

BACKYARD CHICKENS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO KEEPING A SMALL FLOCK

What they need, what they don't, and what you'll wish you knew before the first egg.

Chickens are not complicated, but they are a real commitment. Give them secure housing, appropriate food, clean water, space to behave like chickens, and enough attention to notice when something changes.

BUILD THE COOP BEFORE YOU BUY THE CHICKENS.

01 Before you buy chickens.

The first chicken-keeping job is making sure you are actually allowed and prepared to keep them.

Local rules vary wildly. Some municipalities limit flock size, ban roosters, regulate coop setbacks, require permits, or restrict poultry entirely. Your lease, HOA, or neighborhood rules can add another layer.

- Check town, city, county, HOA, lease, and zoning rules before ordering birds.
- Ask specifically about hens, roosters, flock limits, coop setbacks, waste, slaughter, and selling eggs if any of those matter to you.
- Plan who will care for the flock when you travel. Chickens still need water, feed, security, and observation every day.
- Identify a poultry or avian veterinarian, diagnostic lab, or Extension contact before you have an emergency.
- Decide what happens when hens age and egg production slows. A chicken can remain part of your flock for years after peak laying.

ONE QUESTION PEOPLE FORGET

Do your neighbors need to love chickens? No. But odor, rodents, flies, loose birds, and a crowing rooster can turn your hobby into their problem very quickly.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WRITE YOUR FLOCK CONTRACT

Before buying birds, write down your maximum flock size, whether you will keep older non-layers, who handles vacations, and what you will do if a bird becomes seriously ill. Future decisions get easier when the values are settled first.

02 Chicks, pullets, or adult hens?

There is no prize for choosing the hardest possible starting point.

Day-old chicks are adorable and educational, but they require brooding equipment, careful temperature management, more time before eggs, and a plan for any unexpected males. Started pullets cost more but skip much of the fragile early stage.

- Chicks: lowest purchase price, highest early-care requirement, and months before laying.
- Started pullets: young females approaching laying age; simpler for beginners who primarily want a small egg flock.
- Adult hens or rescues: personalities and health histories vary; quarantine and careful introductions matter.
- Hatchery sexing is not perfect. Have a plan if a chick grows into a rooster where roosters are prohibited.
- A rooster is not required for hens to lay eggs. You only need a male if you want fertile eggs.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

START SMALLER THAN THE COOP CAPACITY

Leave yourself room for flock dynamics, replacements, or the inevitable chicken you somehow come home with later. A coop filled to its absolute limit on day one gives you no flexibility.

03 Choose breeds for your life.

Egg color is fun. Temperament, climate tolerance, size, broodiness, and availability matter more.

Breed descriptions are useful, but individual birds still vary. Build a flock around your climate and goals instead of choosing only by a photograph in a hatchery catalog.

- Cold climates: consider body size, comb type, and how well the breed is known to tolerate cold.
- Hot climates: lighter-bodied birds and breeds known for heat tolerance may cope better, but every flock still needs shade, ventilation, and abundant cool water.
- Families and mixed flocks: temperament matters when birds share limited space.
- Large breeds need more room, stronger roosts, and more generous doorways than bantams.
- Broody breeds may stop laying periodically to sit on nests - useful if you want chicks, inconvenient if you do not.
- Eggshell color is determined by genetics; it does not make one egg more nutritious than another.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

PICK THREE PRIORITIES

Write your top three: egg production, temperament, climate tolerance, broodiness, size, appearance, or heritage conservation. Choose breeds that satisfy those priorities instead of trying to find a chicken that is perfect at everything.

04 The coop is shelter, not a tiny house.

Dry, secure, ventilated, easy to clean, and large enough to function beats decorative every time.

A good coop protects birds from weather and predators while allowing moisture and ammonia to escape. Draft-free does not mean airtight. Ventilation should move stale, humid air out without blasting sleeping birds with winter wind.

