largely depends on the breed, the conditions that they are living in and training.

If you're thinking about getting a rooster, first check the rules and regulations in your area. Because they are noisy, you may need a special permit or you may be limited in the number of roosters your flock can contain. If roosters are welcome in your area, consider getting one for every six to nine hens.



Fun Fact: Roosters try to attract hens by performing a dance called “tidbitting.” This involves moving their heads up and down while making a specific call.



Do I Want Baby Chicks Or Young Birds?

The answer to this question depends on many factors, including how quickly you want your eggs to start getting produced, how docile you want your chickens to be, and how much work you're willing to put in upfront.

Baby chicks

Is there anything cuter than a day-old chick? Probably not. These bright yellow fluff balls are about as adorable as they come. Starting off with chickens this small is a very rewarding experience, however, you'll need more supplies and an enclosed space in your home or garage to care for them. Baby chicks are also very fragile and need to be closely monitored, so get ready for a time commitment (see Page 39). Expect to pay between \$1 and \$5 per baby chick.

Pullets

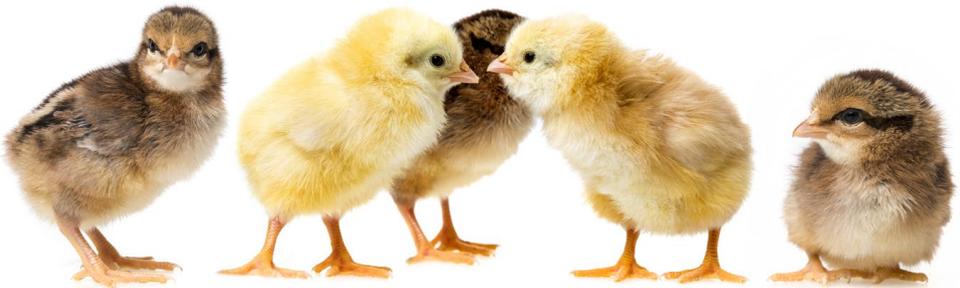
By ten weeks, young female chickens (pullets) no longer need heat lamps and they are much more independent than baby chicks. This is a great option for those new to raising chickens—they are less work but there is still time to bond with them. As a drawback, you'll need to wait a little bit until they start laying eggs. The cost per pullet is usually between \$7 and \$10.

Point of lay

Most hens begin to lay eggs between 18 and 20 weeks, so this is when the majority of chicken owners bring them home. By this age, the hens are considered to be adult birds and can be introduced to the coop right away. For this reason, they usually cost more than chicks and pullets. Another drawback is that they may take a while to get used to you and not be as easy to handle as a chick you've been raising from the beginning.

Laying hens

These are birds well into their first year of laying. The benefit of these birds is that you won't have to wait around for eggs because they have a well-established routine. The drawback is that they may be the most expensive of all the options.





What Breeds Are Right For My Family?

There are hundreds of chicken breeds in existence—more than 500 species by some estimates! Suffice it to say, with so much variety, it's important to find the right breeds for you and your family. When picking out chicken breeds, you'll want to consider noise level, demeanor, size, the type of weather where you live, what color eggs you're looking for, how many eggs you need to feed your family and more.

Quietest: Australorp, Wyandotte, Brahma, Cochin, Mottled Java, Ameraucana, Rhode Island Red

Friendliest: Orpington, Golden-Laced Polish, Silkie Bantam, Cochin, Australorp, Plymouth Rock, Sussex, Jersey Giant

Most productive egg-layers: White Leghorn, Rhode Island Red, Golden Comet, Ameraucana, Barred Plymouth Rock, New Hampshire Red, Red Star (or “sex-links”)

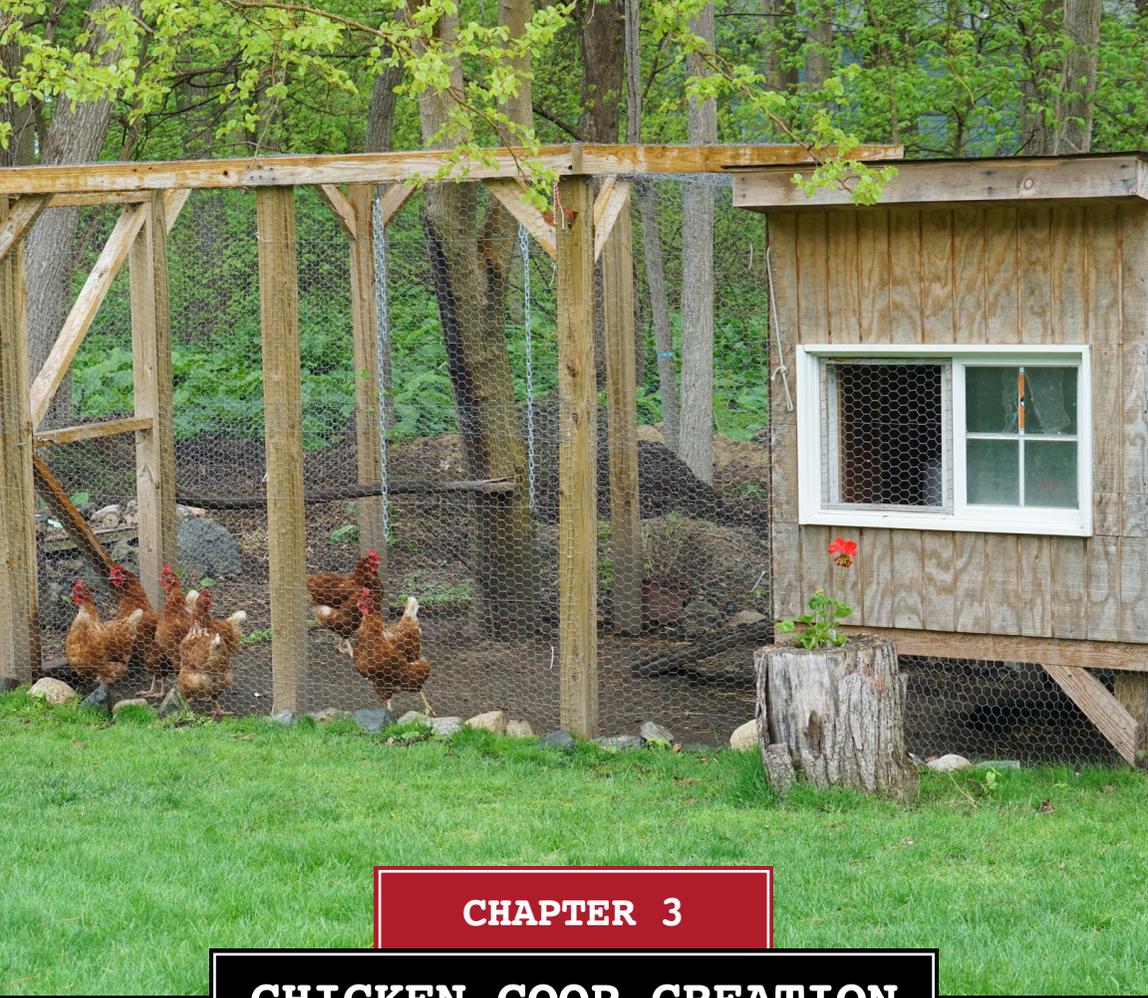
Best winter egg-layers: Plymouth Rock, Rhode Island Red, Leghorn

