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Raising Your Own Chickens

By Leonard Cordell

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About the Author

Leonard Cordell has always liked chickens since he and his widowed mother lived with relatives who had about twenty for a couple of years when he was a young child.

Leonard kept chickens for several years but had to leave them behind when he moved into an apartment last year. The new owner of the property intended to remove the chickens but he kept them as an interest for his children and a source of quality eggs after catching some of Leonard’s enthusiasm about them.

The author has helped many people to get started with their own chickens and their feedback has been highly positive. Now, Leonard has used their experiences and questions, as well as his own knowledge and research, as a hands-on basis to produce this ebook.

Leonard says that he aimed the ebook at the beginner but believes there may be some tips and short-cuts which can be useful to more experienced people too.

“This ebook will shorten the time which readers need to prepare and then set up their chickens and also help them to avoid many mistakes which we had to learn to cope with through experience.”

I believe that keeping chickens is a great hobby but I keep the book balanced by explaining the work involved and many of the potential problems so that readers are well prepared.

Most children love to be around chickens and they are a great way to get them outside and getting some exercise.

I’ve also learned that watching your chickens going about their business is also a great way to unwind after a hard day at your job.

Why Keep Chickens?

Until about fifty years ago, it was fairly common for people to keep a few chickens in a pen in their backyard to provide eggs for their family’s breakfasts.

Many of these families also killed and cooked one from time to time to give the family a delicious change from their usual diet.



They would tell you that the bird which they raised themselves and the eggs which it had produced was a lot tastier than those available from any store. If you got the opportunity to sample the meat or eggs, you would probably have agreed.

From that point, the number of people keeping their own chickens reduced sharply.

The land in our cities has become too valuable for use as poultry farms or other similar pursuits. Many larger areas have been sub-divided into ever smaller parcels for residential or industrial use.

Neighbors became less easy-going about the noise, smell and other factors which they were exposed to.

More people had to commute to the work which reduced the time which they had for these activities. Traffic became much heavier and there were more options for people to fill their spare time with.

It became more difficult and less enjoyable to have your own “egg ranch”.

Many people started raising chickens on small blocks of land which they bought in rural areas.

But, there has been a growing interest in keeping chickens in recent years.

Many people prefer the taste of home-grown eggs and chicken meat.

They may also be influenced by reports of disease outbreaks which are sometimes linked to some commercial producers. To be fair, this usually involves a very small number of the commercial producers – most are

very careful to meet or even exceed the regulated standards which govern their industry to protect the consumers and their own reputations.

Be aware that diseases which affect commercial producers are also potential problems for hobbyists. I'll give you some suggestions about reducing these risks later in this ebook.

Some people are also strongly influenced to consider starting their own flock by the increasing use of intensive farming methods which they don't agree with.

Some are like me and decide to keep chickens after having early positive experiences with chickens owned by older family members.

Chickens are still fairly cheap to get and maintenance costs are fairly low after you have set up the housing for your birds and secured the area to keep them in while ensuring that vermin and predators stay out.

Most fowls are suitable for children to help with the care of. This is a great outdoor activity for the children with health and educational benefits.

Your chickens can help to reduce the weeds and bugs in your garden and provide some natural fertilizer.

The Downside of having Your Own Chickens

It is important to realize that having chickens imposes some demands on your time and budget. Consider these factors before you order your chickens and chicken wire. You have to:

- Comply with rules and regulations. This may involve some money as well as time.
- Maintain structures, monitor birds' health and dispose of dead birds and other rubbish quickly and in line with local regulations.
- Keep your neighbors happy. You may have trouble if someone new moves into the area around you even though your previous neighbors were okay.
- Plan any holidays or business trips more carefully or not have them because of the need to have someone look after the flock and maintain the housing etc.

- Difficulty finding a veterinarian with personal experience and interest in poultry. Fees are likely to be relatively high.
- Chickens will be attracted to some things in your garden. I’ve heard about them having a passion for tomatoes and almost anything which is colored red.

They often will just have just a single peck at each tomato as they pass.

One way to stop them scratching your plants out of the garden is to lay wire netting over the ground before you sow the plants.

Can You Keep Chickens?

There are a number of factors that must be given careful consideration before you order your first chickens or fertile eggs.

I'll get through this unexciting but important stuff as clearly and quickly as possible.

That will make it easier for you to work out and decide on the scale of your first chicken adventure, You'll get all the basic information you need to get you started with minimum fuss and stress for you, your family and the livestock.

These are some outside factors which you have to consider before you get started.

Regulations and Restrictions

If you are leasing or renting your home, you will have to check with your landlord about permission to keep chickens.

If you have title to your home, you will still need to do some careful checking before starting to plan your poultry project.

Check the title for any restrictive covenants which may ban the keeping of any particular type of animals or specific activities such as breeding or farming them (which would prevent you keeping poultry).

These restrictions are usually put into the original title to reduce the possibility that someone might upset their neighbors or do anything on their property which might tend to affect the value or ambience of the properties in the area.

If you are in the clear in that regard, your next step should be to check with the local authorities about bylaws or other regulations which may restrict your ability to keep poultry.

Some of the factors which the authorities try to cover in their rules are designed to ensure that:

- The birds' health and welfare is protected.
- There are no problems with rats, mice and other vermin.