- Place the coop on well-drained ground and keep the roof reliably dry.
- Build ventilation high in the coop, above the birds when they are roosting.
- Make doors and access panels large enough that you can actually clean, inspect, and reach every corner.
- Use surfaces and materials that can be cleaned and that do not create sharp edges or injury points.
- Do not make electricity, heat lamps, extension cords, or decorative lighting the foundation of winter survival.

THINGS CHICKENS ABSOLUTELY DO NOT CARE ABOUT

Tiny curtains. Farmhouse signs. Coordinated paint. A chandelier. They care about dry bedding, fresh air, food, water, roosting space, shade, enrichment, and not being eaten.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

DESIGN IT FOR A RAINY TUESDAY

Imagine cleaning the coop when it is 38 degrees, raining sideways, and you are late. If feeders, waterers, eggs, bedding, and locks are difficult to reach, redesign them before birds move in.

05 Give them enough space.

Crowding makes nearly every management problem harder.

Space recommendations vary with breed, climate, run access, management, and how much time birds spend confined. University Extension references commonly place adult laying hens around 1.5 to 2 square feet per bird indoors, with substantially more space in an outdoor run. More room is rarely the problem.

- Treat published minimums as a floor, not a design goal.
- Large breeds need more room than bantams.
- If birds spend long periods confined because of weather, predators, or disease restrictions, extra run space becomes more valuable.
- Crowding increases moisture, manure load, competition, feather damage, stress, and aggressive pecking.
- Plan space for feeders, waterers, dust bathing, shade, and movement - not just bird bodies.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

BUILD FOR THE WINTER FLOCK

Design around the season when birds will spend the most time together in the smallest usable area. If the run becomes snowed in or soaked for days, the flock still needs room to function.

06 Roosts and nest boxes.

Chickens want to sleep up and lay somewhere that feels quiet and protected.

Adult hens generally prefer to sleep on roosts rather than the floor. Nest boxes are for laying, not sleeping. Proper placement helps keep eggs cleaner and reduces crowding.

- Provide enough roost length that every bird can settle without constant pushing and displacement.
- Use a comfortable roost shape and size that lets birds balance securely; avoid slippery or sharp materials.
- Keep roosts positioned so droppings do not fall into feeders, waterers, or nest boxes.
- A common rule of thumb is roughly one nest box for every four to five hens; hens will still argue over the same favorite box.
- Keep nest boxes lower than the highest preferred roost so birds are less tempted to sleep in them.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WATCH WHERE THEY CHOOSE TO SLEEP

The flock will review your architecture on the first night. If they are sleeping on nest-box edges, windows, or equipment instead of the roost, ask what makes that location more attractive or accessible.

07 Predator-proof means building for the animal that wants in.

Chicken wire keeps chickens in. It is not the same thing as a secure predator barrier.

Raccoons, foxes, coyotes, dogs, weasels, rodents, hawks, owls, snakes, and other predators exploit different weaknesses. Your local predator list determines the details, but strong mesh, secure locks, covered openings, and nighttime confinement do most of the heavy lifting.

- Use small, sturdy hardware cloth or other predator-resistant mesh on vulnerable openings, especially the lower portions of runs and windows.
- Secure doors with latches raccoons cannot simply manipulate. A hook you can open with one finger is not a raccoon lock.
- Prevent digging with buried fencing or an outward apron where local predators make that necessary.
- Cover runs or provide appropriate overhead protection where aerial predation is a concern.
- Automatic coop doors can be excellent tools, but inspect them regularly and do not let automation replace checking that every bird is safely inside.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

DO A PREDATOR AUDIT AT NIGHT

Walk the coop after dark with a flashlight. Pull on every door. Look for gaps larger than you intended, loose mesh, warped wood, broken staples, digging, or a latch clever paws could defeat.

08 Bedding and deep litter.

The goal is dry, absorbent footing - not a wet compost pile under your chickens.

Bedding absorbs moisture, cushions the floor, keeps birds cleaner, and helps manage manure.

Deep-litter systems build a thicker bedding layer over time and can work well when they remain dry, aerated, and managed. They are not an excuse to ignore wet spots or ammonia.