Most colorful eggs: Araucana (blue eggs), Easter-Egger (blue and green eggs), Cream Legbar (blue eggs), Marans (deep brown eggs), Welsummer (chocolate brown eggs), Penedesenca (red-brown eggs)

For more information on what size coop you’ll need per breed, check out Page 23.



Fun Fact: The rare Ayam Cemani breed of chicken from Indonesia is completely black inside and out, from beaks, eyes and feathers, to internal organs, bones and blood. At a cost of \$2,500 a piece, they are believed to have magical properties and are often used in ritual ceremonies.



CHAPTER 3

CHICKEN COOP CREATION

Whether your raising baby chicks or picking up hens of egg-laying age, we recommend building your coop first. Bringing home chickens can be a lot to get used to for the first couple of weeks, and building the coop ahead of time will be one less thing you need to think about.



Chicken Math: Sizing Up The Coop

If you're hoping to have an all-natural flock (as in, no medications), it's best to give your hens plenty of space, which reduces the risk of illness and infection. Chickens need way more room than most people think! Fortunately, with a bit of chicken math, it's easy to figure out how many chickens you have space for.

If they are going to have access to your backyard for part of the day (called "free-range"), then you should be able to have one chicken for every two to four square feet, depending on the size of each bird. If the chickens are going to be locked in the coop at all times without access to other areas (called "penned"), then each chicken needs between five and ten square feet to stay happy and healthy.

Here are some breed-specific sizing guides to help you:

Bantam breed

These are your smallest chickens, bred as the miniature versions of regular-size hens. These are great for an urban or suburban flock, since they take up less space and eat less than other breeds. While they may not lay eggs as consistently as other hens, they make less far less noise—wonderful news for you and your neighbors! Bantam breeds include Silkie, Barred Plymouth Rock Bantam, Brahma Bantam, Cochon Bantam, Mille Fleur d’Uccle and others.

Number of Chickens	Free-Range Birds	Penned At All Times
2	4 square feet	10 square feet
4	8 square feet	20 square feet
6	12 square feet	30 square feet
8	16 square feet	40 square feet
10	20 square feet	50 square feet

Light breed

These are your medium chickens, often difficult to catch and more easily spooked than heavy breeds. Light breeds include White Leghorn, Andalusian, Polish, Ancona, Old English Pheasant Fowl, Derbyshire Redcap and others.

Number of Chickens	Free-Range Birds	Penned At All Times
2	6 square feet	15 square feet
4	12 square feet	30 square feet
6	18 square feet	45 square feet
8	24 square feet	60 square feet
10	30 square feet	75 square feet

Heavy breed

These are the largest of all the chicken breeds, traditionally bred as a dual-purpose bird for egg-laying and meat. These birds eat more than light breeds, they are less likely to try and fly away, and they are known for being docile and easy to handle. Heavy breeds include Orpington, Rhode Island Red, Australorp, Plymouth Rock, Dorking, Cochin and others.

Number of Chickens	Free-Range Birds	Penned At All Times
2	8 square feet	20 square feet
4	16 square feet	40 square feet
6	24 square feet	60 square feet
8	32 square feet	80 square feet
10	40 square feet	100 square feet

Tip: Many chicken parents enjoy having a mix of different breeds in the flock. If this is the case for you, err on the side of caution and build a pen that's sized to your largest breed.



Fun Fact: Chickens see the world in full color, just like we do. In fact, they are able to see a broader range of color than humans.