- There is no disturbance of other residents through noise, smell or other factors.
- The presence of the poultry does not have any negative effect on value of surrounding properties.
- Rubbish is kept to a minimum and it is disposed of properly without delay.
- All buildings, fences etc are well built, have good appearance and comply with regulations.
- Flocks are not commercial in nature unless appropriate licenses are obtained in advance.

This may require that you:

- Apply for a permit
- Have plans drawn up and submitted for approval
- Have your premises inspected
- Pay specified fees

I did a quick scan through a search engine for relevant laws in the U.S.A. The variety of rules and restrictions is enormous.

In many areas, some people are ignoring regulations to keep chickens and other creatures because “everyone is doing it”.

If this is happening in your area, carefully consider what it might cost you to have to dispose of your flock along with any equipment (not to mention any fines) if the authorities started to enforce the rules and you were caught.

In some areas, some people have set up a citizens’ group to lobby the authorities and try to sway public opinion within their community get the rules loosened or dropped. That sounds like a good and less stressful way forward than ignoring the rules and worrying about the authorities knocking on your door.

Dealing with Bureaucrats

This is what I keep in mind when dealing with people who administer regulations of any kind. This is **not** legal or any other kind of professional advice. Your experience may well be different.

- Don't pay out any money for equipment and supplies before you have something specific in writing from the authorities that your project has a strong chance of approval.
- Professional advice may be costly but that could help you to get better results more quickly and you save money, time and stress. Professional advisers build their personal networks with individuals in the bureaucracy and they can sometimes get things done with much less time and stress.
- Whenever you are talking with somebody about any important matters, get their name, details of their position and how to contact them directly, if you need to, later on.
- Make notes during your discussions. As soon as possible afterwards, while everything is still fresh in your mind, review your notes and ensure that you have recorded everything that might be important later on.
- Send the people you had discussions with an email or a letter with the details of what you remember of the discussion. If they disagree with anything you send them, they should let you know as soon as possible. This *might* reduce later arguments.
- Always treat everyone as you would like to be treated.
- Never ever lose your temper.
- Do not attempt to score points in any discussion. You may have to deal with that same person in another matter months or years later.
- Keep all confidential material confidential.
- Don't give up on something you really want too soon. But, review the situation and possible outcomes from time to time. Be prepared to put something aside until perhaps it is more likely that you can

get what you want. People in administrative positions change after a while and the next person in a position might be more cooperative.

Good Luck!

Neighbors

You need to carefully consider how your neighbors might feel about you having poultry on your property before you start your project.

Their objections may be valid or based on incorrect information. Either way, you should carefully check with every one of them before approaching the authorities to get permits etc.

Some potential problem areas are smell, noise, vermin, damage to property or its perceived value and health concerns.

Smell is not entirely avoidable. All you can do is keep it to a minimum and offer them a chance to discuss your plans before you proceed.

Roosters are the main source of noise. Many areas have specifically banned all roosters even if they allow residents to keep hens. But, you cannot say there will be no noise even in the absence of roosters because hens do make some at various times during the day. This can be when they lay an egg, interact with other fowls or are upset about something.

Poultry, their feed and their droppings tend to attract rats, mice and other vermin. You need to be able to demonstrate willingness to installing the best possible level of security and guarantee to deal with any waste and vermin quickly and effectively.

Your chickens will try to escape their allotted areas and can damage other people's gardens or even attack their pets or children sometimes. You should clip a wing of each of your birds and make the housing and especially the fencing as secure as possible.

You will need to convince the neighbors that your flock will be housed in a way that it will not cause any possible effect on the perceived value of their properties or the ambience of the area.

Health concerns are very important. Current information suggests an outbreak of bird flu, for instance, is no more likely if someone gets a flock of healthy poultry in your area if there have not been incidents before.

But, no-one can guarantee that their flock will never be affected by some sort of disease. Point out that you have a local veterinarian with personal experience of treating poultry and you will comply with all requirements and suggestions of state or federal authorities.

Show them that you will use only use new materials, professional standard equipment, have a high standard of cleanliness and get your birds from licensed suppliers.

Despite all this preparation and consultation, you may find some neighbors will be obstructive. Do your preliminary negotiations before you have expended much time or money on the project.

What Type of Chicken to Choose?

There are a wide range of chicken breeds to consider, depending on what you want to use your chickens for.

You need to be aware that some breeds are docile and easily managed, others are more aggressive. Some will fight other birds, especially when there is more than one rooster or cockerel in your flock.

Egg color may be worth thinking about if you intend to sell the eggs because colored eggs can attract a higher price.

Most people find that they cannot sell their eggs for enough to cover the real cost of

production, especially if you have to pay for special licenses and pay tax.



Bantams: These smaller birds are a good choice when you just want eggs for your family and perhaps pets for the children. They are usually easier for children to help take care of.

There are bantams which are smaller versions of current larger breeds while other bantam breeds no longer have a directly related larger breed.

Pekin Bantams and some of the Game varieties are popular breeds for small areas. The **Pekins** do not lay a lot of eggs but some people use them to set on eggs from other hens which do not look after their fertile eggs so well.

Note that the larger variety Game fowls may be aggressive but this is not the same with all of the smaller varieties.

The **Rhode Island Red** (bantam and large fowl) are probably among the most popular of all breeds. They are a good choice for beginners.

Like the Rhode Island, the **Wyandottes** and related varieties are dual purpose, well-tempered and also produce brown eggs.

Others include the Ancona, Wyandottes, Aruacana, the Rhode Island and Houdan (larger than most other bantams) which are all worth considering.

