

RAISING YOUR BACKYARD HENS

Raising backyard chickens will require sound animal care and management, including proper planning, careful management, a biosecurity (disease prevention) plan to control diseases, and a complete and balanced feeding and watering program.

Why Have Backyard Chickens

Raising backyard chickens can provide a means of producing food products at home as well as an opportunity for young people to learn responsibility for the caring of animals. Production of eggs is not always economical. Each individual should consider his or her own economic situation before starting to raise backyard chickens.

Laws

Make sure you follow the guidelines set forth by the Metropolitan Government of Davidson County before getting started in raising your backyard chickens. If you have questions contact the Environmental Health Services at (615) 340-5653, or visit the Metro Department of Health website at <http://www.health.nashville.gov>. Failure to follow these guidelines may result in the removal of your chickens.

What Kind of Chickens?

Obtaining the best chickens possible will help you get off to a good start. You will want to obtain your chickens from a reputable breeder. Also, be aware that it is not unusual for chicks to die during shipment, something you might want to keep in mind, especially if you have small children, before you open the shipping carton.

Egg production – White Leghorns are a very popular breed for laying white eggs. Rhode Island Reds and Buff Orpingtons are popular breeds that lay brown eggs. These breeds can lay approximately 200 eggs per year per hen.

Hen House Requirements

You must provide a shelter for your chickens. Chickens should be comfortable while in your care. A chicken house protects them from the weather. It also keeps out rodents, wild birds, and large animals. Housing equipment does not need to be elaborate or expensive. There are, however, several factors which must be considered in order to grow healthy and vigorous chickens. These factors include the following:

- **Space.** Each chicken should have plenty of room to grow in the chicken house. The Metro law requires two square feet per bird in the hen house and six square feet per bird in the enclosed run.
- **Ventilation.** The amount of ventilation needed depends upon the season. During the summer, keeping chickens cool is very important. Opening windows in your chicken house will increase air movement. During cold weather, ventilation should be from the south side of the chicken house.
- **Light.** When raising chickens for egg production, it is recommended that the house have artificial lighting, if possible. Chickens need about 14 hours of light daily.
- **Temperature.** Chickens do not need artificial heat, unless the house is poorly insulated. Keep the chicken house free from drafts. If the birds are exposed to extreme cold, they will stop laying, and their combs and wattles may freeze. In the summer the chicken house floor should be covered with at least 3 inches of dry litter (wood shavings or sawdust). When the weather starts to get colder, gradually add fresh litter until it is at least 4 to 6 inches deep. The built-up litter provides a warm, dry floor. Stir the litter often to keep it in good shape. If an area becomes caked or wet, scoop out the wet litter and replace with fresh.
- **Access to Feed and Water.** Chickens should always have a fresh supply of commercial feed containing at least 16% protein. Provide clean fresh water at all times. Without fresh, clean water, hens will not eat and will stop laying.
- **Roosts.** Equip your chicken house with roost pole(s) for the hens to perch on at night. Roost poles should be 1.5 to 2 inches in diameter, horizontally mounted and long or numerous enough to allow about a foot of space per bird. The bottom roost, if you have more than one, should be 18-24 inches above the floor. Wood dowels work well for this purpose; plastic can be too slippery for the birds to grip well. A removable manure box under the roosts will aid in keeping the hen house clean.

- **Nest.** Provide one nest for every four hens. Keep clean nesting material, such as wood shavings, in the nest at all times. Place nests 18-20 inches above the floor. Individual nests should be 10-14 inches wide, 12-14 inches high and 12 inches deep. Providing a perch below the entrance of the nest will help keep the nest clean.
- **Brood box.** If you start your flock with chicks, you will need a brood box to keep them warm and safe before they are mature enough to live in the hen house. Chicks are temperature sensitive, so be prepared to modulate it carefully. The timing of the move to the coop depends on the breed and the individual, but a good rule of thumb is to wait until they are fully feathered. Consider keeping them indoors until the nighttime low is above freezing, or providing heat lamps in the coop. Penning them in the coop for a day or two before allowing them the full run of the enclosure will help them understand where they're supposed to go at night.

Egg Care

Most eggs are laid with a clean shell. To keep eggs clean, change the nesting material often. Gather eggs at least twice a day. Dirty eggs can be buffed clean with an emory cloth. Eggs should be gathered and refrigerated promptly. Eggs can be kept in the refrigerator for up to 6 weeks. Thin-shelled or misshapen eggs are not unusual, especially in young birds. In mature birds, thin shells can be a sign of dietary issues, often low levels of calcium.

Culling

Culling is the removal of sick or injured birds from the flock. Injured or sick birds must be separated from others as soon as you notice them. Culling will reduce feed costs and may prevent the spread of disease. Towards the end of the first year of production, some hens may stop laying. It is normal for hens that have been laying for 12-24 months to take a rest.

Be Biosecure

Follow the APHIS guidelines of *Look, Report, Protect*. Look for signs of disease (like runny droppings, wheezing, or droopy birds), report to a veterinarian and protect your flock by washing hands thoroughly after handling birds. Also, be sure to disinfect shoes with bleach (10% solution) if you have visited someone else's chicken house or if they visit yours. It is a good idea to have waterproof "chicken house shoes" that can be bleached (10% solution) for this reason. For more information visit on-line at <http://healthybirds.aphis.usda.gov>

Keep It Clean To Prevent Disease

Though diseases in small backyard operations are less common than in concentrated feeding operations, illness can still strike. Keeping the chicken house clean, including the feeding and watering areas, is the key to preventing disease. Poultry owners should also know the signs of diseases in the birds so that they can take immediate action. A reference on poultry disease can be found at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ps044>. In case of medical needs, contact a veterinarian.

Be A Good Neighbor

Remember that your neighbors may not be as fond of chickens as you are. Keeping your hens in a clean, predator-free chicken house is best. Be aware your birds may attract neighborhood children. Be sure to supervise whenever children are involved. Children can be taught how to handle chickens gently, if the need arises, but don't forget to have children wash their hands every time after handling birds.

RESOURCES:

University of Tennessee Extension, George M. Killgore, County Director, <http://utextension.utk.edu/davidson>

University of Tennessee Publication PB915 "Growing Blue Ribbon Pullets"

UCAN: <http://ucanNashville.org>