5 Steps To Build A Coop

Building a coop yourself can save you some serious dollars, and you'll get total control over the materials you're using (this is especially important for sustainable farmers). Plus, if you're the creative type and have basic wood-working skills, a chicken coop is a fun, rewarding project. Here's how to get it done:





Step 1: Pick a chicken coop plan

From modern dwellings to cozy log cabins, a simple Google search will yield hundreds—if not thousands—of free chicken coop plans for any style. Make sure to peruse sites like Pinterest for inspiration, or browse through the 3,000-plus blueprints available on [BackyardChickens.com](https://www.backyardchickens.com). Your chicken coop plan will depend on:

- What protection is available in your yard (fencing, trees, etc.)
- What climate you live in
- How many chickens you plan to have
- How large your birds will be
- How aggressive (or docile) your breeds are known to be
- Whether chickens will be free-range or penned all the time

Every DIY coop should be customized to meet your flock's needs—there is no one size fits all! The more time you spend planning and preparing, the less hassle you'll have later.



Step 2: Find the perfect location

Picking the right spot for your coop upfront will set your chickens up for success, and prevent complicated construction changes down the line. The ideal location will entail security and privacy for your flock. The less stressed your chickens feel in their environment, the more productive they will be when it comes time to lay eggs. Here are some other factors to keep in mind when picking out a site for your chicken coop:

Sunlight

When evaluating your backyard, look for a spot that has partial sunlight during daylight, especially between noon and 3:00 p.m., the warmest hours of the day. Like humans, chickens enjoy soaking up the sun's rays here and there, as long as it's not too hot outside. If you live in the northern hemisphere, you'll want to place your coop's windows in a south-facing position, so that there is more solar heating during cold days in the winter.



Shade

Depending on the breed, some chickens may fare better in the summer heat than others. To be safe, make sure that the location of your coop has shade, especially during peak heat hours. Perhaps you could build your coop around a large tree, which will provide shade throughout the day. As an added bonus, your hens will be entertained come autumn, when they have to sort through fallen leaves to find tasty bugs.

Solid ground

As you'll read in the "predators" section of this book (Page 33), many animals (like foxes) are willing to dig to catch their prey—and that includes digging holes underneath a fence to get into the chicken coop. When picking out a section for your coop and run, look for the sturdiest ground to make it difficult for predators to get inside. Or, if you can, build your chicken coop on a concrete slab covered with compact dirt.

Dust

If your chickens are going to be hanging out in the run for most of the day (as opposed to an open-air flock that roams around your farm), you'll want to make sure the coop is built near dust. Chickens need to dust bathe in order to rid themselves of excess oils and parasites, like lice and mites.



Grass

If you place your chicken coop near fresh grass, chicken droppings will fertilize the soil. In addition, chickens will take care of any bugs, grubs and worms you've got crawling around—it's a great source of protein for them!

Fence

If you've got a fence around your backyard, consider building your coop up against it. This will take away some of the work of predator-proofing and enclosing the coop on all sides. Even better, if you have a partially-sunny corner, you can use it so that two sides of the chicken run are already taken care of! Be mindful of any loose boards and fix them right away to prevent determined animals from getting in. Also, if noise is an issue, make sure that the fence isn't bordering on a neighbor's yard.



Fun Fact: Chickens have at least 24 different vocalizations, each with a different meaning to communicate with their flock.



Step 3: Choose the right materials

Wood

Because your coop is going to be outdoors, we recommend using naturally rot-resistant woods, like cedar, redwood or tropical hardwoods. Please note that some chicken owners have found that cedar causes respiratory distress in chickens.

Since rot-resistant woods can be pricey, you may also want to go with Douglas fir, hemlock, spruce or pine, as long as you treat it with a sealer first. Some chicken farmers even use pressure-treated wood infused with pesticides, but this may not be right for your operation if you're committed to sustainable farming practices. In fact, some of these harmful chemicals could leach into the soil where your chickens live, get into their food supply and, in turn, end up in your eggs. Gross!



Fencing

There are several materials you can use for chicken fencing, but some are better than others. Galvanized hardware cloth with 1/2-inch openings is a fan favorite; the holes are small enough to deter rats and snakes from getting into your coop and the material is plenty sturdy. It's available in 3,4,5 and 6-foot rolls and usually sits 3 to 4-feet tall.

Chicken wire is relatively cheap, but it rusts quickly. You'll also find that while it keeps chickens in, it won't keep raccoons out. Some folks choose to use this material on the top of their coops to save on cost, but rodents may still be able to climb up and get into the coop anyway.

Chain link is sturdy, but resourceful raccoons can still reach inside the coop with their tiny hands and hurt your chickens. If you decide to use chain link fencing for the outer perimeter, please make sure your hens have a safe place to retreat if a predator comes by.



Step 4: Think about protection

With the loss of natural habitat, more and more wildlife are entering urban areas in search of their next meal. In building your chicken coop, it's crucial to keep in mind the natural predators that will hunt chickens after dark—large and small. The rule of thumb is this: if a 5-year-old child could open up the chicken coop, so could a hungry raccoon! Here are some predators that think of your chickens as a delicious delicacy:

- Bobcat
- Coyote
- Dog
- Fox (especially the red fox)
- Hawk (red-tailed and Cooper's hawk)
- Housecat
- Opossum

- Owl (especially great horned owl)
- Raccoon
- Skunk
- Snake (especially rat snake)
- Weasel (especially long-haired weasel)

To keep these predators away, building a chicken coop on a solid foundation is key. Some chicken owners pour down a concrete floor before building the coop, then lay wire mesh a foot into the ground on all sides, flaring out to two feet. From there, bury the wire mesh under a layer of mulch or sod. Only use sturdy materials to hold fencing, and make sure there are no gaps in the wire mesh. All doors must have a latch or lock—a simple clasp won't keep raccoons out! To protect your chickens from hawks above, you'll need to cover the entire top of the coop and run with fencing as well, so make sure to factor extra material into your construction plans and overall budget.