- Use an absorbent bedding appropriate for poultry and your management system.
- Remove or cover wet, compacted areas promptly - especially around waterers.
- If you smell strong ammonia at bird height, ventilation, moisture, stocking density, or litter management needs attention.
- Keep nest-box bedding clean enough that eggs are not constantly soiled.
- Deep litter works best as a managed carbon-rich bedding system; the final material should generally finish composting away from birds before being used around food crops.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

USE YOUR NOSE AT ROOST HEIGHT

Crouch down where the birds breathe. If the air smells sharp or your eyes sting, do not congratulate yourself for having a deep-litter system. Add dry bedding, remove wet material, and increase ventilation.

09 Feed the chicken you actually have.

A complete ration should do the nutritional heavy lifting.

Commercial poultry feeds are formulated by life stage. Chicks, growing pullets, and laying hens have different needs. Feeding the wrong ration - especially high-calcium layer feed to growing birds - can create real health problems.

- Use an age-appropriate complete starter or starter/grower feed for young birds and an appropriate grower ration until laying age, following the feed label and veterinary or Extension guidance.
- Once hens are laying, use a complete layer ration designed to provide the protein, vitamins, minerals, and calcium needed for egg production.
- Offer oyster shell or another appropriate calcium source free-choice to laying hens when needed rather than guessing by dumping extra calcium into everyone's feed.
- Provide insoluble grit when birds eat foods that require grinding and do not have reliable access to suitable grit outdoors.
- Scratch grains and kitchen scraps are treats, not a balanced ration.

THE BORING FEED IS DOING IMPORTANT WORK

A scoop of complete feed looks less exciting on Instagram than a bowl of colorful treats. Your chickens do not care. Balanced nutrition is the point.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MAKE TREATS EARN THEIR SPACE

Use treats for training, enrichment, or small seasonal extras - not as a replacement for the ration. If birds are filling up on snacks, the complete feed cannot do the job it was formulated to do.

10 Water is the nutrient you notice only when it fails.

Chickens need constant access to clean, fresh water.

Birds reduce feed intake when they cannot drink. Heat, freezing weather, dirty waterers, algae, spilled bedding, and equipment failure can all turn water into the flock's limiting factor.

- Check water at least daily and more often during extreme heat or freezing weather.
- Provide enough drinking points that lower-ranking birds are not blocked.
- Place waterers where spilled water does not turn the coop into wet litter.
- In winter, a safely installed heated waterer or drinker warmer can prevent freezing without heating the entire coop.
- In summer, shade the water and provide additional clean, cool water sources during heat events.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CREATE A FAILURE BACKUP

Own a second waterer. Equipment always breaks when the store is closed, the temperature is 95 degrees, or the first waterer freezes solid.

11 Let chickens do chicken things.

Enrichment is not a luxury when birds live in a confined environment.

Scratching, foraging, dust bathing, perching, exploring, sunning, and social interaction are normal behaviors. Giving birds appropriate outlets for those behaviors can reduce boredom and conflict.

- Provide a dry place for dust bathing.
- Scatter small amounts of appropriate treats into litter or leaves so birds forage rather than inhale them from a bowl.
- Use branches, stumps, low platforms, hanging greens, or other safe objects to create vertical and visual variety.
- Rotate enrichment rather than packing the run with permanent clutter.
- Provide shade, dry shelter, and places lower-ranking birds can move away from dominant flock mates.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

ADD ONE BEHAVIOR, NOT ONE GADGET

Watch the flock for ten minutes. Are they trying to scratch, perch, dust bathe, hide, or climb? Add something that supports the behavior you actually see instead of buying a random chicken toy.

12 Eggs, molt, broodiness, and fewer eggs.

Egg production changes. The hen is not malfunctioning.

Young hens usually reach laying age at roughly five to six months, depending on breed, nutrition, season, and individual development. Production changes with age, daylight, heat, molt, broodiness, stress, illness, and other factors.

