



Chicken 101

Considerations for chicken rearing

Backyard poultry production has gained popularity, and flocks are becoming increasingly popular in urban environments due to the ease of raising and maintaining a small flock in backyards. The ability to raise one's own eggs appeals to many people.

Do your homework to find out the requirements for backyard flocks. Considerations include breed, nutrition, disease prevention, housing (coop and amount of space needed), environment, egg production, pros and cons of including a rooster in the flock, and whether you plan to start with chicks or mature birds.

Before you bring your birds home, ensure you are totally prepared for this venture. As a starting point, consider the following:

Coop

Regardless of whether you plan to confine chickens or let them roam free, a coop is necessary. The coop is the building that houses chickens and offers safety, and it's where chickens can lay eggs. Your budget, the amount of space available, and the number of chickens you want to keep will all be factors when selecting a coop (rule-of-thumb: one chicken per three square feet).

Get the biggest coop you can afford, especially if your chickens will be totally confined (no free-ranging). A coop needs good ventilation, provides protection from predators and should be easy to clean. A large, predator-proof pen adjacent to the coop is needed when chickens will be totally confined. Also, ensure the pen has ample shade.



Coops can be purchased online, at a local feed store, or you can build one yourself. Books are available with do-it-yourself coop designs, as well as coop plans online. Also consider, that newly hatched chicks should not be housed in a coop until they are at least eight weeks old. Chicks need to be raised inside in a brooder until old enough to be transferred to the coop.

Coop Accessories

No coop is complete without accessories. Must-have accessories are a feeder, water container designed for chickens, nesting boxes for egg-laying, and places to roost, which can be roosting poles or shelves—anything off the ground where chickens can comfortably settle for the night, either perched or snuggled in. Nest boxes need bedding, and possibly the floor of the coop will need bedding if it is solid (not wire).

Feed

Before purchasing chickens, determine the nutritional needs of your flock and how and what to feed them. If you plan on harvesting eggs, look for a high-quality layer feed in mash or pellet form to ensure your chickens will receive the nutrients needed to support egg production. If you plan to start your flock with newly hatched chicks, buy a premium starter mash for a strong, start to a long and productive life.

Breed

Before you rush off to the local feed store for some chicks or agree to take on some of your neighbor's extra hens, think about what breed of chicken will work best for your situation. Each breed has strengths and weaknesses, such as temperaments and egg-laying abilities. Some breeds do better than others when confined and some are easier to keep in cold climates. Spend some time researching the various chicken breeds to determine the breed or breeds you are most drawn to and will best suit your needs.

Audrey Pavia is an award-winning freelance writer specializing in animal subjects. She's authored hundreds of articles for pet, trade and farm publications, including Veterinary Practice News, Western Horseman, Hobby Farms, Chickens, Urban Farm, and Dogster magazines.