Egg Layers: Some of the most popular breeds for backyard egg production include **Rhode Island**, **Plymouth Rock** and **Wyandotte** but

the **White Leghorn** is regarded as the most widely used breed to for egg production at this time.

Some of these breeds have a reputation for aggressiveness.

The **Black Rock** is a breed which is highly rated for brown egg production and also is good eating after the laying season.

Chickens for Meat: Most hobbyists might kill an occasional bird for the pot but the breeds listed in this section are some which are bred for producing meat more than for their level and quality of egg production.

White Cornish x White Rock: These chickens have been bred by crossing between White Cornish and White Rock breeds probably account for most commercial chicken meat production today but they are not good choices for the small flock owner. They need special care and a special diet.

The **Cornish** which was the basis of the crosses is still popular.

The **Sussex** (available as a large chicken and a bantam which is about one third the size) is very popular and a good type for beginners.

There are many other breeds and many crossed varieties. The best idea is to consult with your State Agricultural support service and also with members of your Poultry Club for advice on breeds which are most successful in your area and those which may cause problems for you.

Where to get Your Chickens

There are a number of sources for you to consider when you are ready to buy your chickens.

Remember, that buying some small chicks is not your only option for starting your flock.

You should decide what is your main purpose having chickens first.

That will help you to focus on the most suitable sources and breeds. This will reduce the time taken and reduce the risk of getting some which, however appealing, may not really match with your goals.

You might want chickens for:

- **Egg production:** The most common reason for keeping a few chickens. I believe that, with reasonable care, you will get eggs with better taste and other benefits as well.
- **Meat:** Producing your own meat chickens gives you confidence about the quality of the birds because you can control their diet and environment.
- **Pets (with the occasional egg):** Some breeds are excellent pets and you'll have the benefit of some delicious eggs too!
- **Showing and breeding:** If this is part of your focus, you could become very busy with the number of shows and other events in most parts of the country. This is not a cheap hobby but it is absorbing for the participants.
- **Making or saving money:** I've put this at the end of the list because it can be difficult to get back all the money you put into setting up and maintaining your flock. To make a viable business from raising chickens, you must have extensive knowledge and experience and a good sized flock along with the financial and other resources to match the large enterprises which would be your main competition. Or, you could specialize in something where people are prepared to spend money for what you produce.

I hope that has helped you to get a clearer idea of what you really want and what is practical for your personal situation and environment.

Now, we'll look at the most common places to get some leads to your ideal source with some of their potential advantages and disadvantages.

Poultry Clubs etc: These groups would be my first recommendation unless you already have an experienced and helpful poultry owner among your close friends or relatives. Even then, you will benefit from getting a variety of views and drawing from a wider range of experience.

Even the views of other inexperienced poultry owners like yourself will be helpful to you. They are usually very eager to share the knowledge which they have already acquired and this will save you having to ask all of the most common questions yourself.

The clubs fees are usually very reasonable and probably well worth it for the advice and support which you get from the other members.

But, many clubs have other benefits as well. This may include discounts on supplies from certain dealers, a special club rate for veterinary services from a particular practice, informative talks and demonstrations from local or visiting experts and national and regional shows and conferences. You may even be able to get discounted travel and accommodation when attending the conferences which can be a good excuse to take your partner and make a holiday of it at the same time.

The other options in this Chapter are in no special order of preference or importance.

Your local newspaper: The first place most people look. You might get some bargains but there are often advertisements which an experienced person would realize were worthless but could lure an inexperienced beginner to waste their time and money. You will find some people that want to dispose of their flock because they cannot keep them any longer and maybe some that want to make a last few dollars from exhausted intensively farmed chickens too.

Even when you buy birds from an honest person who has to get rid of them, you cannot be completely sure that you are not taking over some unseen problems as well. This is not a good idea when you are just beginning to learn about and keep your own poultry.

Markets, shows and auctions: These are another popular way to find a variety of suppliers in one place where you can compare their different offerings.

Remember that when large numbers of poultry are gathered together, there is some risk of infection. Ask your vet for suggestions about precautions you should take. They change as more research is done and new problems and possible solutions appear. Your vet will have access to the most current information.

Always disinfect your vehicle and footwear after visiting these venues.

General sales and auctions are a pot-luck option. You cannot expect to get any guarantees about the offerings.

If you get to an auction which is limited to particular breeds, you may be on firmer ground because the birds should be from recognized suppliers and inspected before being offered.

Bird rescue groups: These organizations do wonderful work to give some of the birds no longer wanted in the intensive egg farms a short but happier retirement. But, you cannot be sure what problems, if any they may bring with them or whether you will actually get any eggs from them. I’ve bought a few birds from them but kept them apart from my regular stock as pets.

Nationally branded birds: These are a great, worry free option if you can afford the outlay.

The national suppliers, who register their brands, guard their reputation as it is worth money to them. They have local agents in many areas that can provide you with advice about which of their stock is most suitable for your area and purpose.

What to Start with

The first two options listed here have a great benefit for breeders that have young children. They can follow the process of development from egg to chicken and then the production of eggs so they don't believe as some children apparently do that eggs grow in those strangely shaped trays!

Fertilized eggs: This option is for experienced poultry keepers who have some equipment. I don't recommend it for the inexperienced because it requires special equipment and more work than the other options.

You can build a brooder and other bits but this requires you to have the necessary skills and time or to buy in the equipment.

