

Keeping pet chickens



Should I keep chickens?

Chickens are great fun! As well as the regular tasty egg supply, they can become very tame and have their own personalities. They are wonderful to watch and really bring the garden to life! Make sure you have the space and time to ensure they are looked after properly, and think about who will care for them if you go on holiday or away for the weekend. Chickens can also be long lived, so think about what you will do when they stop laying eggs.



How many eggs will I get?

Most hybrid chickens will each lay around 260-300 eggs a year. That's around 5 or 6 a week (but some will lay almost every day whilst young). Many hens will stop laying whilst they moult and during the colder weather, and the number of eggs will drop as they get older (and eventually stop). Some pure breed chickens may only lay March-October. The colour of the egg varies with the breed – most lay a light brown egg but other colours include white, pale, tinted, speckled, dark brown and blue/green!

What do I need?

Housing

- **Something to sit on at night** - Chickens need perches to roost on at night. These should be lengths of wooden batten, around 3 to 5 cm wide with rounded edges. There should be enough perching space for all the chickens to comfortably roost at the same time (around 15 cm per chicken), and enough space between perches to let them get up and down without injury. Perch height should be adjusted to suit the size of the birds and nest boxes, and allow easy cleaning.
- **Space** - Chickens will spend most of their time outside except at night and when laying. Basic recommendation is 2sq foot per chicken. A house should be large enough to allow movement and ventilation, but small enough to keep them warm in winter. Most houses come with a recommendation for chicken numbers – check whether they mean bantams or large fowl! Be warned, chickens are addictive and you will want more! (so think about a bigger house)
- **Cost** - The cost of chicken houses ranges from £100-£500+ depending on size, design and workmanship. Be wary of cheap imported houses which may not be sturdy or last very long.
- **Security** - **Don't rely on the door to keep foxes out** – if there is no lock then buy one to put on – foxes can and will open doors (or nest boxes) to get at chickens! They will also dig their way in and find any weak spots so check for strength!
- **Nest boxes** – for laying eggs in!
- **Easy to clean out** – sliding floors, large access hatches etc.
- **Do you need a run?** – Definitely if your chickens aren't going to have free access to the garden or a fenced area all day.



- **Raised or on the ground?** – Off the ground is useful if the area is liable to get muddy, and a raised house will be easier to keep rodent free.

- **Wood or plastic?** – advantages and disadvantages to both – see tables below:

Wooden House

Pros	Cons
Can be painted to the colour you choose	Rots
Traditional appearance	Needs maintenance
Can adapt sheds into hen houses for larger numbers	Can be chewed through by vermin
	Mites happily live in wood



Plastic House



Pros	Cons
Doesn't need maintenance	Modern look
Vermin proof	Smaller than wooden houses
Mites/Lice can't survive in it	Can't usually make at home!
Easy to clean	
Can be made from recycled material	

Bedding

A number of products are commonly used on the house floor: chopped straw can be used for larger numbers of hens and shavings for small numbers. If you are using shavings it is important to buy 'first grade' shavings with the dust extracted. This is available from most country stores and comes in bales. Nest boxes ideally need some soft material in order to make a cosy place in which to lay an egg. Shavings with some straw on top is a good option, although this can sometimes be a favourite hiding place of the red mite (more on bugs later).

Should I let them out into the garden?

If you want to, then do so. Make sure your garden is secure and keep an eye out for neighbouring dogs or foxes. Be aware chickens love to scratch around for bugs, so they will head straight to your flower and vegetable beds and may also scratch up your lawn. An average size garden will usually be ok for 3-6 chickens. If you value your lawn, a fenced off area or run is a good idea. Some shelter, such as that provided by small trees or a purpose-built shelter should be provided. This will help to provide protection from sun and bad weather, and encourage the chickens to explore. Chickens also like dry soil areas where they can dust bathe. Grass should not be allowed to become too long, as long strands can become trapped in the chickens' digestive system.



What about predators in the garden? - Foxes will be the main predators, and a fox can come visiting at any time. Make sure that you have secure fencing, it needs to be dug underground at least 8 inches and the height of the fencing should be at least 5 foot high, preferably 6. Make sure your chickens are shut in when it's dark.

Chickens!

How many chickens do I get?

Chickens are social animals so a single chicken probably isn't a good idea. I'd go for 3 or 4 unless you have lots of space (and can use all the eggs!). You can always get more at a later date. You only need to register them as a flock with DEFRA if you have more than 40 chickens.

Do I need a Cockerel?

Hens don't need a cockerel to be able to produce eggs (unless you want to hatch the eggs for chicks). Cockerels are lovely to look at and it is nice to see a pair or trio including a cockerel, but the associated noise may make you unpopular with your neighbours, so think carefully before buying one.

Where can I buy chickens?

Look in poultry magazines or online, or ask other people with chickens to find a good chicken supplier. There are lots of different breeds available, some more suited to first time chicken keepers than others. Some of the options are:



1. Buy a hybrid chicken at "point of lay" – this is around 16 weeks old, and she should be starting to lay soon. "Hybrid" layer breeds such as Warrens or Blackrocks (left) are generally good layers and easy to care for.

2. Rescue an ex-battery hen. The Battery Hen Welfare Trust re-homes thousands of battery hens each year and has collection points all over the country. These chickens have done nothing other than stand in a tiny cage for their entire lives. Consequently they will be very unfit to begin with and bewildered by the change.