Step 5: Build the chicken coop

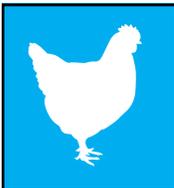
Now that you've got the site selected and the plan in place, it's time to start building! A detailed outline should include finalized dimensions, materials and tools so you can start with the frame and work your way in. Double-check to make sure that your coop has each one of the following elements:

Coop (or hen house)

This is an enclosed space for chickens to sleep, rest and lay eggs. It is usually elevated above the ground and accessed by a ramp. It houses a roosting bar and nesting boxes.

Roosting bar

Chickens need a place to roost, that is, a place to rest that is elevated above the ground in order to feel safe. Most coop plans include a raised beam (or two) inside of the coop; think of them as tree branches where your chickens can relax. You'll need one foot of roosting space per hen.



Fun Fact: Like humans, chickens experience REM (rapid eye movement) during sleep, indicating that they may have dreams.



Nesting boxes

Coops must contain divided nesting areas so hens can lay their eggs in privacy. These look like 12x12 boxes filled with wood shavings, usually on one side of the coop. You'll often see an easy-access lid on top of the nesting boxes so chicken owners can easily gather eggs from the outside. You'll need one nesting box for every four hens.

Run

This is an enclosed area for chickens to run around outside of the main house, called a "run space." This is where chickens forage, dust bathe, hunt for insects and get fresh air outside of the coop. The size of the run will depend on whether or not chicken owners intend for their birds to be free-range or penned. If the chickens will be allowed to forage in your backyard every day, a smaller run is acceptable (three feet per bird). However, if they are penned up all the time, the size of the run triples (ten feet per bird).



Buying A Prefabricated Model

There's no question that convenience is a huge plus here. With these types of coops, you can buy a chic model online or in-store, put it together in one afternoon and away you go! If you choose this route, be prepared to pay a pretty penny. For a three-chicken coop, you're looking at \$200. For a five-chicken coop, expect a bill around \$400 to \$500, and up it goes.

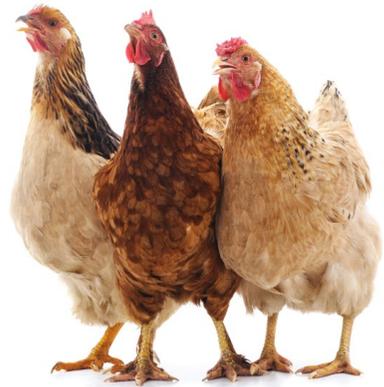
When buying a prefabricated model, double-check that the coop size matches up with the chicken math outlined in the previous section (Page 23). Look for these features:

- Latched doors (not just a simple clasp)
- Enclosed run

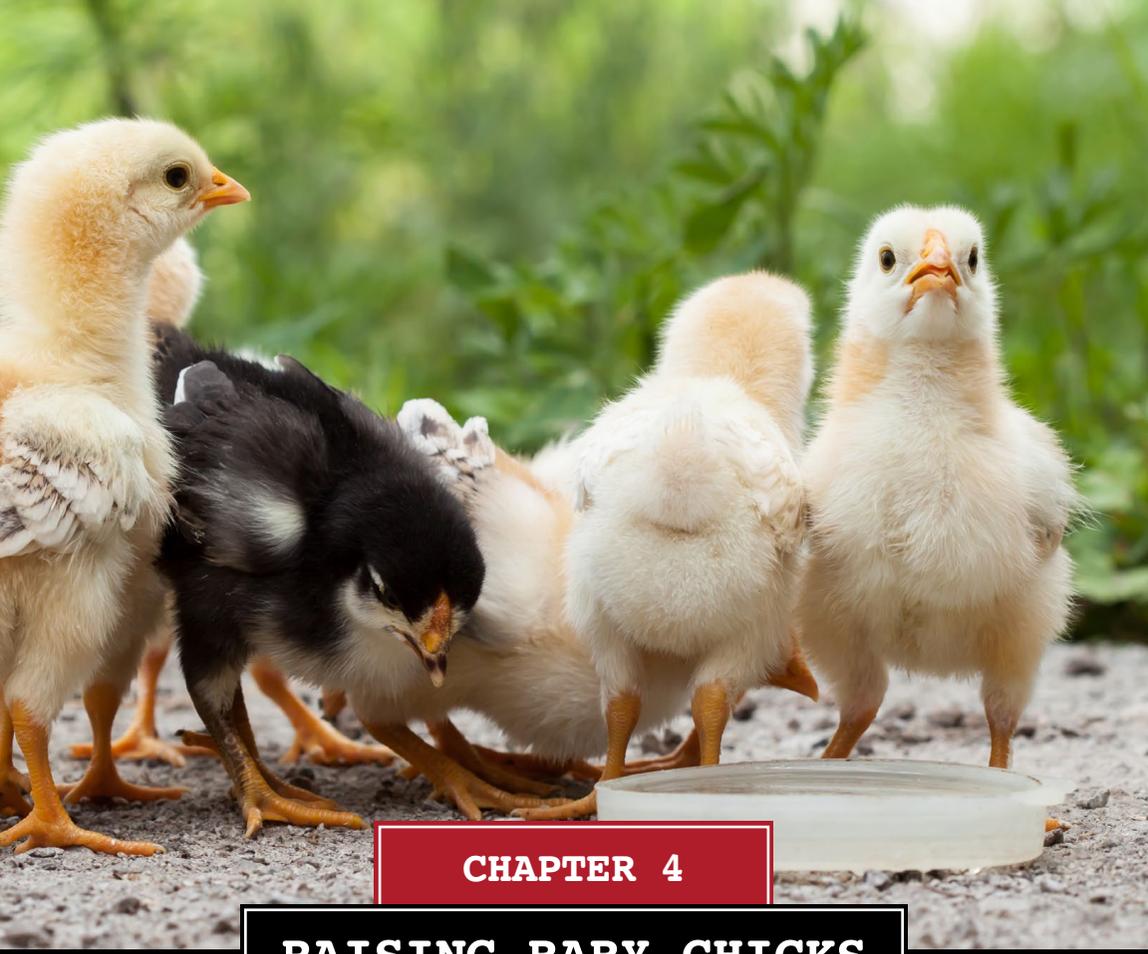
- Elevated ramp
- Roosting bar (or two)
- Divided nesting boxes with easy-access lid
- Sliding windows for ventilation (or wire mesh)
- Protective fencing (bars no more than a 1/2 inch apart)
- Removable trays (for cleaning)

