

Backyard Chickens

By Jennifer Cook, CSU Extension/NRCS, 2011

Raising backyard chickens can provide you with fresh eggs, pest control, and hours of entertainment. Before you get started, it is important to learn about what chickens need to be healthy and happy. First step, make sure your local municipality allows you to have chickens!

Hens are productive egg layers for two to four years depending on the breed. Depending on the breed, expect five eggs per week for the first two years, and realize that egg production will decrease during the winter. Chickens molt once a year, usually in the Fall. Roosters are not necessary unless you want the eggs to be fertile. The trick to having consistent egg layers is simply meeting their food, water, and shelter needs.

Food and Water

Chickens need constant food and water supply. Water should be under 80 degrees Fahrenheit and not frozen solid. Provide a free choice supply of complete LAYER feed which will have extra calcium, 16-18% protein, and essential amino acids/vitamins/minerals. Also feed ground oyster shells or ground egg shells for calcium if needed. Chickens will eat kitchen scraps like veggies, fruit, meat, and dairy. They love grass clippings, bugs, seeds, worms, and weeds. During cold weather, provide extra energy with "hen scratch" such as corn or soy grains. Flax seed will provide omega-3's when greens are not available. Alfalfa hay can also be fed.

Chickens have gizzards which are like secondary stomachs that help them grind their food before digestion. This process requires chickens to swallow gritty substances like gravel. If chickens do not have access to gravel in the chicken run, you can purchase "grit."

Sunlight and Soil

If you allow your chickens outdoor access, install chicken fence around your property and let the chickens "free range" a few hours every day. If needed, clip their wings to keep them from escaping. In the chicken run and coop area, shoot for at least 10 square feet per chicken and make sure there is soil or sand because chickens like to take dirt baths to deter mites.

The Coop

Coops need to protect chickens from heat, sun, wind, extreme cold, and predators. Use lots of high carbon litter like wood shavings, tree leaves and straw as bedding. The coop should provide a place for the chickens to lay eggs and a place to roost.



Wild chickens roost in trees at night. To simulate tree limbs, build roosting bars four feet high and accessible in the coop. Chickens are very docile and vulnerable at night. Make sure predators like raccoon, fox, mountain lion, skunk, hawk, and coyote, are closed out. Farm cats can stay in the coop at night to hunt mice, however cats will kill chicks.

Nesting boxes should not be directly under the roosting area because chickens poop a lot at night. Nesting box sizes will vary by breed. An average size is 10" x 10" X 18" tall - 12" X 12" X 18" tall with a 2" tall dam to hold bedding. Plan on one box per four or five birds. Keep the boxes cleaned daily so your eggs will be clean.

Other Considerations

Labor – daily egg collection, feeding, and watering.

Smells – use high carbon litter to reduce manure smells.

Noise – hens make some noise when they lay an egg. Roosters crow anytime, day or night. Tell your neighbors in advance if you expect noisy chickens.

Pathogens and Diseases – not much in a small flock. Don't kiss the birds, and wash your hands and equipment.

Disposal – How will you manage the older chickens which are no longer laying eggs? Keep them, eat them, euthanize them according to local regulations, or donate old birds to animal operations such as the Raptor Rehabilitation Center.

For more information:

Chickens in Your Backyard, A Beginner's Guide by Rick and Gail Luttmann

CSU Extension factsheet, "Home-Produced Chicken Eggs"

<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/foodnut/09377.html>

CSU Veterinary Extension: Avian webpage

<http://veterinaryextension.colostate.edu/menu2/avian.shtml>