- A rooster is not required for egg production.
- Collect eggs regularly and keep nest boxes dry and clean.
- Molting is a normal period of feather replacement; laying often slows or stops while the bird redirects resources toward feathers.
- Broody hens may stop laying while they attempt to incubate eggs, even when those eggs are not fertile.
- Production generally declines as hens age. Decide before that happens whether your flock is an egg-production system or a lifelong-animal commitment.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

TRACK THE FLOCK, NOT INDIVIDUAL EGG QUOTAS

Write down total eggs, major weather, molt, feed changes, and unusual flock events. Trends are more useful than getting angry at one hen because Tuesday only produced three eggs.

13 Summer is often harder than winter.

Chickens cannot sweat. Shade, water, and ventilation are the foundation of heat management.

Panting can be a normal cooling behavior in warm weather, but heavy panting, wings held away from the body, weakness, lethargy, or collapse can signal dangerous heat stress. Prevention is easier than emergency cooling.

- Provide reliable shade during the hottest part of the day - watch where the shadow moves in late afternoon.
- Keep shaded areas ventilated so the flock is not trapped in hot, stagnant air.
- Offer multiple sources of fresh, cool water during extreme heat.
- Avoid creating a wet, humid coop in the name of cooling. Mistlers are most useful where evaporation can actually happen.
- Collect eggs more often in heat waves and monitor birds whose size, feathering, age, or health makes them less tolerant.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

FIND THE 4 PM SHADE

Go outside on the hottest sunny afternoon and stand where the flock stands. If the only shade disappeared at noon, fix the problem before the next heat wave.

14 Winter care is mostly moisture management.

Healthy adult chickens often handle cold better than a damp, poorly ventilated coop.

A winter coop should block harsh drafts at bird level while still venting moisture and ammonia above the flock. In many climates and for many adult breeds, routine supplemental coop heat is unnecessary and can introduce fire risk.

- Keep bedding dry and add clean material as needed.
- Maintain high ventilation even when the temptation is to seal every opening.
- Prevent drinking water from freezing with appropriately installed equipment.
- Provide enough roost space for birds to settle comfortably off the floor.
- Collect eggs frequently during freezing weather.
- Know your breed and climate; small-bodied birds, large combs, illness, or extreme conditions may require additional planning.

SKIP THE HEAT LAMP BY DEFAULT

Extension guidance commonly warns against routine supplemental heat because combustible bedding and hanging heat sources create a real fire hazard. Build the coop to manage cold instead.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CHECK CONDENSATION AT SUNRISE

Look at windows and walls first thing in the morning. Visible condensation is telling you the flock is producing more moisture than the coop is removing. Increase ventilation before frostbite teaches the lesson for you.

15 Learn what healthy looks like.

Chickens hide illness. Your biggest diagnostic tool is knowing their normal behavior.

A healthy bird is generally bright, alert, eating, drinking, moving normally, and interacting with the flock. Early illness can be subtle because prey animals often conceal weakness.

- Watch for a bird separating from the flock, sleeping at unusual times, becoming unusually quiet, or changing posture.
- Notice sudden changes in feed or water intake, egg production, droppings, gait, breathing, eyes, nostrils, comb, feathers, or body condition.
- Check feet, legs, vent area, skin under feathers, and the keel/breast condition periodically.
- A chicken that is struggling to breathe, unable to stand, severely injured, neurologic, egg-bound, or rapidly declining needs prompt veterinary help.
- Sudden multiple deaths or widespread respiratory/neurologic signs can require immediate contact with a veterinarian or state animal-health authorities because highly pathogenic avian influenza and other serious diseases remain concerns.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

DO A WEEKLY HANDS-ON CHECK

Pick up each bird when practical and learn what normal weight, feet, feathers, eyes, breathing, and breast muscle feel like. You are building a baseline, not waiting for an emergency.

16 Biosecurity starts at the gate.

New birds and borrowed equipment can bring more into the flock than you intended.