If you buy a prefabricated coop, your birds will probably need an additional enclosed run or daily access to your backyard for foraging. While fine for nesting and sleeping, the prefabricated models are often too small to keep chickens happy during the day.

Tip: After assembly, treat your wooden coop with a sealant to prevent water damage.



Fun Fact: If you want to go all out, Neiman Marcus sells a luxury chicken coop for \$100,000. It comes with a multi-level dwelling, nesting area, “living room,” brooding room, library with books, grazing trays, waterer, feeder and chandelier.



CHAPTER 4

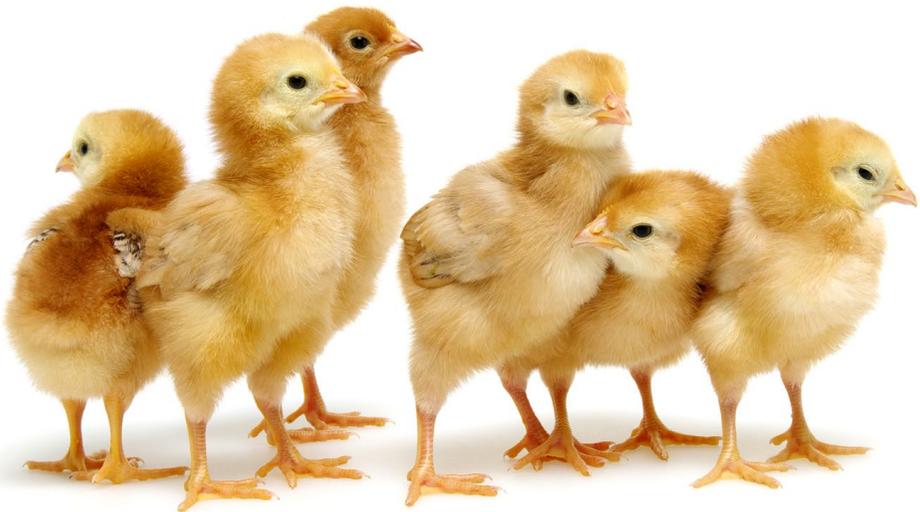
RAISING BABY CHICKS

Chickens, especially babies, can be a lot of work in the beginning. This is why many first-time chicken owners prefer to purchase hens of egg-laying age, to skip the demands of the chick-raising process. However, while it's more work in the beginning, spending time with your chicks early on will encourage them to grow into docile, healthy, sociable adults. The more time you spend holding them, the more comfortable they will be in your arms if they get sick or injured. Plus, you may find that full-grown, affectionate chickens enjoy perching on your shoulders or head... and who doesn't love that?



Where To Get Baby Chicks

You can order baby chicks online, but we recommend getting them from your local agriculture specialty store. There are three reasons for this. First, you are supporting a local business, pouring your dollars back into the community where you live. Second, if you have questions or any issues arise, you have established a personal relationship with the animal specialists at the store who will then be able to guide you. Third, in case one of the chicks turns out to be aggressive or a “female” grows up to be a rooster, your local store will have knowledge about where to take your chickens when they can no longer stay in your flock.



How To Build A Brooder

Before you bring baby chicks home, it's important to set up a "brooder," a warm, cozy, safe space for the babies to grow. For DIY projects, there are several items that you can use to contain the chicks, including a cardboard box, plastic storage container, playpen, kiddie pool or aquarium. Whatever you choose, make sure to give your chicks enough space! The general rule of thumb is one square foot of room per chick.

If you can keep the brooder in your laundry room, garage, barn or other enclosed space, this is best. That way, your chicks are protected from the elements and nighttime predators looking for a quick meal. Make sure the brooder space is dry and warm with a 100-watt light bulb (you want the space to be 90 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit round-the-clock). Always give your chicks as much fresh air as possible, but if necessary, you can put a lid on top to prevent danger from children or pets. To make a lid, staple hardware cloth to a wooden frame fitted to your container, that way there's plenty of ventilation but it's also predator-proof.

For bedding, baby chicks love pine shavings. Avoid newspaper, which can be tricky for chicks to walk on. Also steer clear from cedar, which may cause respiratory distress for your little ones.

Tip: As your chicks grow, you'll need to adjust the size of the brooder accordingly. When they are one to three weeks old, the container must be at least 12 inches high. When they are six weeks old, make sure the brooder is 24 inches high to prevent them from jumping out.

How To Care For Baby Chicks

Food

Baby chicks need special care when it comes to food. We recommend that you invest in a special chick feeder instead of a regular dish or bowl. This is because chicks will jump in, kick the food everywhere and poop in it. In addition, they may accidentally flip it over on themselves and get trapped.

