

Backyard Chickens

All across the country backyard chickens have got people clucking. Whether they are raised as pets or as a food source, chickens can be very beneficial for backyard gardeners. This fact sheet will offer some insight about how to raise chickens and what you need to know to get started.

Why raise backyard chickens?

There are several reasons why people decide to raise backyard chickens. Some simply like chickens and keep them as pets. Others are interested in knowing where their food comes from and how it is raised, eggs included. Studies have shown that eggs from chickens raised in settings like backyards and pasture areas are higher quality than those typically purchased in a

grocery store. Compared to the official USDA egg nutrient data, eggs from chickens raised in backyards have 1/3 less cholesterol, 1/4 less saturated fat, 2/3 more vitamin A, 2 times more omega-3 fatty acids, 3 times more vitamin E, 7 times more beta carotene, and 4 to 6 times more vitamin D.¹ Chickens can also aid in gardening by providing nutrient rich manure that can be composted to supplement soil and by eating insects that are harmful to fruit and vegetable production.

Getting Started

When getting started with backyard chickens the first step is to make sure they are legal within city limits of your community. Chickens are often regulated at the local level, so it is best to check with your local agencies to make sure your town allows it. Some towns in South Dakota currently allowing backyard chickens include Bruce, Flandreau, Wasta, White, Sioux Falls, and others.

Once you have confirmed that chickens are allowed within city limits then it is time to get started with the basics. Backyard chickens, just like any animal, will require food, water, and shelter. Chickens will also need a source of grit and benefit greatly from an area of dirt where they can dust themselves.

Food

Whether you decide to buy chicken feed or make your own, feeding your chickens can be easy. Bags of bird feed are available at most farm supply stores. Feeds vary depending on what the chicken is being raised for. For example, there are some feeds specialized for egg layers and others for meat birds. It can also be helpful to supplement your flock with scratch grains (also available at farm supply stores) for maximum health and care of the bird. If your birds are allowed access to the outdoors they will also find much of their feed on their own during the spring, summer, and fall by eating insects, weeds and grasses. Chickens also love to eat kitchen scraps like apple cores, banana peels, potato skins and more. Adding oyster shell, which can be purchased where chicken feed is sold can help provide extra calcium needed for egg shell production.



For More Info:

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Water

It is important to keep a constant clean water source available to any animal. Special chicken watering containers can be found at any farm supply store. There are several styles of watering containers which make watering easy and clean. There are also products available which keep the water thawed in the winter time. For very small flocks electric warming dog water dishes work great.

Shelter

Chicken housing can be as simple or as complex as one would like. Small pre-made coops are available online and at many farm supply stores. Chickens should be given no less than 3 square feet of space per bird in their coop.² Chickens have the natural instinct to roost at night, so it is good to provide them with indoor space above ground where they can perch. The floor of a coop should be covered by several inches of soft, organic material such as straw or wood shavings. This litter should be cleaned and replenished frequently to protect the birds from illness and odor.

Chickens are able to endure very cold temperatures, so it is not necessary to heat most coops. In the case of very cold weather (colder than -10°) it can be helpful to provide a heat lamp which can be purchased at a farm supply store. Outdoor roaming space, known as a 'run', is often fenced in to protect from predators and have easy access to the coop. Some towns may require that your run be enclosed by a fence, so be sure to check with local agencies when setting up a run. It can also be helpful to provide chickens with small enclosed areas, or boxes, in the coop for laying eggs. The bottom of the box should be lined with soft material to avoid cracks in shells.

Grit

Grit, or small bits of stone, pebbles, or other material, are essential for any bird's digestion. Grit can be purchased wherever chicken feed is sold, and can be mixed in with their food or be left in a separate dish.

Dusting

Chickens have the natural instinct to roll around in areas of dirt. This practice is known as 'dusting'. Dusting should be encouraged as it helps keep pests like mites at bay.

Picking Out the Right Chicken

Chickens vary greatly in hardiness, appearance, attitude, and egg production depending on the breed. Some breeds, such as Leghorns, Cornish, and Polish, are great at pest control. Breeds like Buckeyes, Brahas and Javas are known for their tolerance to cold weather. It



is important to research different breeds to find out which one is right for you.

It is also important to consider the gender of the bird. Many towns do not allow roosters due to noise. Female chickens, known as hens, will lay eggs whether or not a rooster is present. You can purchase chicks from many farm supply stores or online.

Handling and Safety

Keeping chickens can be a very safe and enjoyable experience when done correctly. Concerns regarding health and safety are to be expected when getting started with a flock. It is valuable to keep in mind that most illness in birds is found when many birds are kept in close quarters, so small backyard flocks are at a low risk. The US Center for Disease control has even stated that diseases such as avian flu are not a human safety danger in small backyard flocks.³ However, remaining diligent with cleanliness and safety is a must.

All areas of coops and runs should be kept clean and free of waste. After handling birds and eggs it is best to wash your hands immediately with soap and warm water. It can be helpful to have shoes, gloves, and clothes that are dedicated to chicken chores. All tools, such as shovels, water containers, and feeders, should be cleaned regularly. It is also not recommended to allow chickens in the house.

Practicing safety when handling eggs produced by backyard flocks is also key. All eggs should be cleaned with warm water. Some chicken owners also like to use a mild soap or vinegar on the outside of the egg to ensure cleanliness. Eggs should also be checked for any cracks or abnormalities. Candling, which is the practice of holding a bright light to the outside of the shell, can help detect minor cracks. If any cracks or abnormalities are detected then the egg should be disposed of.

More Information

This fact sheet provides only a small amount of information that is available regarding the handling and care of backyard flocks. There are several resources available online and in print for the new chicken owner. Some helpful texts include:

- *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens* by Gail Damerow
- *Backyard Poultry Naturally: A Complete Guide to Raising Chickens* by Alanna Moore
- *The Joy of Keeping Chickens: The Ultimate Guide to Raising Poultry for Fun or Profit* by Jenniver Megyesi
- *Backyard Chicken Magazine*, web: www.backyardpoultrymag.com
- *Mother Earth News Magazine*, web: www.motherearthnews.com

There are also several websites that area wealth of backyard chicken information. Some include:

- University of Minnesota's Backyard Chicken Page: www1.extension.umn.edu/food/small-farms/livestock/poultry/backyard-chicken-basics/
- Backyard Chickens website: www.backyardchickens.com

Additionally, many backyard chicken owners find it helpful to have a community of other chicken owners available. Several groups, like the Dakota Rural Action Homegrown Sioux Falls Chapter, host an annual Tour de Coop to encourage chicken conversation and community. There are also several websites and Facebook groups that offer a place for people to discuss the care of chickens.

The following agencies can also offer advice regarding state rules and recommendations for chicken and egg production:

SD Dept. of Health
605-773-3361
800-738-2301
DOH.info.state.sd.us

SD Dept. of Ag
605-773-5425
agmail@state.sd.us



Resources

1. Alterman, Tabitha & Cheryl Long. "Meet Real Free-Range Eggs". *Mother Earth News*. Nov. 2007. Web: www.motherearthnews.com/real-food/tests-reveal-healthier-eggs.aspx. 7 Nov. 2013.
2. Ussery, Harvey. "Incredible Homestead Chickens". *Mother Earth News*. Jan. 2008. Web: www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/best-chickens-for-the-homestead.aspx. 7 Nov. 2013.
3. Center for Disease Control. "Questions and Answers About Avian Influenza". May 2008. Web: www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/qa.htm. 7 Nov. 2013.