Disease prevention is much easier than trying to treat an outbreak. USDA biosecurity guidance recommends separating new birds from the existing flock for 30 days. Keep equipment clean and limit unnecessary contact with other poultry.

- Quarantine new birds away from the resident flock, ideally with separate equipment and care routines.
- Care for the established flock before quarantined or sick birds, then clean hands, footwear, and equipment.
- Do not casually share crates, feeders, tools, or footwear between flocks without cleaning and disinfection.
- Reduce contact between your flock and wild birds, especially around feed and water.
- Store feed securely so rodents and wild birds cannot contaminate it.

PEOPLE HYGIENE MATTERS TOO

Backyard poultry can carry Salmonella and other germs even when they look healthy. Wash hands after handling birds, eggs, feed, waterers, or coop equipment, and keep poultry equipment out of food-preparation areas.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CREATE COOP SHOES

Keep a dedicated pair of boots or shoes for poultry chores and leave them outside living areas. It is simple biosecurity and an excellent way to avoid explaining chicken manure on the kitchen floor.

17 Introducing new birds without starting a prison riot.

Quarantine protects health. A slow introduction protects flock dynamics.

Chickens establish a social hierarchy. Dropping unfamiliar birds directly into an established flock can trigger intense aggression, especially when space and resources are limited.

- Finish the health quarantine before social introduction.
- Use a see-but-do-not-touch period where the groups can observe one another through secure fencing.
- Provide multiple feeders, waterers, and escape routes during early mixing.
- Avoid introducing a single vulnerable bird when you can introduce compatible birds together.
- Expect some pecking and chasing as hierarchy is established, but intervene if a bird is relentlessly attacked, cornered, bleeding, or prevented from food and water.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MAKE THE RUN LESS DEFENDABLE

Before mixing groups, temporarily rearrange safe run furniture, add visual barriers, and spread resources out. An environment that feels slightly new to everyone can reduce territorial advantage.

18 Manure is a resource after it is managed.

Fresh chicken manure is nutrient-rich. That does not mean it belongs directly on every growing plant.

Chicken manure and used bedding can become excellent compost material. Composting helps stabilize the manure and lets bedding carbon balance the nitrogen-rich waste. Food-garden use also has food-safety considerations, especially when manure is raw or incompletely composted.

- Collect manure and carbon-rich bedding into a dedicated compost system.
- Keep the compost pile away from wells, surface water, and places where runoff creates problems.
- If compost is intended for food production, use recognized composting and manure-application guidance rather than assuming age alone makes it safe.
- Deep-litter material removed from the coop may still need an outdoor finishing period before garden use.
- The cleaner and drier your coop management is, the easier the manure stream is to compost.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

GIVE MANURE A DESTINATION BEFORE BIRDS ARRIVE

Decide where used bedding goes every week or month. If there is no compost area, disposal plan, or carbon source, the manure pile will design itself - usually somewhere you hate.

19 The real chicken-keeping routine.

Most flock care is ordinary work repeated before it becomes a problem.

DAILY

Check every bird. Refresh water. Confirm feed. Collect eggs. Check locks and doors. Look for wet bedding, predator damage, abnormal droppings, or a bird acting differently.

WEEKLY

Inspect feet and body condition on a few birds or the whole small flock. Clean waterers and feeders thoroughly. Refresh bedding. Check mesh, latches, automatic-door tracks, and rodent activity.

MONTHLY

Look for mites or lice. Inspect the coop structure. Review feed storage. Check ventilation and dust. Add or remove litter as needed. Review egg production and flock notes.

SEASONALLY

Prepare for heat or freezing weather before it arrives. Deep-clean or reset bedding as your system requires. Review predator pressure, drainage, shade, and flock size.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MAKE CHORES BORING

Put feed, bedding, tools, egg baskets, first-aid supplies, and spare water equipment where you actually use them. Good systems turn chicken care into ten predictable minutes instead of forty minutes of looking for things.

20 Older hens are still chickens.

Egg production is something a hen does. It is not her entire value.