You can find specially formulated chick food at your local feed store. When the chicks are eight weeks old, you can switch to grower feed (17 percent protein). At twelve weeks old, asks your vet to recommend a grower feed with less protein. Baby chicks also need grit (small pebbles) to help digest their food, so be sure to mix it into the feed.

At 18 weeks, when your chicks transition to egg-laying age, switch them over to a layer feed. This contains extra calcium to produce egg shells and contributes to their bone growth. Don't forget the grit!



Water

Instead of a bowl for water, where a baby chick could drown, consider getting a nipple-style water dispenser from a nearby feed store. In addition to being safer, chicks also can't get food or feces into their water supply. This is important because during the first few weeks, chicks are the most susceptible to illness. A clean food and water supply will help them grow into happy, healthy adult chickens.



Hygiene

It's important that baby chicks have round-the-clock access to clean food and water. Monitor their conditions carefully. Refill the food and change the water supply whenever it is running low or needs tidying. Wash their food and water dispensers once a week with soap and hot water. Also, make sure to change their bedding at least once a week.

Hygiene also refers to your chicks, too! Make sure they have a small bowl of dirt or dusting powder to dust bathe and clean their feathers. When one chick picks up on this, others will follow—and it's the cutest thing ever.

Handling

When you first get home with your chicks, expect to spend at least an hour with them as they get used to their new habitat. After the first 24 hours, practice holding them in your hands throughout the day for several minutes at a time, and speak to them in a soothing voice.

Health

One of the benefits of handling your chicks every day is that you'll be able to watch for signs of illness. Look for limping or wheezing, which could indicate respiratory distress. Also, have a look at their poop. Diarrhea can cause feathers to mat or create blockages in the digestive and urinary tracts. If you spot any issues, schedule an appointment with your vet as soon as possible. Chicks are delicate when they are young! The longer you wait, the riskier it gets, and a simple illness can take them out.

Moving Chicks To The Coop

When your chicks outgrow the brooder, and the night time temperature of the coop is at least 55 degrees Fahrenheit, your chickens are ready to move to their permanent home outdoors. They may be hesitant at first, so make sure to spend time with them on transition day. Help them locate food and water, and place dummy eggs in the nest boxes to encourage laying. Within a week or so, your chickens should be used to their new space and freely roaming the coop with confidence.





CHAPTER 5

RAISING ADULT CHICKENS

Where To Buy Chickens

Before you buy chickens online, check with the animal specialists at your local feed store. They should have information about nearby suppliers, farmers or hatcheries where you can go and visit the chickens before buying. You can also check classified ads and Craigslist for chickens, but make sure to ask about their return policy ahead of time (in case you get a rooster, an aggressive hen or a sick bird).

Introducing Chickens To The Coop

When you bring in pullets or adult hens, they'll pick up the routine quickly. In the evening, around sundown, pick up your hens one by one and take them inside the hen house for sleep. Eventually, they'll get the hang of the schedule and go inside on their own. You may also need to place fake eggs (ping pong balls, golf balls, wooden eggs) into the nest boxes to encourage them to lay.

If you're adding new chickens to an existing flock, take extra care. This disrupts the pecking order, and your new additions will likely get picked on (or shall we say "pecked" on) at the start. Before adding new chickens to the coop, place them in a separate pen next to the other chickens for a few days. This way, they can safely get to know each other by smell. Another tip is to introduce new members of the flock in pairs in neutral territory. If you notice an aggressive hen excessively pecking at a new bird and drawing blood, section her off immediately. By leaving her isolated for a few days, she should get the memo to chill out.





Caring For Your Chickens

Taking care of chickens is a bit of an art. However, once you get the basics down, you'll have a productive flock in no time at all.

Water

Chickens must have access to fresh, clean water all the time. You should be checking water levels at least once a day, especially during hot summers. Also, if the water supply is dirty (dirt, manure, compost, feces), chickens will be hesitant to drink from it and quickly become dehydrated. In addition to changing out the water every day, make sure to raise the waterer up on bricks or concrete blocks so less debris ends up clouding the water. You can also hang the waterer from a wooden beam and some wire, as long it's low enough for chickens to access.

Food

Chickens spend most of their time digging through the dirt and foraging for treats. Make sure that your flock has easy access to food during the day. Check the feeder every other day to ensure that the food isn't wet or moldy, and clean the feeder at least once a week by giving it a good spray down with water. You can keep rodents out of the food by hanging up the feeder slightly off the ground, perhaps attached to a wooden beam.

What can you feed them? Well, just like humans, chickens are omnivores. They need a well-rounded diet of chicken feed, juicy bugs and table scraps. You'll find that chickens eat just about anything, from apple cores and cooked oatmeal to cheddar cheese and crackers. Just remember, ultimately you are eating what the chicken is eating, too. Some people also choose to feed their chickens leftover chicken, but we'll leave that one up to you...



Here are some foods that chickens should avoid:

- Citrus fruits or peels (these foods slow egg production)
- Animal bones
- Expired meat
- Garlic and onion (your eggs will end up tasting like them)
- Avocado skins and pits
- Potato skins
- Chocolate
- Raw or dried beans
- Moldy foods
- Sugar
- Bread or yeast
- Raw eggs (otherwise they will start eating their own eggs—and each other's!)



Tip: After you're done cooking eggs, break up the shells and feed them back to your chickens for an extra dose of calcium in their diet. This is recycling at its finest!



Fun Fact: A hen will eat about four pounds of feed to lay one dozen eggs. Keep that in mind when you're calculating your budget!



