

How to raise chickens



WHAT COULD BE MORE IDYLIC than a flock of hens happily clucking in your backyard? A growing movement of people in cities and suburbs, not just farmers, are raising chickens—and we're right there with them. We got six baby chicks in August of 2007 and raised them to provide eggs for our end-of-summer feast (www.sunset.com/oneblockfeast), not meat (we wanted protein we wouldn't have to kill). A side benefit of raising chickens: their droppings, which make great fertilizer for our garden. Plus, chickens are unexpectedly entertaining (see for yourself at Team Chicken's blog: visit <http://oneblockdiet.sunset.com> and click on "Team Chicken" under Categories.).

WHAT WE RAISED

A Mixed Flock of Six Chickens

- + 2 Ameraucanas (Ophelia lays blue eggs, Alana green)
- + 2 Buff Orpingtons (Honey and Charlotte, buff-colored eggs)
- + 2 Rhode Island Reds (Carmelita and Ruby, deep brown to bronze eggs)

Are Chickens Right for You? Before you rush out to the feed store and get your baby chicks (adorable balls of fluff), you need to evaluate your space and your lifestyle.

Questions to Answer

Does your city allow you to keep chickens? Every city has its own rules about this. Our particular municipality (Menlo Park, CA) lets us keep hens, but not roosters. That's fairly common in cities: Many have no problem with a few hens (usually classified as pets), but they ban noisy roosters. Check your local regulations before getting any animals; it would be dreadful to get them and then have to get rid of them.

Do you have the space? Each chicken should have 10 square feet to run around in, plus 4 square feet of house. For a flock of six, that's a 6- by 10-foot yard and a 4- by 6-foot house.

Can you keep them safe? Making their digs secure is extremely important, especially at night: Chickens are prey animals,

and they sleep so soundly that they seem unconscious—morsels waiting to be devoured. They're vulnerable to attack by raccoons, skunks, foxes, weasels, and other predators. Raccoons are particularly nasty, and they're particularly clever about using their little nasty hands to get into your coop. Also, keep in mind that your other pets (cats, dogs) may be predators. (Details below on how to build a secure chicken coop.)

What will do you with them when they stop laying eggs? Hens lay for four or five years, but can live for eight (or more).

What will you do if one gets injured or sick? Locate a vet in your area before you acquire your flock—preferably one who's familiar with chicken health problems. We had a great experience with a local vet, Adobe Animal Hospital in Los Altos, CA (www.adobe-animal.com).

Can you afford it? Yes, the eggs are practically free, but setting up a coop costs a few hundred dollars, and chicken food is an ongoing though not large expense. Vet bills also add up quickly, so you should have the means to pay for a visit to a vet if a chicken should get injured or sick, or be prepared to dispatch it yourself.

WHAT WE USED Materials, Prices, and Sources

The coop Encompasses both the house

and the enclosed run where chickens scratch around and spend the daylight hours. Most of the work in raising chickens is setting up their space. Chickens need a box to lay their eggs (at least 2 for 6 chickens), a secure house with a roost for them to sleep on, and a place to run around and do their chicken thing.

The house should have at least 4 square feet per laying hen. That's much less than you're thinking; a flock of 6 chickens needs a structure that's only 6 feet by 4 feet. We got ours from Wine Country Coops. Their houses are luxurious (glass windows! high-quality wood! beautiful construction!), but pricey (\$1,500 and up; www.winecountrycoops.com or 707/829 8405). You can get a less-posh chicken house at a feed store, or you can build one yourself. Find inspiration here: www.backyardchickens.com

The yard Allow 10 square feet per hen. (You need less room in your run if you let your chickens free-range; we don't, because they would eat the seedling plants in our test garden.) We made ours with lumber (2-by-4s, to act as posts); chicken wire stretched over the posts and buried 12 inches into the ground to keep digging predators at bay; and a corrugated, translucent plastic top to allow light in but keep the chickens dry in foul weather. The door to the chicken house leads right into the yard, so the coop is



completely enclosed and protected. (*About \$200 in supplies.*)

For chicks

Unless otherwise mentioned, we purchased everything below from Half Moon Bay Feed & Fuel (www.halfmoonbayfeedandfuel.com or 650/726-4814). You can also order online: www.westernranchsupply.com

A warm indoor location We used a storage shed on the Sunset grounds.

