

Backyard Chicken Keeping Basics

Amanda Henning
Agriculture and Food Systems Educator



Photo from www.smallfarms.cornell.edu

The local food trend is growing in popularity and people are becoming increasingly interested in raising their own chickens for eggs, meat, and pure enjoyment. Chickens are a pleasure to have and provide your family with healthy, delicious food.

However, before you bring home your new feathered friends there are several things you need to consider. First, you need to find out if local municipal laws allow you to keep chickens on your property, by calling your local municipal office. Each municipality will have its own rules.

For example, in the town of Lockport chickens are prohibited in residential zones R1 and R2, but if your property is in an Agricultural District chickens are allowed but must be penned (no free range chickens). To determine what zone your property is in, you can call your local municipality or review your tax records.

This step is very important. You don't want to find out chickens are not allowed on your property after you spent a considerable amount of time and money getting ready for and taking care of them. If chickens are currently not allowed into your neighborhood, there are steps you can take to try to change that. You may be able to request an alternative use permit for your property, to allow for backyard chickens or you may have to go a few steps further. The website www.backyardchickens.com is a great resource to help you get started.

Once you find out if you can have chickens, you need to determine how many you want (you may be limited by local laws). This will, in turn, determine how large of a coop you will need.

Building a safe coop

Your coop can be as fancy or as plain as you want to make it. Whether you want to build or buy a chicken taj mahal or a fixer-upper, there are a few things each coop has to have in common.



Photos from www.buzzfeed.com



1. Size:

The coop needs to be large enough to accommodate your flock and allow room enough for you to be able to enter in order to clean and collect the eggs! The height of the coop and the height of the outside penned area, if you have one, needs to be tall enough to allow the tallest member of your flock to move around comfortably. The coop needs to be sturdy but can also be moveable. There are many designs available.

2. Nesting boxes and roosts:

Nesting boxes should be provided. You don't need enough nest boxes for each chicken to have her own but providing your chickens with a choice may make them more comfortable. You will likely find that the chickens will choose a favorite nesting box.

Providing a roost for your hens is important. Chickens like to be up off the ground to sleep. In the wild, chickens will roost in trees to stay safe from ground predators. This does not need to be an elaborate structure, a branch or piece of scrap wood, that the hens can wrap their feet around and is properly secured will work just fine.



www.fivegallonideas.com



www.backyardchickens.com



www.shabbyoldpottingshed.blogspot.com

3. Safety:

In the coop:

Chickens make a tasty meal for the many predators that are around. Fox, dogs, raccoons, coyotes, snakes, hawks, rats, etc. will try to get into your coop and make a meal of your chickens or eggs. To keep these predators out, your coop needs to be sturdy enough to stand up to not only the weather, but also these predators. To ensure your new feathered friends are safe

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inside their coop, it is important to cover large cracks, holes and windows with boards or chicken wire so a hungry raccoon can't pry it open to get a mid-night snack.

Outside:

Consider attaching fenced area to your coop so the birds are safe when they are outside. This will protect them from the predators during the day.

4. Ventilation

Once the coop is predator proof, ventilation is another important thing to think about. Chickens are susceptible to a variety of respiratory infections. Adequate ventilation is very important to maintaining a healthy flock. Fresh air is necessary to supply oxygen, remove ammonia fumes and keep the litter dry. Air entering the building from the rafters is termed ventilation. Remember, it is better to have the birds at 35 degrees and dry rather than at 55 degrees and wet.

5. Food and Water

You will need to provide clean water and food to your chickens inside the coop. Preparing this ahead of time will avoid possible headaches later. There are many types of feeders and waterers available and many more ideas to make your own. Just make sure your feeders and waterers are attached well or are on a sturdy surface, so they don't fall onto your birds or tip over and spill all the food and water.



www.backyardchickens.com



www.smallfriendly.com

Choosing the chickens that are right for you

This is an exciting step in preparing for your flock. There are a plethora of breeds to choose from. Choosing the right breed for you/ your family may not be as easy as you think. When choosing what breed to bring into your backyard the following will help you narrow down your selection:

- What type of bird are you interested in? i.e. heritage breeds, bantams, dual purpose, etc.
- Are you interested in having a variety of colors in your egg basket?
- Do you want chickens that will hatch their own chicks?
- Do you have children? Some breeds have a better disposition than others.
- You should also consider body and comb size. If you will be keeping your birds over the winter, you will want a bigger bodied bird with a smaller comb to avoid frostbite and hypothermia.

There are a few fun websites that have quizzes to help you decide what breeds are right for you. For example the, “Pick a Chicken!” breed selector tool at www.mypetchicken.com.

Also, most chicken catalogs will describe each breed so you can decide which is right for you. Some popular catalogs for purchasing chicks and supplies include: Meyer Hatchery, Murray McMurray Hatchery, Cackle Hatchery, Sand Hill Preservation Center (heritage breeds only, online catalog only), and Hoffman hatchery.