Grit

Did you know that chickens don't have teeth? It's because of this that hens need grit (small pebbles or crushed shells) to help break down food in their gizzard—a muscular pouch in the lower stomach. Grit also provides extra calcium, which hens need to produce eggs. You can mix grit right into the feeder, or keep it in a separate bowl on the ground if you wish. Along with clean food and water, check that your chickens have enough grit every day.

Cleaning

A clean coop is the key to good health! Turn the hay every other day, then rake it all out and replace it once a week. Chicken poop can easily be scooped with a mini shovel once a day, then placed in your compost to complete your garden ecosystem (chicken droppings have high nitrogen content to enrich the soil). Once in a while, rake out old food and feathers; these are also highly compostable, so your garden will benefit!

Make sure to invest in a solid pair of rubber boots. Wear them each time you enter the coop and leave them outside by the door to your yard. This will prevent you from tracking dirt, manure and bacteria into your house.

Tip: Try doing a little bit of work every day as part of your routine, rather than doing it in a big chunk during your hard-earned weekend. It'll be easier on you in the long run!



Handling

We recommend handling your chickens every day so they get used to human touch. This comes in handy if they are injured or you need to check for parasites. Picking up your chickens takes a bit of practice, but with these steps you'll be handling them like a pro in no time.

Before picking up your chickens, calmly spend time in their space. Once they seem comfortable around you, follow these steps:

1. Slowly herd your hen into a corner; she may cluck nervously.
2. While she's facing away from you, step towards her. Place one hand over each wing to prevent flapping, thumbs touching over the spine and fingers facing down the wings (kind of like grabbing a ball with two hands). She may squat down, which makes this easier.
3. Bring her to your chest and cradle her like a baby—feet down and resting on your arm, with her beak facing away from you. Speak in a soothing manner, stroking her feathers until she calms down.

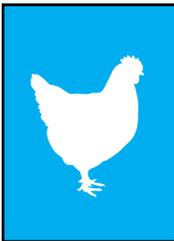
Note: Never chase your chickens! While it may seem like a fun game, this will stress your hens out. As a result, they may trust you less and their stress hormones could halt egg production.

Socialization

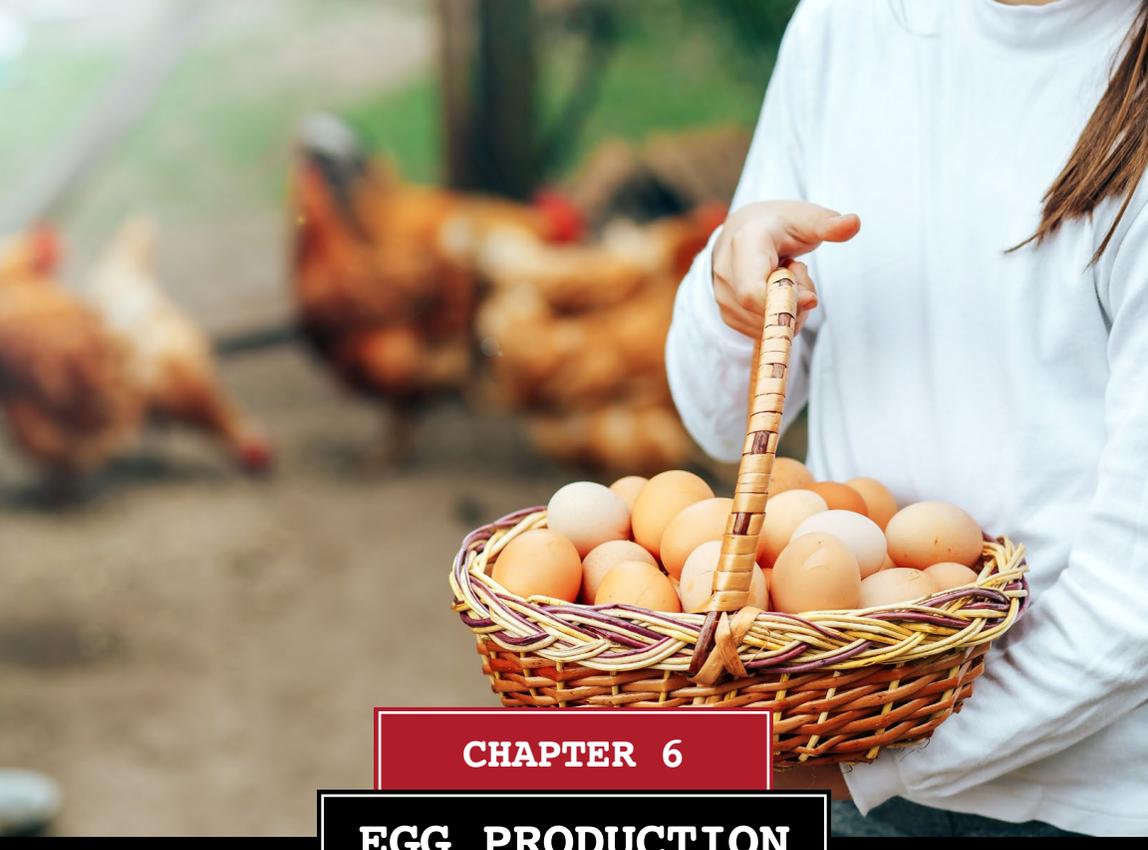
Chickens are playful, curious creatures. Each chicken will have distinct personality traits, vocalizations and habits. It's important to socialize with your chickens every day so they can get to know you—and you can get to know them!