Heat lamp, reflector, bulb, and clamp

Until they have feathers, chicks need to be kept very warm. *About \$20.*

Wire cage to keep the chicks in for the first few weeks of their lives. We preferred the type with the door at the top, because it made reaching in easier. *From \$90.*

Plastic 1-gallon water fount Its narrow lip keeps the chicks from drowning; also it's hard to tip over. *About \$5.*

Chick feeder We got a metal one with a top to keep the chicks from scratching their food right out; the top has holes large enough to give access to the food. *About \$5.*

Chick starter Finely ground, high-protein (20%) mixture of grains that a chick should eat from the time you buy it (anywhere from 2 days old to 1 week, typically) until it is 8 to 10 weeks old. Medicated chick starter helps stave off the nasty parasitic infection called coccidiosis. *\$18.81 for a 50-lb. sack; organic is \$32.50 for a 50-lb. sack.*

Chick scratch Not vital for their nutrition, but they love it. A finely ground mix of milo, corn, and wheat. *\$18.81 for a 50-lb. sack* (organic not available at Half Moon Bay Feed & Fuel).

Electrolytes Dissolve in the chicks' drinking water according to package instructions. Shores up their frail systems with nutrients. Especially important if the chicks are sick or stressed from traveling. OK to give up until 8 to 10 weeks. *\$3.99 for an 8-oz. packet* (enough for more than 100 gallons of water).

For adult chickens

Unless otherwise mentioned, we purchased everything below from Half Moon Bay Feed & Fuel (www.halfmoonbayfeedandfuel.com or 650/726-4814). You can also order online: www.westernranchsupply.com

Water and food dispensers These galvanized steel 5-gallon dispensers hang from the roof of the coop and provide a steady source of food and water to the chickens. *\$30 each.*

Layen (layer) crumble Less protein than chick starter and a coarser formulation; begin feeding at 8 to 15 weeks. This is the chickens' main food for life. If you like, you can give it to them in **pellet form** instead, to reduce waste (the granular stuff tends to fly out of the food dispenser). *Crumble, \$16.12 per 50-lb. sack; pellets, same price. Organic, \$26.95 for both crumble and pellets, 50-lb. sack.* A good mail-order source for organic layer pellets is Modesto Milling in Empire, CA (www.modestomilling.com). *\$21.42 for 50 lbs.*

Coarse-ground oyster shells Strew a couple of handfuls on the yard's floor a few times a week for chickens to peck up. Strengthens the eggshells, which otherwise can be weak and rubbery. *\$12 for 50 lbs.*

Cracked corn To chickens, it's like candy. A high-energy food, it also helps them stay warm in winter. *About \$19 for a 50-lb. bag.*

Treats from the garden and the kitchen Chickens love leafy greens, anything wilted, fennel and dill, arugula (their favorite), cilantro stems, chile seeds, weeds that we pick from the garden (especially anything in the dandelion family and wild grasses), plain yogurt, apple cores, over-ripe strawberries and other fruit, and insects they find in the dirt, plus worms.

Avoid: eggshells (can encourage them to peck their own eggs), citrus (weakens shells), onions and garlic (can impart a funny flavor to eggs), and legumes (we've heard that they can be toxic). We avoided giving them meat so as not to attract rats—and because we think it's creepy—but chickens are omnivores and will eat just about anything.

HOW WE DID IT A Step-by-Step Guide

1. Buying chicks We got our chickens as sexed chicks from Half Moon Bay Feed & Fuel (www.halfmoonbayfeedandfuel.com or 650/726-4814). "Sexed" means that the store's staff were pretty sure that they

were girls. Also, they came vaccinated for Marek's disease, a terrible, fatal poultry disease.

Getting chicks is a common way to start, partly because chicks are so darn cute and partly because it can be a challenge to find laying hens to buy.

2. Indoors: Keeping the chicks alive for the first few weeks was a fun kind of bustle. Chicks need a warm, indoor location (we kept them in a shed) and a heat lamp until they start to feather out. We visited them several times a day, making sure that the heat lamp was not too warm or too cool (ideal temperature: 90° F.), that they had food and water, and that their cage was not too much of a mess. Also, we picked them up and patted them a lot to get them used to us. It worked: As adults, the hens are friendly and easy to handle.

3. Outdoors: At four weeks, they were fully feathered, the sign that they are ready to leave the nest, so to speak. It was September in the Bay Area and balmy when we took them out to their coop at the far end of our test garden. During the cold months, we kept the heat lamp inside their house for extra warmth at night.

