



Ten Things to Know Before You Get Chickens

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Introduction

Are you thinking about getting chickens but not sure where to start? With chickens you can't just get one to see how it goes. Chickens are not meant to be solitary creatures; they need company of at least two other chickens. When you have chickens, you have to make decisions for your flock as a whole. It is a commitment when you do get them. Here are ten things to think about before you acquire your chickens. If you have more questions, please contact your local VCE office.

1. Local ordinances

Many localities have regulations on the number of chickens you can have and how close you are to your neighbors. Some have ordinances not allowing roosters. It is a good idea to check before investing. Your neighbors may appreciate you checking with them too. Chickens, especially roosters can make a lot of noise. Hens are quieter than roosters. If you want to purchase young birds, they may turn out to be roosters, especially if you buy a straight run. Have a plan for what you will do with them if your ordinances do not allow roosters. **Hens do not need roosters to lay eggs.**

2. Breed selection

Things to take into consideration: Why do you want chickens, for eggs, meat, do you want pets or purely for egg production? Different breeds have different strengths and even temperaments. Some breeds have friendlier temperaments, but each bird will have its own personality. It is a good idea to research this before you purchase chickens.

For more information about breed selections - <http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/choosing-the-right-breed-for-your-backyard-flock>

3. Age of chickens

How old are the chickens you plan to get? If you plan on getting chicks, they will not be able to be outside right away- you will need a brooder. It will take 4 to 6 months before your hens begin to lay eggs (depending on breed). Hens can live to be 8-10 years old, but their egg production slows as they age and usually stops around 7 years of age.

4. Biosecurity

To protect the health and wellbeing of your flock, your neighbor's flock and your family, being conscious of biosecurity measures is important. Sanitizing, keeping your chickens safe from wildlife, and isolating sick birds are just a few of the things you need to do to establish a healthy/safe environment that prevents an avian disease outbreak. Do you have someone that can advise you if you have a sick bird? Do you have a place to quarantine birds showing signs of illness? Check with local veterinarians to see if any of them will treat chickens.

It is also a good practice to purchase your chickens from a NPIP certified hatchery or consider vaccinations. Backyard chickens can be a source of disease spread to commercial birds or other backyard flocks. You should not enter another person's poultry house because disease organisms are often carried on shoes and clothing. Mice and rats carry other diseases. You need to control rodents to prevent disease spread.

For more information about Backyard biosecurity and avian illness:

<https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/poultry/biosecurity-for-backyard-poultry-flocks/>

5. Recognizing behavior

Are your chickens sick? Or broody? Or dust bathing? Gentle feather pecking is normal social behavior, severe pecking is not normal; it is a sign your chickens need more foraging time. Knowing what behaviors signify and how to handle it is important.

For more information about recognizing behavior: https://muskingum.osu.edu/sites/muskingum/files/imce/Program_Pages/4H/Member_Resources/Livestock_Resources/Ohio_4-H_Poultry_Resource.pdf

6. Nutrition

Did you know birds at different stages have different nutritional needs? It is important to know how to feed your birds for their life stage and for what you are raising them. Layers need a different feed than pullets and chicks also need their own food.

For more information about nutrition: https://muskingum.osu.edu/sites/muskingum/files/imce/Program_Pages/4H/Member_Resources/Livestock_Resources/Ohio_4-H_Poultry_Resource.pdf

7. Coop/Run construction

There are all sorts of coop and run designs. The key things a coop must do is protect from the elements, predators and have enough room for each bird so that they are not overcrowded. Coops need to be free from drafts, but also have vents or windows to ventilate when needed. The space you need per bird is dependent on the breed of bird. A perch or roost could be incorporated into your coop. Chickens are 'forest animals' and prefer overhead cover in their run to feel safe. Laying boxes are important if you have hens for their eggs.

For more information: https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/2902/2902-1092/2902-1092_pdf.pdf

8. Animal Welfare

What will you do with a chicken that is injured, stunted in growth, not able to eat or drink? Sometimes chicks are born with severe issues. Are you going to euthanize it if you need to? At times,

this is the best thing to do for the welfare of your flock.

<https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/APSC/APSC-161/APSC-161.html>

9. Manure

Chicken manure and litter may contain harmful bacteria like E. coli and salmonella. It is important to handle it properly and have a plan for what you will do with it. Do you have a plan for your chicken manure and litter?

For more information on managing chicken manure: <https://www.extension.uidaho.edu/publishing/pdf/CIS/CIS1194.pdf>

10. Myths

There are a lot of myths about raising chickens. It is best to use science-based information.

For information about common chicken myths: <https://www.blogtalkradio.com/backyardpoultry/2016/10/13/backyard-poultry-with-the-chicken-whisperer-brought-to-you-by-kalmbach-feeds>

Terms to know:

Biosecurity - any practice that reduces the risk of introducing disease to yourself, your flock, or other flocks.

Brooder - A heated enclosure for raising chicks. Protects chicks from drafts and predators and provides access to food and water.

Broody hen - A hen that wants to sit on eggs to hatch them and brood chicks.

Chick - A baby chicken.

Clutch - A group of eggs, usually about 12. Term is commonly used with a group of eggs being sat on, or incubated, by a brooding hen.

Cockerel - A male chicken under one year of age. Also called a young rooster.

Coop - Building that chickens can use to sleep in and be safe from predators

Dusting or dust bath - Common chicken behavior of bathing with dirt in a dusty shallow depression to keep feathers clean and dry

Hen - An adult female chicken that has reached reproductive age and can lay eggs

Layers - Mature female chickens kept for egg production. Also known as laying hens.

Litter - manure and bedding that build up in the coop

Pullet - A female chicken that has not reached sexual maturity.

Rooster - A male chicken over one year of age.

Run - Fenced in area (often covered) so that chickens can go outside of the coop but still be safe from predators

Straight-run chick - Chicks that have not been separated according to sexes. Chicks that have been separated are known as sexed chickens.

Waterer/Fount - A device used to provide water to chickens.

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<http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/choosin-g-the-right-breed-for-your-backyard-flock>

Additional resources

- A Small-Scale Agriculture Alternative: Poultry - <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/2902/2902-1099/2902-1099.html>
- If you are considering getting birds by mail - https://www.poultry-welfare-extension.com/uploads/2/5/6/3/25631086/pec_special_issue_august20.pdf
- Website for tips on starting a flock - <https://www.poultry-welfare-extension.com/>

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