Always speak to them in a reassuring voice, using their names often. Encourage your chickens to come to you by sitting on the ground—they may very well jump onto your lap! Pet their feathers the same way you would pet a cat or a dog. They also seem to enjoy being rubbed on the back of their necks, underneath the layer of feathers. You can play with your chickens by scattering treats for them, giving them an enormous pile of leaves to sort through, or teaching them to do tricks. For example, you can use positive reinforcement and food to train chickens to jump up on your forearm for treats!

The more time you spend around each of your pets individually, the easier it will be to notice anything that seems out of the ordinary, like limping or frightened behavior. When you spend time around them as a group, you'll recognize who's in charge and be able to determine the pecking order.



Fun Fact: Did you know that calling someone a “chicken” is actually a compliment? Chickens defend their young from predators and can evade an attack in the wild 90 percent of the time.



CHAPTER 6

EGG PRODUCTION

Training Hens To Lay

When chickens are old enough to start laying, they may not know what to do at first (or where to do it). To train them to lay eggs in the nesting boxes, use a couple of ping pong balls, golf balls or wooden eggs to start. You can even take an old egg and mark it with a Sharpie, so you don't get it confused with any new eggs that are laid. Within a week or so, your hens will learn that they are supposed to lay their eggs in the nesting box, and collecting them will be a breeze.

Tip: Clean out the nesting boxes once a week. Keeping this area tidy is one of the best things you can do to encourage egg production.





Encouraging Egg Production During Winter

Even the most consistent egg-layers may slow their production during winter. After all, the days are shorter, the weather is wet and rainy, and nights in the coop can dip to uncomfortably cold temperatures. This is when chickens naturally go into a molt and take the season off from laying.

If you're an all-natural chicken farmer, perhaps you don't want to disturb this biological process. However, if year-round egg production is important to you, there is a trick you can use: artificial light. Suspend a light bulb (or heat bulb) above their perch, then use a timer so that the light turns on before sunrise. This will help the chickens get at least 12 hours of "sunlight" a day and convince them that springtime is on the way. They should start laying again, pronto.

If you have room in your coop, you can always add to your flock with breeds that will lay through the winter, like Buff Orpington, Rhode Island Red, Silver-Laced Wyandotte, Sussex, Arucacana or Plymouth Rock.

How To Collect Eggs

Once your hens start laying eggs, try to make it a habit of gathering them at least three times a day: once before noon, once in the early afternoon and once in the evening. Space each gathering a few hours apart, so you have the best chance of catching new eggs.

If you allow eggs to sit overnight in a nesting box, it's possible that they will break from being stepped on or end up covered in feces, leaving more work for you later. If you collect them soon after they are laid, it will protect the eggs from sitting through extreme temperatures, like harsh summer heat.

As you're collecting the eggs, make sure to discard any broken or cracked shells immediately, as they may be contaminated and unsafe to eat. If there is egg yolk in a nesting box, clean out the shavings and replace them with new nesting material. Then, wash the box with soap and hot water. Once a chicken tastes her own eggs, it spells bad news! She may try to break them on purpose for food, so getting rid of yolks before she's had a chance to try them is key.

Eggs can carry bacteria from manure, mud or rodents. Once you're done gathering them, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and hot water.





How To Clean Eggs

Debris like manure or dirt can easily stick to eggshells, but most of the time it will come easily. Gently scrub the egg with a brush, cloth or fine piece of sandpaper. Do not grip the egg too hard, otherwise you could break it. When you're finished, disinfect the brush (or another cleaning tool) in bleach water.

When you're washing eggs, it's crucial to use water about 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The science behind this is fairly simple: If eggs are washed in water that's cooler than their internal temperature (usually 70 degrees), the shells will contract. When this happens, eggs pull in microbes which could lead to contamination. Yikes! For this same reason, it's important to never let eggs soak in water for any period of time.

Tip: For an all-natural egg sanitizer, mix one part white vinegar with one part water. Dip a paper towel in the solution, wipe down the egg and let it air dry. Easy peasy!

How To Store Eggs

After you're done cleaning the eggs, dry them off with a clean paper towel or cloth. Make sure they are fully dry before storing them in a fridge drawer or egg carton (by the way, you can order blank egg cartons in bulk online for relatively cheap). Mark the date of collection on the eggs or egg carton so you can keep track of freshness.

Keep the eggs away from the fridge door to avoid fluctuations in temperature every time the fridge is opened and closed. When kept at a cool temperature, eggs from your beloved chickens will last (at least) one month from the collection date. Yum!

Tip: To see if your eggs are expired, use the float test. Place an egg in a glass of cold water. If it sinks to the bottom, it's fresh. If it floats to the top, compost it.





ALL YOU NEED IS A LITTLE CHICKEN CONFIDENCE

Now that you've read the contents of this book, it's time to dive right in! First-time chicken owners are often nervous that they are going to mess everything up. They'll spend hours pouring over coop blueprints, get lost in the Google search vortex trying to configure the perfect mix of breeds, and lose sleep the first night the chickens are in the hen house.

Relax, friends. One of the reasons that chickens make such amazing pets is that they are so simple to take care of, once you get the hang of it. For a little work each day, the rewards are huge: tasty fresh eggs in the morning, enriched compost and cuddly companionship, to name a few.

To get the additional support you need, ask your local feed store about chicken groups in your area—this is a great opportunity to make new friends with similar interests. Join (or create) a Facebook group dedicated to raising backyard chickens, and ask other chicken owners for advice in online forums. You'll find that the chicken-raising community is active, vocal and passionate about their feathered friends.

Congrats on your new pets! Let us know how it goes.

— Alternative Daily

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