



BACKYARD CHICKENS

You're ready to get cracking with backyard chickens...

So what comes first, the chicken or the egg? As a first-time keeper of the coop the answer to this timeless question is easy – you'll need to start with a few chickens!

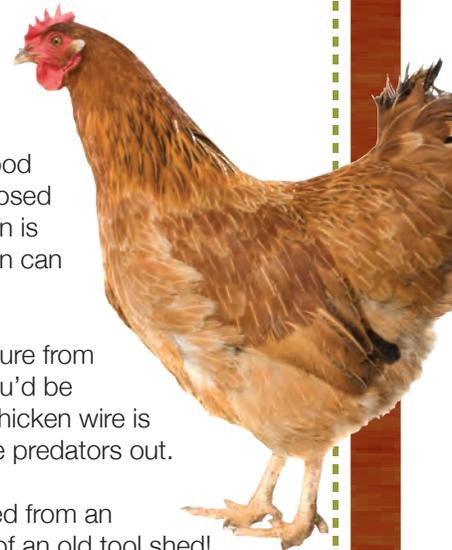
Most folks start with baby chicks or pullets (teenagers) to enjoy maximum egg production. Before you choose, check with city by-laws to verify how many chickens are permitted in your area. Many cities don't allow roosters, and for good reason! Who wants to wake up at 5am to 'cock-a-doodle-doo' every morning? Once you've committed to having a flock of chickens here's a few tips to get you started:

1 HOME SWEET HOME

All chicken coops need 4 things – nesting boxes with plenty of hay, a place for food and water, a roosting bar (chickens love to roost at night), and access to an enclosed outdoor area to scratch and peck the ground (minimum 4 square feet per chicken is needed). If your property is enclosed by a fence beware that a lightweight chicken can easily clear 4-feet so you may need to make some adjustments.

Your chicken coop doesn't need to be a fancy chalet, but it does need to be secure from predators (and family pets). And it's necessary to close them up tight at night. You'd be surprised at how persistent a raccoon can be once it gets the smell of supper. Chicken wire is great for keeping chickens in but you might need something stronger to keep the predators out.

Coops can be purchased from the local feed store, bought second-hand, shipped from an online supplier, or built from scrap wood. Get creative - you can even make use of an old tool shed! For an easy, affordable option see the Portable Chicken Mini-coop Plan.



2 WHAT BREED?

Raising chickens for eggs or meat? The breed you get depends on your answer. Some breeds can be raised for both but you'll get better egg production or tastier meat if you focus on one or the other. Want prolific layers? Few outperform the Leghorn breed for white eggs, Rhode Island Red for brown. Live in a cold climate? Try the hardy Buckeye. Have children? Choose friendly breeds such as the Buff Orpington or Red Sex Link.

There are hundreds of breeds – each one developed for a specific purpose. So do your research and choose the one that best suits your needs. Check the Mother Earth News Hatchery Finder, then contact your local feed store or go online to have a few chicks delivered by mail.

CHICK-TIP – if you start with chicks don't think they can head straight to the coop. They need to be kept warm inside under a heat lamp, starting at 95 degrees the first week and lowering the temperature by 5 degrees per week until reaching 70 degrees. Once chicks are feathered out, after about 8-12 weeks old, and able to withstand night temperatures, they can be safely moved to an outside coop.

3 NUTRITION AND WATER

Baby chicks start with 'chick starter', which is formulated to help them grow. Once they are 20 weeks, or have laid the first egg, they can transition to 'layer feed', available as pellets or in crumble form. Free feeding is best, and your chickens will love the occasional treat like cracked corn or dried mealworms.

If you're in an urban setting where chickens are not the norm, find out where horse owners get their feed, or ask your pet store to order it in for you. Many people offer their chickens fruit and veggie scraps – however some items are not good for their digestive system so do your research before they chow down.



Water is very important for chickens – make sure it's available 24/7. Lack of access to fresh, clean water may result in decreased egg production (not to mention it's inhumane). If you plan ahead you can get their food and water set up correctly so it's relatively low maintenance.

4 FREE RANGING

Hens love to free range, and eating a variety of greens makes for tastier eggs. But whether you're raising chickens in your urban backyard, on a homestead, or a farm miles away from neighbors, one thing remains certain: everything likes to eat chicken. From raccoons and hawks to neighbors' dogs, be sure their daytime space is just as protected as their nighttime haven.

As you spend time with your flock you'll notice their funny antics and unique ways of communicating. Chickens are very social creatures, but if you want to add a new chicken to the flock it's best to add several at one time -- you will learn quickly that birds of a feather really do flock together.

5 HEALTHY HENS

The best way to ensure happy hens is to make sure they have a happy home. Take care of the basics, and be sure to collect the eggs everyday so there's room for more. A cracked egg can lead to problems if a hen gets the taste for them.

It's also wise to remove all the bedding from inside the coop, at least once per month and thoroughly aerate it with a rake. This reduces buildup of pathogens, ammonia, and keeps your hen's feet clean (especially important in wet climates). Don't forget -- old bedding makes superior compost, so keep a compost bin handy. For more tips on maintaining a healthy flock check out <http://www.backyardchickens.com/a/maintaining-a-healthy-flock>



There's so much more to know about raising chickens, but this is plenty to get you started. Chickens help complete the urban sustainability life cycle – they'll eat fruit and veggie scraps, offer fertilizer for the garden, keep bugs under control, and provide the most delicious eggs you've ever tasted. And.....you'll soon become the most popular neighbor on the block – once people try your farm fresh eggs they'll be begging for more!

Sources:

Motherearthnews.com
Backyardchickens.com
Biofueloasis.com