<http://www.bhwt.org.uk/>
www.littlehenrescue.co.uk

or



3. Buy a rare breed or "fancy" chicken or bantam – lovely to look at, in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and temperaments. Some are more likely to become broody. They tend to be more expensive, and be careful which breed you choose if you have little experience. The Cream legbar (on the left) lays a lovely blue egg!



Other options include buying chicks or even eggs and hatching them yourself, but this requires more equipment so needs further research.

Be very wary of buying chickens at livestock markets – they may be cheap but are often carrying disease and even if they look healthy could be incubating problems – especially if you already have chickens at home just waiting to be infected.

Vaccinated or unvaccinated? – Either is ok (small producers often do not vaccinate); just try not to mix vaccinated and unvaccinated birds.

Feeding

What do I feed my chickens?

Most battery hens (and most chickens you will purchase) will be used to having “**layers pellets**” or “layers mash” (I find pellets easier and less messy). This is the easiest food to feed your laying chickens.



You can also feed a small amount of **mixed corn** (they love this but don't give too much!) You may be surprised to know that it is illegal to feed kitchen scraps to your chickens as it can lead to an increased risk of *Salmonella*. To ensure a good number of eggs it is wise to ensure that at least 70% of the diet is layer pellets. It is also wise to feed a small amount of **poultry grit**, although some pellets / mash will already include this.

For treats, why not try a tasty **corn on the cob** (uncooked) hung from a low branch – you'll be amazed how quickly it disappears!



Meal worms are another favourite (if a bit pricey at times)



Here are a few extra tips:

- Chickens only eat and drink when it is light (so don't need food inside the house)!



- Plastic or metal drinkers/feeders are fine; they will need cleaning every few weeks (more often for water). Bigger ones are less likely to be knocked over. If you plan on giving cider vinegar as a supplement in the water every so often you will need a plastic drinker.



- Keep the water drinker and feeder in their run or near their house for easy access
- A spare water drinker for winter is a good idea (as they get frozen and you can keep one inside to swap each morning)
- Mice / rats will be attracted by the food. Feeders which only open when trodden on by a chicken can be very useful (www.GrandpasFeeder.co.uk) to protect against pests and weather.



What about supplements?

If your chickens are on a good diet they shouldn't need any supplements. Having said that, the addition of cider vinegar to the drinking water (10mls per litre of water in a plastic drinker) for a few days a month can sometimes give them a bit of a boost. Some people also like to use probiotic supplements on occasion.

What maintenance do they need?

Your chickens will need to be let out every morning, and locked up securely at night away from fox, mink and other predators. They will need food and water daily. They need cleaning out at least twice a week, and fresh bedding added as required. They need to be checked for their general health around once a week. Check the house for signs of red mite – lift out the perch (they like to hide in the corners). You may see the mites themselves or the grey powder they leave behind.



Chicken Health

How do I know if my chicken is poorly?

When a chicken is poorly, she will often have a drop in the number of eggs she produces. Other problems may include diarrhoea, wheezing, coughing, weight loss, swollen feet, egg retention, swollen crop etc. If you are worried then give us a ring so we can advise you.

Worming

Some problems like worms are easily sorted out – please contact us if you want to know about worming your chickens. I worm mine twice a year with Flubenvet, which I use because I can keep eating the eggs. Worms are less of a problem in small groups of chickens ranging over a largish area.



Chicken check-up

At least once a week pick up each of your chickens in turn and give them a check over. Best time is probably bed time – otherwise you may be running all over the garden! Things to look for include:

- Weight – do the bones feel more obvious? Is she losing weight?
- Crop (the sac like structure in the neck) – is the crop full? (if it is evening it will often be full of food eaten during the day; it should be almost empty in the morning)
- Bottom – is the bottom clean? Any sign of lice around the vent?
- Feet – are the undersides of the feet free from wounds or sores? Swollen feet or sores may be the start of bumble foot and need treating quickly.
- Chest – can you hear any rattling in the chest area?
- Belly – does the belly feel “fuller” than normal? This can be fluid build-up.

Do I need to bring my chickens to the vets?

Although we are more than happy to see you, most chickens will live out their lives without needing too much intervention from us! The common reasons for us to see chickens include wing clipping, health checks for new chickens, and poorly chickens. We can also advise you on the best ways to pick up and handle your chickens.

If you need to get prescription medication from us we legally need to have seen at least 1 member of your little flock within the last 6-12 months. This is because your chickens have to be “under our care” as a veterinary practice to comply with prescribing laws.

Links

<http://www.bhwt.org.uk/> - Battery hen welfare trust – for re-homing battery hens and advice on caring for them

www.littlehenrescue.co.uk – Battery hen rescue organisation

<http://www.practicalpoultry.co.uk/> - poultry enthusiast monthly magazine with breeder registry and lots of information online

<http://www.poultry.allotment.org.uk/> - The Poultry Pages – help for all types of Poultry

<http://www.staffordshirechickens.co.uk/> - local (Eccleshall) supplier of vaccinated hens (£10-£15) and housing (traditional wooden and Omlet Eglus) – they even provide a home you're your chickens when you go on holiday! Call Richard (07748 635116) for more details, or have a look at their website.

<http://www.moorlandspoultry.co.uk/> - local (near Leek) supplier of hen houses, point of lay hybrid chickens/bantams and supplies

www.chicubes.co.uk – local supplier of easy to clean and maintain housing range made on site. Based in Brown Lees, Staffordshire

<http://www.omlet.co.uk> – fun and easy to clean hen houses



If you have any questions then please call us on 01782 522100