Production usually declines with age. Some keepers cull birds when they stop laying; others maintain a retirement flock. Neither choice should be an accidental surprise years after you started.

- Decide whether your flock is primarily livestock production, companion animals, or somewhere in between.
- Budget feed, housing, space, and health care for older birds if you plan to keep them for life.
- Watch older hens for mobility problems, body-condition loss, reproductive disease, and bullying by younger birds.
- Do not add chicks every spring without calculating what the flock will look like five years later.
- If euthanasia becomes necessary because of serious suffering, have a humane plan and veterinary guidance available before the crisis.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

DO THE FIVE-YEAR MATH

Write down how many birds you want now, how often you expect to add new hens, and whether older birds stay. The math will tell you whether your future flock fits the coop you are building today.

21 Beginner flock checklist.

Do not bring birds home until these boxes are boringly complete.

- Local rules checked, including rooster and flock-size restrictions.
- Predator-resistant coop and run completed before birds arrive.
- Ventilation, roosts, nest boxes, dry bedding, shade, and drainage planned.
- Age-appropriate complete feed purchased and stored securely.
- Water system plus a backup waterer ready.
- Oyster shell / calcium plan and grit plan understood for the birds you keep.
- Daily caretaker and vacation backup identified.
- Quarantine space available before you ever add new birds.
- Poultry veterinary / diagnostic contacts saved.
- Heat-wave and freezing-weather plans ready.
- Manure / bedding disposal or composting area planned.
- Decision made about older non-laying hens and unexpected roosters.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

THEN BUY THE CHICKENS

When the coop, feed, water, predator protection, and long-term plan already exist, bringing home birds feels a lot less like panic with feathers.

22 Sources worth keeping.

Use current veterinary, Extension, CDC, and USDA guidance when health or disease is involved.

USDA APHIS - Defend the Flock

Biosecurity guidance for backyard and commercial poultry, including separating new birds for 30 days.

aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/defend-the-flock

CDC - Backyard Poultry

Human-health precautions, handwashing, Salmonella risk, egg handling, and protecting young children.

cdc.gov/healthy-pets/about/backyard-poultry.html

Merck Veterinary Manual - Backyard Poultry

Veterinary-reviewed information on physical examination, infectious disease, and management-related health problems.

merckvetmanual.com/exotic-and-laboratory-animals/backyard-poultry

Penn State Extension - Small Scale Poultry Housing

Current housing guidance on weather protection, ventilation, predators, and coop construction.

extension.psu.edu/small-scale-poultry-housing

University of Georgia Extension - Nutrition for the Backyard Flock

Feeding by life stage, calcium, complete rations, and water.

extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=C954

University of Maryland Extension - Poultry Housing / Predators

Housing-space references and predator-prevention guidance.

extension.umd.edu/programs/agriculture/program/animal-science/poultry

Cooperative Extension Small & Backyard Poultry

Seasonal husbandry resources including heat stress, winter housing, and flock management.

poultry.extension.org

IMPORTANT

This guide is educational, not veterinary advice. A sick or injured bird may need hands-on examination, diagnostic testing, or humane emergency care. Local poultry rules and disease-control requirements can change.

KEEP THE SYSTEM SIMPLE. KEEP THE CHICKENS WELL.

THE WHOLE GUIDE IN TEN LINES:

- Check the law before you check the hatchery website.
- Build the coop before you buy the chickens.
- Dry plus ventilated beats sealed plus warm.
- Hardware cloth and real locks matter more than cute coop decor.
- Complete feed and clean water do most of the nutritional work.
- Give birds space to scratch, perch, dust bathe, and move away from one another.
- Learn what healthy looks like before you need to recognize illness.
- Quarantine new birds and take biosecurity seriously.
- Have a plan for manure, vacations, heat waves, winter, and old hens.
- The egg is a gift. The chicken is the commitment.

A good flock is not the one with the fanciest coop. It is the one whose needs are met consistently enough that the chickens get to spend most of their time simply being chickens.