There are also many points to keep in mind when deciding which producer to get your egg stock from. You need to be sure that the eggs you get are from the same stock as pictured and that the pictures are of the supplier's own birds.

If you cannot collect the eggs yourself, you will not be able to inspect the premises and the condition of the chickens there.

You will also need to pay premium postage rates to spare the eggs the mechanical sorting machine.

You will need to amend your daily schedule to the needs of the eggs and the chickens which are produced from them.

You can and should ask for clarification about anything which you are told or read in their advertisement which you don't understand. If they don't give you a straight answer, start looking elsewhere.

Day old chicks: If you start with chicks, you'll have to have their feed and accommodation ready before they arrive.

Although hatcheries routinely sex the chicks before sending them to customers but no process is 100% accurate and you may find one or two males in the batch you get. If you do not have permission to keep a rooster and cannot find another home for any you get such as a local petting zoo, you will have to cull them.

If you have children that visit the chicks from time to time, it's a good idea to have someone check for and remove any dead or injured chicks before each visit.

The chicks will require a carefully controlled level of warmth through their first four weeks. They also need to be restrained from wandering away from the heat source or going anywhere that they might be grabbed by vermin who particularly relish young chicks above anything else.

Security must be very good and checked constantly.

Check if the eggs need to be vaccinated and, if so, get your vet to show you the procedure. It is fairly simple and you will reduce your costs if you don't have to get the vet's staff to do all your eggs or chicks.

Make sure that plenty of clean chick crumb is always available and a separate feeder with clean water. Ask your vet if you need to add any medicine to their water.

Six week old birds: Getting these older birds saves you the early stages of their development and could be a good choice for the first members of your flock. They are not ready to lay but the childhood stage is almost over.

Point of lay: These birds are ready to start or may have already produced a few eggs. If you got them delivered over a significant distance, they may look sick but will just need some time to settle down after the stress of their journey.

Please don't let your children visit the grown birds until they are over that stress.

Feed the Birds

My preference has been for a properly formulated quality commercial mixture with all the necessary vitamins.

Your young chicks may need a different starter mix, depending on whether you are raising them for egg production (regular starter mixes) or for meat production.

These may sometimes contain other ingredients which help to protect the birds from diseases as well as some to promote growth or other desirable factors.

I'd avoid anything which contains the last category, but the protective ingredients are a good idea in my opinion and a great time saver.

Check what your vet recommends or advises against.

Chickens must have 24/7 access to adequate clean water.



Always clean up and remove any spilled seed which may have been contaminated by droppings or other substances.

Mop up water because fowls don't do well with wet feet and feathers.

Also, they will drink water anywhere they find it and the results may be bad.

Your birds need access to both soft grit (oyster shell) and flint grit. Oyster shell assists their production of quality egg shell.

Flint git is essential for breaking up the bird's feed in their crop.

Never feed anything which is starting to spoil.

Avoid giving your birds any meat at all.

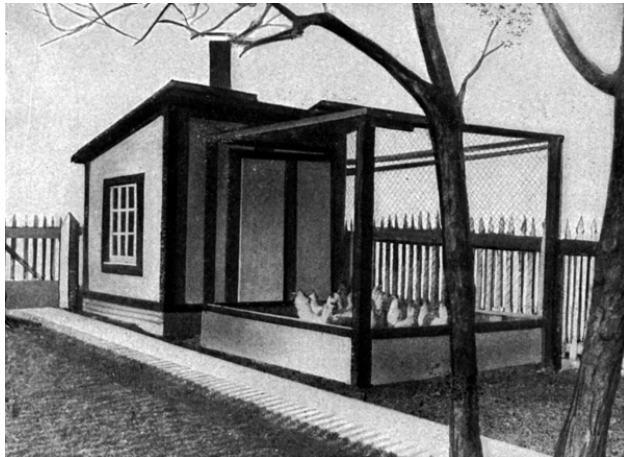
Avoid supplements which are promoted as "energy boosts" or "immunity improvers" Unless provided by your vet to deal with a specific problem in your flock.

Don't feed them dog or cat food ever.

A well-balanced diet with fresh greens supplementing a quality commercial mix is best in my opinion.

That probably won't work out more expensive than a feed you put together yourself when the time you need to collect ingredients, measure them and carefully mix them is taken into consideration.

Housing Your Chickens



Your chickens need a house of their own. They don't make good house pets. One of the main reasons is that they cannot store their urine and all their droppings are usually very smelly.

If you have other pets such as dogs and cats, you need to

keep them separated, not just supervised.

The cost of constructing or buying and setting up an adequate shelter for your flock, even if it is just a couple of birds when you start, is likely to be a significant part of your poultry budget.

You need to consider the likely maximum number you will have on the premises at one time when you are planning your original setup. It is often less expensive in terms of both time and money to build bigger at the start rather than to have to make significant changes when you are also looking after a flock at the same time.

You can convert a shed which you already have for the purpose if you have one but you will also have to budget for some significant additional work to make it suitable for its new occupants.

Their main shelter needs to be sufficient to protect them from wind, extremes in temperature and predators of all kinds.

The growing popularity of free range poultry production, due in part to a reaction against some intensive farming practises, many people want to go that way but it is a method which needs careful planning and involves more work and time than if you use an enclosed run for the birds.

Whatever methods you adopt, the boundary of your property must be secure to keep your birds in and pests and predators out.

This security needs to be maintained to its original standard. Vermin will enlarge the smallest gap and take advantage of anything which you overlook.