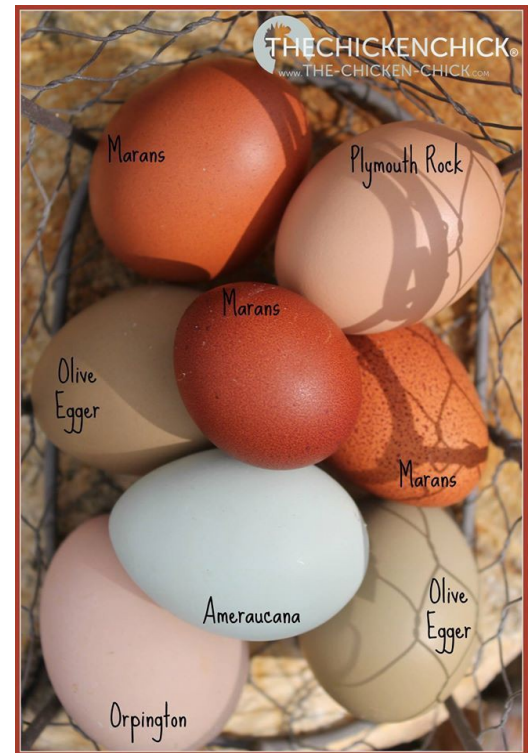
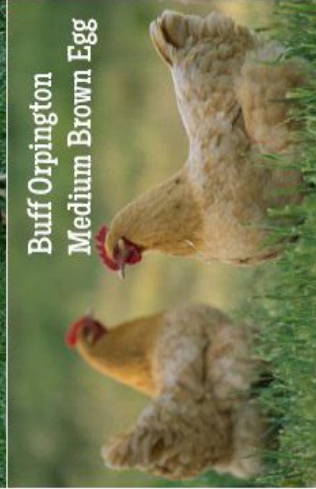
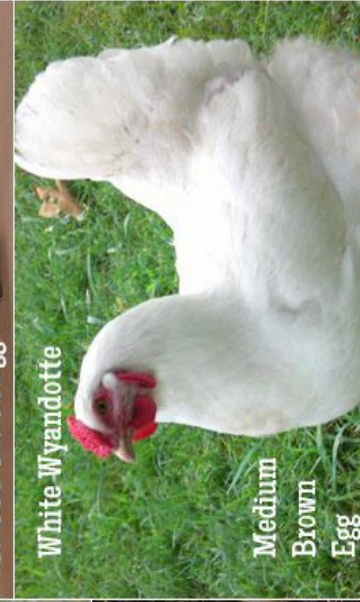
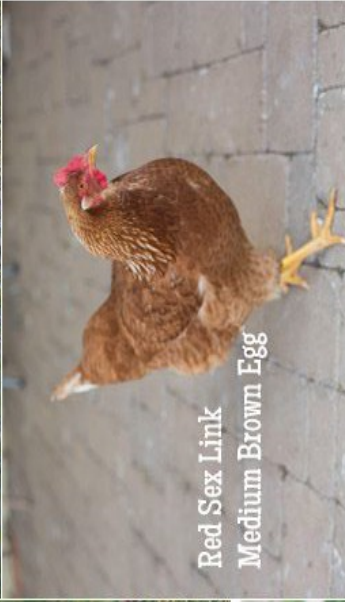
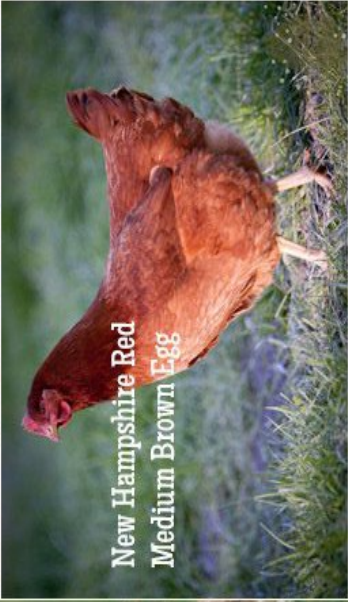