The first egg, a long-awaited event, appeared in January, courtesy of Ophelia; over the next several weeks, the others followed. Most chickens will begin to lay somewhere between 18 and 24 weeks, depending on the chicken and the weather—moderate warmth encourages laying.

4. Day-to-day maintenance As adolescents and adults, chickens don't require that much care. They need to have fresh water and food available all the time, so check it daily.

Clean the coop about once a month. More often if it gets smelly faster. We initially used straw as bedding and on the floor of the coop, but now have moved to wood chips, since we have one chicken who likes to eat straw. We also hose out the house, which gets filled with droppings. We **compost** the droppings.

Collect eggs every day or so. Not only because you want to eat them, but because egg buildup can encourage broodiness (a condition in which a hen

refuses to get off the nest, hoping to hatch chicks). Also, the more eggs in the nesting box, the more likely they are to crack against each other.

Beyond the basic minimum of care, we recommend daily visits because it's enjoyable to go see our ladies. Plus, regularly bringing them treats and petting and picking them up helps them get used to human presence, and makes it easier to handle them if you've got a sick chicken you need to check out, for example.

Helpful Info

Your local feed store. Some companies will mail you chicks, such as McMurray Hatchery (www.mcmurrayhatchery.com), but for beginning chicken-raisers, it's better to get them at a feed store. Not only is it reassuring to pick up your cheeping chicks in person, but feed stores also have helpful, knowledgeable employees who can be valuable resources.

The forum at BackyardChickens.com

No matter what weird problem you're having, someone else has had it first. If you're looking for practical advice and real anecdotes, this is the best resource on the Web. Sifting through the active message board at BackyardChickens.com will get you up to speed on what to worry about, what not to worry about, and what to do next.

More chicken talk and advice:

<http://www.the-coop.org/>

<http://club.omlet.co.uk/forum/>

<http://home.centurytel.net/thecitychicken/>

<http://www.pathtofreedom.com/pathproject/simpleliving/chickens.shtml>

Online coop retailers and supplies:

<http://www.mypetchicken.com/>

<http://www.omlet.us/homepage/homepage.php>

Extra Notes

Chickens are not like other pets When bringing any live animal into your life, you assume a certain amount of risk. Puppies can get sick. Bad things can happen to a healthy cat.

But your relationship with your chickens will likely be somewhat different than with ordinary domestic pets.

For one thing, in all likelihood, you eat others of their species. Maybe even every day. Some people who raise backyard chickens find that they lose their interest in eating meat. Others, after observing chickens' behavior and really getting to know them, decide that they feel okay about meat.

In our experience, chickens do not have the emotional range of cats or dogs. We've spent a lot of time with our chickens, and we're pretty sure that they don't recognize us. They don't really like to be held; their enjoyment of petting seems like a reflex more than pleasure. If you are looking for a cuddly creature with whom you will have an emotional relationship, chickens may not be the most rewarding option.

This is not to say that we don't like our chickens. We enjoy them very much. We like to watch them scratch around and feed them treats in the afternoons. We like their eggs a lot.

Regardless of your philosophical feelings about whether or not your chickens are pets, you need to make sure that you have a plan about what to do in case one gets sick or injured. Not all vets can or will treat chickens.

Also, not everyone who raises backyard chickens chooses to treat them when they get sick. Some people will euthanize their own sick or injured animals; others have a friend, family member, or neighbor who is willing to do it in an emergency.

Eggs: Questions and Answers

Q: Do you need a rooster for eggs?

A: Chickens lay eggs with or without the presence of roosters. Since we don't have a rooster (they're not allowed in Menlo Park), the eggs are not fertilized, which means that they will never hatch into chicks. (This is just as well, because we're not really in the market for any more chickens.) If we did have a rooster, the eggs would be fertilized while they were, ahem, still in the hen; the rooster doesn't do anything to eggs once they've been laid.

Q: Do colored eggs taste different?

A: Different varieties of chickens lay differ-

ent colors of eggs. Our Ameraucanas lay blue-green eggs; the other four lay brown eggs of varying shades. All of them taste exactly the same, and wonderful.

Q: How many eggs do you get a day?

A: Our chickens usually lay one egg a day. Chickens used in industrial agriculture lay two eggs a day.

Q: What do you do with the eggs?

A: We give them to staff members. We originally thought we'd use them in our test kitchen, but they're different than supermarket eggs — a little smaller, with more tender whites and richer yolks — and so they throw our recipe testing off.