Use wire netting to stop birds and vermin crossing the boundary of the area where you keep them.

Make sure that you dig out the soil and put the wire down at least twelve inches or more beneath the soil surface. Bend the wire at an angle out from the poultry enclosure to make it more difficult for any vermin or dogs to dig through or under the wire.

Dogs are a major problem with poultry and no dog should be trusted with them.

I don't recommend that you buy pre-owned housing because of the potential risks with poor design or inheriting diseases or other potential health problems.

This section will give you some suggestions for housing your birds which could be useful whether you want to construct your own, build from a plan or kit or pay someone to build it for you.

There are many proprietary pre-made structures available as plans or kits which can be purchased. You can even buy housing for your birds which is delivered fully assembled in some areas.

Some factors which must be taken into account are explained below.

Free Range Considerations.

This is great for the birds but there are many things which can change your dream to a nightmare. I am not saying. "Don't do it.'

Just be aware of these factors and ensure that you cover all bases so that there are no nasty surprises for you, your birds or your neighbors later on.

I think a shed for the birds to roost in at night and be protected from predators, two or four legged and also birds, is essential.

The free range area needs to be inspected to ensure that there is nothing which might harm the birds. This is one of the reasons that they will need more supervision if allowed to roam.

The flock must have their wings clipped.

The flavour of the birds and the eggs will probably be stronger – it’s nice but some people take a while to get used to it.

Check that the breed you select is suited to roaming and at least partly fending for itself.

You will still need to provide some feed for the birds. This should be provided in secure feeders so that you can monitor the amount which is being consumed and avoid, as far as possible, leaving any in the open which could attract vermin.

Predatory birds can be a serious problem as well as the animals that like chickens and eggs as part of their diet.

A mid-way alternative to a large shed with or without a run is to have a small portable run which can be moved around a grassed area.

This give sections of the open area time to recover between those periods when they are being used for the flock and gives the birds fresher vegetation to forage in.

All chickens need roosts which should be protected from the weather.

Some chicken varieties have ankle feathers and other decorations which need to be kept dry.

Some of the pre-built units have features which appeal more to people who own chickens and are not really necessary or sometimes even desirable for the birds’ welfare.

The Basics of Good Housing

If you are considering buying a plan or a kit, these are the main things you and your birds actually need.

Space: The birds need enough space for getting at least a little exercise and for them all to roost comfortably at the same time. You must avoid having the roosts set up so some bird’s droppings will fall onto other birds.

You also need enough space to get around the enclosed area and the run without having to crawl or hit your head.

Keep in mind that you will need enough space while handling the birds, eggs, feed and equipment.

Check how easy it will be for you to access the laying boxes. Some designs have the boxes attached to the outside of one wall and you can collect the eggs and check any birds in them by opening a lockable flap from outside.

No Gaps: Make sure there are no gaps in the walls or floor, especially around the edges which might be used or even enlarged by vermin or predators.

Also, ensure that vermin and predators cannot use the drains or pipes to get to the birds or their feed.

If there are small gaps under the roosting area, rats and mice will quickly set up home in them and then be much harder to eliminate.



Water run-off: All sections should have a sloping roof to take water and snow away from the chickens resting area.

Make sure that the water which falls from the roof will drain away properly.

If the water collects in the chickens’ exercise area, the birds will get dirty. The water and the mud will increase the chance of them becoming sick.

Temperature: Keeping the structures cool enough for your chickens in Summer is equally important.



Feeders: All feeders and other equipment should be of modern, rugged construction.

Feeders need to be checked daily. Any damaged feeders or ones which can be raided by vermin should be replaced.

Feed should always be kept in secure containers.

If you give your birds clumps of vegetation, always suspend it from above their run. If you scatter it on the ground or floor,

you will find it difficult to remove the scraps and maintain cleanliness, so birds may develop diseases or other problems.

Always remove feed which is not likely to be consumed in a short period before it starts to deteriorate.

Lighting, especially sunlight, is essential for your birds. Set up your housing so that some direct light gets in every day but make sure nothing else can get in.

Good ventilation will make the shelter cooler in Summer and more pleasant all year round.

The ventilation should reduce any possibility of damp or mould developing and reduce odours.

Good drainage is essential for the housing and also outside it to avoid health problems for you and your birds.

But, ensure that vermin and predators cannot use the drains or pipes to get to the birds or their feed.

These precautions will reduce the possibility of health problems for your flock and also for people that eat what you produce.

But, your own eternal vigilance and constant care about hygiene and the well-being of the flock is your best protection.

Your birds need and deserve some exercise every day.

You need to keep a couple of cages, at least, on hand so that you can isolate a sick bird and transport it to the veterinarian and also for collecting or delivering birds.

Always thoroughly clean and disinfect any cages you use and don't share them unless someone has an emergency.

Then, it will be better to replace the cage(s).

Dealing with Vermin

Rodents

Rats and mice are attracted to chickens but their feed is really the target.

Chickens will kill and eat mice and possibly some rats but that can be a problem if the rodents have a disease which can be passed on.

The best tactic is to do everything physically and financially possible to keep the vermin out in the first place.

Putting all feed in secure, covered feeders is a good first step.

A large, aggressive cat can help eliminate mice.



Some of the larger terrier crossed dogs are capable of killing rats but are likely to be injured if there are many encounters. They also should be kept out of the actual areas where the chickens are because they may start on the chickens if they become excited after killing a rat or just because of the chicken scent.