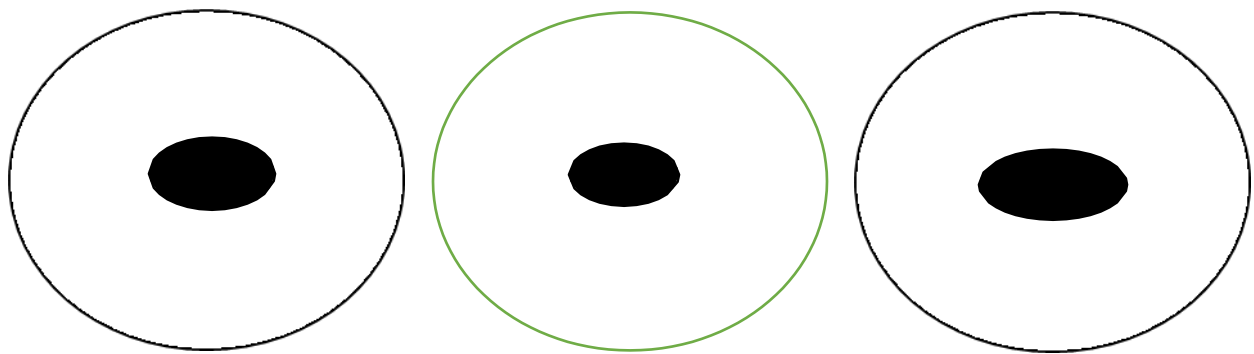
Photo from: www.ohlardy.com



Setting up your coop to get ready for your chicks

You can set up a brooder area in your chicken coop or in another building, garage, barn, or inside your home as long there is access to electricity. You can get creative with your brooder area. You can block off a small section of your coop, or start the chicks in a large box or plastic storage bin. When you become the mother hen and choose to take care of chicks, you need a few basic things to keep them safe and healthy. First you will need an enclosed space that will keep the chicks in a relatively small area and safe from predators (including your dog and cat!).

Installing a heat lamp is necessary for the survival of your chicks. Naturally chicks are taken care of by the mother hen who keeps them warm. The heat lamp should be securely installed 12 to 36 inches above the floor of the brooder area and should provide a temperature of about 95 degrees in the winter and 90 degrees the rest of the year. Enough space under the heat lamp is important to keep chicks warm without crowding. It is easy to tell if the chicks are warm enough, but having a thermometer won't hurt either.



Pine shavings on the floor of the brooder is useful in keeping the coop and chicks clean, provides some insulation from a cold floor and also helps with the development of their feet and legs, particularly if the underlying floor is slippery. A slippery floor doesn't provide the traction chicks need to develop their feet and leg muscles and can cause a very painful condition called spraddle leg that is difficult to correct and can cause death, because chicks cannot make it to the food and water.



Spraddle leg



Photo from my backyardchicken.com

Where to buy your chicks

Where you purchase your chicks will depend on what breeds you are interested in and how much you would be willing to spend. There are hundreds of hatcheries and breeders online that you can search for and purchase from. Purchasing from a catalog or online will give you the greatest selection and allow you to purchase the exact chickens you want at almost any time of the year. However, this route tends to be a bit more costly, because of the added charges of shipping live birds. Locally, there are several stores that you can purchase chicks from in the spring. Tractor supply stores, Rhineharts, Clyde's, and Country Max. You will have less of a selection when buying this way but will save money on shipping. Wherever you purchase your chicks you should consider the following vaccinations:

- Marek's Disease

Inquire whether the chicks have been vaccinated for Marek's disease. Marek's disease is an incurable virus that attacks the bird's nervous system causing poor motor control or partial paralysis. This vaccination must be done for chicks no later than one day old. If you are hatching your own, you can purchase the vaccine and have it available to administer when chicks hatch.

- NPIP Approved Hatcheries

Ensure that you are purchasing chicks from hatcheries that are National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) approved. This plan ensures the breeding adult birds are free from the strain of salmonella that colonize and cause illness in chickens. This will prevent any chicks from dying in transit and ensures they arrive to you pullorum- and typhoid-free.

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- Coccidiosis

This is an internal parasite that is passed on through feces. You can buy chicks from hatcheries that are vaccinated for this. If the chicks are not vaccinated at the hatchery, feeding medicated chick starter once they arrive will most likely alleviate the issue.

When you bring your chick home you need to check for “pasty butt”. This is very common but simple to take care of. However, if you do not remedy the problem, it can cause your chicks to become ill or die. This condition can be caused by stress during shipping or by something they have eaten. To take care of your chicks, wipe the droppings off with a paper towel dampened with warm water. Once the area is clean and dry apply petroleum jelly or triple antibiotic ointment. This should take care of pasty butt. Check your chicks every day to ensure the issue does not arise again.



Feeding your chicks

When you first receive your chicks make sure food and clean water are provided right away. Chicks are not shipped with food and water so it is likely it may have been a day or so since they ate last. When you receive the chicks should have food and clean water available at all times. Make sure the waterer you have is accessible to your flock and shallow enough so they won't drown (no tubs of water) sometimes putting a few glass marbles in the water encourages them to drink since chicks are attracted to shiny objects. If the chicks are dehydrated from their trip, you may have to add electrolytes to their water. Chicks should be fed chick starter mash for the first six weeks of their life. This is available at any feed or farm supply store. When you purchase this feed for your chicks you will have an option of medicated and un-medicated chick starter. Chicks are susceptible to illness because they have not built up an immunity and are growing so rapidly their bodies have little energy left to fight infection. Be sure you understand the risks before you choose whether or not to feed medicated chick starter.

As your flock grows

As your flock grows you will observe many changes. Their adult feathers will start to grow in and will start to look like awkward teenagers rather than little fluff balls. The chickens are growing rapidly and should be on a high protein diet. The following chart will help you determine what type of food to feed your chickens as they grow.

Age of layer	Type of feed
0-6 weeks	Starter mash
6-14 weeks	Grower feed
14 weeks – start of egg production	Developer feed
Egg production	Layer feed