

# Successfully Raising a Small Flock of Laying Chickens

## Introduction

Raising a small chicken flock for egg production in the backyard has increased in popularity over the past few years. It can be a relaxing activity, teach youth responsibility, and provide you with eggs to supplement the family food supply.

## General Considerations

- Check all local ordinances, zoning laws, and property association rules to see if you can raise chickens in your area.
- Follow laws and apply for permits if required.
- Roosters are not necessary in a flock for hens to lay eggs.
- Producing eggs in small flocks will always cost more.
- Chickens require daily care and monitoring. Develop a plan for who will care for the birds when you are away.
- Chickens must be fenced in for their own security.
- Manure/litter is a great soil amendment if composted properly.

## Type of Birds

- All chickens will lay eggs.
- Chickens in most small flocks live 8 years, but they can live up to 12 to 15 years.
  - Common heritage type breeds will lay 50 to 100 eggs a year. There is also great variability between strains.
  - Commercial sex-linked hybrids will lay 240 to 280 eggs a year. They are a hardy yet docile bird, great for a small-flock setting.
- Egg shell color is determined by the breed and makes no difference in nutritional value or taste of the egg.

## Feed and Water

- Provide a constant supply of fresh water. Clean out water daily.
- Feed free choice (feed available at all times).
- Store feed in a dry, dark metal container for up to 4 weeks.
- Proper feeder size, settings, and height saves feed.
  - Keep feeder lip at back height.
  - Provide a 3-inch feed space per bird.
  - Only fill feed tray  $\frac{2}{3}$  full.



- Feed a complete ration specific to the bird's age, body type, and state of production.
  - Feed a chick starter diet for the first 0 to 6 weeks.
  - Feed a chicken grower diet from 6 to 18 weeks.
  - Feed a layer ration from 18 weeks on.
  - Supplement oyster shells to older birds.
  - Crack corn and scratch grain should not be fed to chickens. Avoid feeding high levels of human food or scraps.
  - Only chicks under 4 weeks of age should be fed medicated feeds to prevent coccidiosis.

## Proper Cooping

- Build a coop that provides 2 square feet per bird of indoor space.
- Limit drafts and moisture in the coop.
- Make sure predators cannot access the coop. Close birds in securely at night.
- Coop should be easy to access, clean, and maintain; designed to prevent injury to the birds; and provide natural lighting.
- Slippery surfaces will cause leg injuries.
- Use pine shavings or straw for bedding.
- Clean out any wet or compacted litter.
- Maintain the coop.





## Lighting

- Layers require 14 to 16 hours of light daily.
- Add artificial light in the morning, and allow the birds to roost with sunset.
- One foot candle is full light for birds. Use a 25- to 40-watt bulb.
- Do not light adult birds for more than 16 hours daily.

## Nesting Boxes

- Nests should be at least 12 by 12 inches.
- Provide two nests for the first four hens. Then add a nest for every four additional hens.
- Have a 3- to 4-inch lip in the front of the nests to keep nesting material in the box.
- Keep 3 inches of clean pine shavings in the nests.
- Place nests in a darker, secluded area off the floor and away from roosts.

## Roosts

- Provide 6 inches per bird.
- Place roosts 18 to 24 inches above the floor, spaced 1 foot apart, and away from nests.

## Egg Sale Laws

- Sell within 5 days of lay.
- Keep refrigerated at 45°F or lower.
- Do not use cartons from another business.
- Each carton must be labeled: name and address, date of packaging, statement of identity (eggs), net contents (in 3/16-inch letters), “Keep Refrigerated,” and “Unclassified” (unless you weigh the eggs).

## Best Health Care Practices

- Never introduce adult birds into an established flock.
- Never mix different species in the same flock.
- Limit visitors from accessing your pens.
- Practice good sanitation of equipment.
- Practice “all in, all out” when changing flocks.
- Confine birds to a fenced area and limit contact with wild birds and predators.
- Keep rodents, flies & other animals out of the chicken coop and feed.
- Check for parasites monthly and treat if necessary. A dusting area can help prevent external parasites.

## Additional Resources

- Management and care questions: [extension.psu.edu/animals/poultry](http://extension.psu.edu/animals/poultry)
- Disease questions: [vbs.psu.edu/adl](http://vbs.psu.edu/adl)

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