I only ever used traps for rats.

The traps have to be placed where the rats will be caught but not anything else.

A friend used hollow plastic pipe which was too narrow for her chickens to get into. She put the trap in the center of a length of pipe so there was little chance of the trap being dragged out of the pipe by a rat which was not killed outright.

It is better to make the tunnel of natural materials which the rat will be less suspicious of though my friend had reasonable success.

Rats, and mice to a lesser extent, are intelligent. You need to vary the bait which you use to attract them. Peanut butter, cheese and blood and bone were effective for my relatives.

I would not use animal products like blood and bone because it would tend to attract more vermin than you already had and I think cheese would too.

Very small amounts of peanut butter worked for me. Another friend said that mice were strongly attracted to pumpkin seeds but I prefer to eat that myself!

If your chickens or other animals eat a poisoned mouse or rat, they will be poisoned as well, so I do not recommend poison baits unless they are prepared and used by professionals who know what precautions to take.

Always wear rubber gloves, and cover any areas of broken skin if you even might come into contact with a live or dead rat. They are carriers of Leptospirosis, also known as Weil's disease, which is serious and can be fatal. Unfortunately, rats seem to be immune to it.

Reduce Problems

There are some simple precautions which everyone that has poultry can adopt to help to reduce the spread and effects of diseases on both poultry and people.

Housing: Build or buy quality housing to ensure that it is secure against weather and predators as far as possible. Use quality materials and take great care in assembling the housing.

Then, make inspecting your birds’ housing a part of your daily routine.

Pets: Keep your dogs, cats and any other pets separate from your fowls.

If the birds are attacked by the other animals it’s your fault, not theirs. No dog, however well-trained or docile, can be expected to control its natural hunting instincts forever if its nose is full of the scent of fresh chicken all the time.

Don’t let your fowl mix with other birds, either wild or from other flocks. Wild birds are likely to carry diseases which can be dangerous for both your chickens and the humans which come into contact with them.

If your birds are loose on your property during the day, inspect the area regularly to keep it as clean as possible.

Always lock your flock away every night. Use sufficient security to protect them from birds and animals as well as human predators.



Count them daily and do a visual check of their condition when they are in their housing to get early warning of any potential health problems before they become advanced.

Keep all feed covered so that it is protected from wild birds and vermin.

If you provide green feed for your flock and do not let them find their own, always suspend it in bunches well clear of the floor of their pens so it does not become contaminated by droppings or other materials.

Make sure that your birds’ water supply is fresh and clean at all times.

Keep new birds separate from your main flock for up to four weeks after their arrival and check the new ones carefully through that time to try to prevent the introduction of any diseases.

Do the same for at least a week with any birds you bring back from a show or other event. Thoroughly inspect and disinfect the temporary housing which the birds travelled in and perhaps replace it.

Never lend carry-crates or other containers to anyone except if they have an emergency situation. When they are returned, think carefully whether it is worth disinfecting the crates and re-using them or if it might be better to destroy them and get new crates for greater safety.

Don't take your vehicle near other people's poultry or buildings containing poultry. If that cannot be avoided, make sure that you thoroughly check and disinfect your vehicle, equipment, clothing and especially your boots before using them again.

Have a supply of strong disinfectant and a deep tray which everyone must dip their boots in when entering and leaving the area.

Always ensure that you and every other person wash their hands thoroughly before and after touching your birds or any part of their equipment or housing.

This is a very important lesson to teach young children. They love handling fluffy chicks and, unfortunately, the chicks are prime sources of possible infection through the chicks' feathers and feet being contaminated by droppings and other material.

Keep in contact with your local government agricultural service so that you are aware of new risks and required procedures.

Killing and Clipping Poultry

Any birds which appeared ill before they died or died from unknown causes or are killed by other animals should be discarded in line with local regulations. **Don't ever eat them.**

Clipping and killing birds are essential parts of poultry keeping.

The clipping is necessary to stop birds escaping and must be done annually.

Every flock owner is likely to have to kill one or more birds at some time. You need to learn some method well because it may not always be possible to get a vet or some other experienced person to do it at short notice and the bird may be ill and suffering.

However, many hobbyists pay a butcher or sometimes just a more experienced poultry owner to kill and dress their birds.

There is some physical labor involved in handling the birds. If you have arthritis or other conditions which cause you discomfort when you stand for long periods or have to lift the birds, you may need to get some help, adapt your working methods or pay someone to do it for you.

This removes the problem of having to dispose of the waste and cleaning everything up afterwards.

This saves them a lot of stress and time. The decision is yours. But, please read the rest of this section, get some hands-on training and be prepared to do it yourself when there is no good alternative.

I will give you the best description I can but I suggest that you get some advice from your veterinarian and a demonstration from another poultry owner to supplement this section. Words alone are unlikely to provide you with enough information and confidence to handle these essential tasks so well that the first bird you handle is clipped or despatched with minimum stress.

Clipping Wings

It is common to clip one wing of every bird in domestic flocks to reduce their ability to fly over fences, which could result in serious damage to other people's property or the birds themselves.

The clipping makes them unable to fly steadily but does not cause any permanent damage. In fact, you need to repeat this clipping every year because the clipped feathers can fall out and be replaced by new feathers.

Don't clip feathers on both wings because the bird might learn to compensate for that.

Get someone to hold the bird when you are doing your first few.

Restraining the bird and clipping it will be easier after you have had some practice.

Make sure that your scissors are clean and as sharp as possible. Then, spread the outer feathers of the wing which is closest to you. Just make one cut across the center (or slightly below that point) of the outermost seven or eight feathers.

This will cause only minor discomfort to each bird unless it has just moulted and the feathers are new. Then, it would be best to wait until the feathers are mature and no longer contain any blood.

Dealing with Processors

If you pay a butcher or other processor to kill and dress your birds, here are a few points which you need to check.

Get referrals from happy clients. Don't rely on the size of their advertisements.

Cost: Check the cost of the whole arrangement. There may be charges apart from the basic and obvious ones. Check what forms of payment they will accept.

Confirm that you will get your own birds back. You know that they were clean and disease-free. You don't want other people's problems.

You may have to ask them specifically to return the organs and other parts.

Confirm the best times to deliver the birds to the processor and what time of day you must collect them.

What sort of container do you have to confine the birds in for delivering to the processor?

Do you have to provide bags or other containers for the processed birds?

Processors will not usually cut the birds up for you unless you ask for them to do so. There will probably be an extra fee for this service.

You may have to supply containers which the live birds will remain in until the next day.

Killing a Bird

As well as maintaining hygiene standards and minimizing stress to the birds, you need to be mindful of local regulations about handling and disposing of livestock. This is especially important with regard to proper disposal of the carcass or any bits you are not going to eat and other materials. It cannot usually be put in with your usual domestic waste.

Remove the birds to a separate enclosed area at least twelve hours before you intend to kill them. Be careful when catching them to avoid any possibility of bruising the flesh and to keep the birds as calm as possible.

The best time is probably the early evening. Then you can catch and kill the birds in the early morning before they are fully awake.

Give them water but no food so that their crops are emptied. Any material in the crop when they are killed might go bad and cause problems.

Some people dust the birds after catching them with lice powder so there are no lice which might hop on to you when the birds are killed.

Kill the birds in an area out of sight of the others to minimize distress.

Some religions have specific requirements about the way their fowls should be killed. Always check first with your religious advisor if you have any questions.

My relatives used the traditional small axe. They held the chicken upside down until it stopped struggling, and then put the chicken's head on a block of wood.

That was fairly quick but the cones or shackles are more common today. They let you suspend the chicken over a waste bin so that the blood will drain out rather than splatter over the whole area and you!

Dislocation

This method does not need any special equipment. The basic procedure is simple, but it is not something which everyone would feel comfortable about doing, especially the first time.

If you intend to use this method, I suggest you get a demonstration from an experienced person who can help you ensure a quick kill on your first attempt.

Lift the bird upside down by holding its legs in your weaker hand. If necessary, gather the wings with your other hand and pass them to the hand which is holding the legs.

Lay the bird across your legs and grasp its neck with your stronger hand.

Draw the head down and twist it back until you hear a click.

Cones and Shackles

These simple devices are used for restraining the bird while you kill it by cutting the jugular vein and for letting the carcass to bleed out. An average sized bird may take more than ten minutes to bleed out.

The cones and shackles can be bought from a farm supply store. Get one or two of each size you need to accommodate the size of your birds.

You need a large waste bin or similar container for the blood to collect in. You will need running water and probably a hose to wash the area down.

Be aware that it is likely that there will be some smell remaining in that area for some time despite your best efforts to clean it thoroughly.

Lift the bird upside down by its legs and either secure its feet to the shackle or put its head down into the cone.

Use a knife to either cut into the neck from the front or insert the knife between the bone and the jugular, then cut through the vein. You can use heavy garden shears. Just be sure that your instrument is sharp and you do not cut your own fingers.

There are also various tools available from poultry suppliers for killing the birds.

Plucking

The best time to pluck the bird is immediately after killing it.

If you are ready to pluck the bird straight away, you can probably cold-pluck the birds but will need hot water for cleaning the equipment and the whole area.

If you use hot water for loosening the feathers, you might need some changes of water as it becomes cool and dirty.

The water needs to be about 140 degrees F to loosen the feathers.

Just put the bird in for a few seconds. Then, remove it and try some of the feathers. If they are still firmly stuck, dip all the feathered areas for another few seconds.

If the bird starts to cook, it could be risky to eat after the rest of the processing.

Make sure that any electric cords and connections are well away from where any water could contact them.

You need to be fully covered so that your clothes are not stained or covered with feathers which may be very hard to remove. Overalls and gumboots are probably best.

Keep the floor area clear or you will have some difficulty clearing away every trace of feathers which will cling to the floor and any clothing or other items.

Hang the bird upside down. Make sure that it cannot swing when you start to remove the feathers or you will waste a lot of time.

Don't try to take too many feathers out at one time.

This is something you will get better at when you have done a few birds.

If the area of skin you are plucking is loose or soft, you may want to stretch it slightly with your other hand so that the skin does not tear as you pull the feathers away.

Pin feathers, which are thick and not fully developed, may need special treatment to get them out. Press a dull flat blade against one side and a finger on the other side. Then, use the other hand to pull it straight out.

Inspect Your Plucked Bird

When you have plucked the bird, lay it on a clean table and check it for any potential problems.

Any birds which have abscesses or tumors must be discarded to avoid serious health risks.

If the bird's liver is not just red/brown, don't eat the bird. Pale or spotted livers can be dangerous.

Birds with wounds or discharges should be discarded.

Important Terms

Broody: When a hen starts to sit on and incubate eggs. Different breeds have a greater or lesser tendency to "go broody".

Candling: This is the traditional method checking for cracks and impurities in eggs by passing them in front of strong light. This used to be done by human operators sitting beside a conveyor belt, who watched for and discarded any doubtful eggs. It is mostly automated now.



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Chook: Australian common term for chicken.

Cockerel: A male chicken less than one year old.

Crop bound: Where food lodges in the crop and is not digested.

Feeder: Container which chickens can get their feed from.

Game: The breeds and varieties which have "game" as part of their breed names are descended from types that were used for cock-fighting which is now, thankfully, illegal.

Grit: There are two kinds of grit which your birds will probably need to be supplied with.

Flint grit is an insoluble type which stays in the bird's crop where it helps to grind the bird's feed into a more digestible form. This type of grit must always be available to your birds. If they cannot get enough, there is a risk that the birds will become "crop bound".

Shell grit is usually crushed oyster shell. This type of grit is digested by your birds and some of the calcium in it is used to ensure strong shells on the eggs which they lay. The diet of some birds may supply them with enough calcium that they don't need a supplement of shell grit but it is usually best to have it available.

Withdrawal Period: The time after a chicken has been given a prescribed medicine when it is legally allowed to sell its meat or eggs again. Always ask your Vet when you get any medicine if there is an advised or legally required withdrawal period involved with its use.

Resources

The Poultry Club of Great Britain

<http://www.poultryclub.org/> The Poultry Club is a long established organization with registered charity status and the mission of recording and protecting the characteristics of common and rare breeds of all kinds of poultry.

The Club maintains the 'British Poultry Standards' and established bloodlines.

Henderson's Handy-Dandy Chicken Chart

<http://www.ithaca.edu/staff/jhenderson/chooks/chooks.html>

This illustrated chart on the web site of the Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York, shows about sixty breeds of chickens with some basic information about varieties, rarity, hen weight, possible origins, egg information, coloring and behavior as well as other factors. Although they say that they only have personal experience with about a dozen of the listed breeds, there seems that a lot of work has been involved in producing the chart.

The level of detail in the chart is impressive and the included links are worth checking.

Chicken Health Chart

http://www.welphatchery.com/poultry_health.asp This chart from Welp Inc's Welp Hatchery gives brief coverage of many conditions which might affect your flock.

Adopt some Chickens

The groups in this section are focused on finding comfortable homes for hens that have been intensively farmed and are no longer required by the owners.

Please Note: These birds can be good pets but because of their age and the strains they have endured are not likely to be prolific egg producers or particularly long-lived. They are often susceptible to stress but may suit you if you have the capacity to give one or more birds a bit of rest after their hard working life in return for companionship and some eggs.

Some producers also offer birds directly after their production of eggs diminishes. Be aware that some of the birds may not ever produce another egg.

These birds need good shelter because their general condition and immune systems may be relatively poor.

All hens deserve a second chance and I hope you will think about supporting an organization in your area but, as with any other body, please do your own due diligence before donating to any particular organization.

United Kingdom

British Hen Welfare Trust

<http://www.bhwt.org.uk/> "The British Hen Welfare Trust (formerly the Battery Hen Welfare Trust) is a national charity that re-homes commercial laying hens, educates the public about how they can make a difference to hen welfare, and encourages support for the British egg industry. Its ultimate aim is to see consumers and food manufacturers buying only UK produced free range eggs, resulting in a strong British egg industry where all commercial laying hens enjoy a good quality life.

The aim of this website is to inspire YOU to help US achieve a better future for the 16 million battery hens currently in cages in the UK.

Founded as the UK's first registered charity for laying hens in April 2005 we have helped tens of thousands of hens enjoy a second chance in life rather than go from cage to slaughter."

U.S.A.

Chicken Run Rescue

<http://www.brittonclouse.com/chickenrunrescue> "Chicken Run Rescue, Minneapolis, MN 55411, provides the birds that are released to it from the Minneapolis Animal Control pounds with temporary shelter and vet care, locates and screens adopters within 90 miles of the Twin Cities and transports the birds to their new homes. Chicken Run Rescue is the only urban chicken rescue of its kind and receives no support* from any other organizations, institutions or agencies and depends entirely on donations

and sales of art merchandise to continue helping chickens. There is a special need for rooster homes. Don't breed or buy- adopt! There are never enough homes for displaced animals".

***Update:** The Animal Rights Coalition <http://animalrightscoalition.com> has generously offered to sponsor Chicken Run Rescue so it can accept tax-deductible donations. More details on the site.

Unfortunately, Chicken Run Rescue only deals with chickens and adopters within 90 miles of their base.

If you are in another area or another country, check the classified advertisements in your local newspaper because people sometimes advertise for people to take their chickens when they have to get rid of them because they are moving or have been keeping them without permission from their landlord or local authorities and have to get rid of them.

You may find similar appeals on the Craigslist classified advertising sites on the Internet. This link shows the web locations of the Craigslist sites internationally: www.craigslist.org/about/sites

The Chocowinity Chicken Sanctuary & Education Center, Inc.

<http://www.chochickensanctuary.org/> We are a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization located in eastern North Carolina.

We give permanent sanctuary to abandoned chickens or chickens in need of a home for some other reason. We offer information on chicken care to individuals and strive to educate the public about the effects of factory farming on the animals, the environment, and health.

[Another eBookWholesaler Publication](#)