



Poultry Basics Tipsheet

Chickens are a great addition to any farm or backyard. They can help increase your soil fertility, and even help with controlling pests, while also providing an income stream through the sale of meat and eggs. This tipsheet includes some helpful points on choosing chicken breeds, caring for your flock, and raising a flock in the city.



Photo: NCAT

Key Questions Before Getting Started

- What are the regulations in your community? Many towns have ordinances against backyard flocks. Be sure to call your zoning office to find out what the rules are for your community. In addition, the website www.Municode.com has a searchable database of city codes. Many communities allow chickens but may have restrictions, such as minimum yard sizes and no roosters.
- Do you have a safe place for your chickens? It is important to have a fenced yard to prevent dogs and cats from coming into your yard and killing your chickens. It is also important to have a place for them to be safe during the night—a small coop with roosts is ideal.
- Do you have the resources to care for your flock? Chicken feed is expensive. It is also important to have a person that is able to look in on your flock and feed and water them regularly.

Raising a Flock in the City

Raising flocks in the city is becoming increasingly popular. You get fresh eggs, you're more self-sufficient, and you get a small taste of country living. Other reasons for keeping chickens in your backyard include pest control and fertilizer for your garden, a use for your otherwise wasted kitchen scraps, and educational components for kids and even adults to learn about where food comes from.

For more information on raising a flock in the city, see <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultry/urban.html>.

Chicken Breeds

There are several breeds of chicken that are recommended for egg laying and some for both egg laying and meat production. Here are brief descriptions of the breeds we are currently raising on our farm (source: McMurray Hatchery):

- **Rhode Island Red:** This dual-purpose breed is known for being a very hardy bird. This breed is both cold- and heat-tolerant. At maturity, the pullets will weigh around six and a half pounds and lay large, brown eggs.
- **Pearl-White Leghorn:** This breed is suggested for the highest quality, uniform production of eggs in places with a small amount of space. The pullets weigh around four pounds at maturity and should start laying at four and a half to five months of age. Eggs produced by these chickens will be large and white.
- **Red Star:** These chickens will weigh six pounds at maturity and will lay large, brown eggs. This breed is a sex-link chicken. This means at the time of hatching, these chickens can be sexed by their color.
- **Black Star:** This is a sex-link chicken just like the Red Star. These chickens will also reach around six pounds at maturity and lay large, brown eggs.

Basic Chick Care

- Purchase chick starter feed, heat lamp, feeders, and waterer.
- Construct a brooder with available materials. A brooder is some type of heated enclosure for raising baby chicks. The goal is to have a brooder that will keep the chicks warm, safe from predators, and protected from drafts. You can learn more about a few types of brooders and the materials needed for them at <http://diychickencoops.com/types-of-brooders>.
- When constructing a brooder for chicks, it is ideal for the corners to be rounded. When it gets cold, chicks tend to huddle together and smothering of chicks can occur.
- If using the brooder type that calls for a heat lamp, keep the temperature under the heat lamp at 90 to 95 degrees Fahrenheit for the first week. After this, drop the temperature five degrees each week.
- Depending on the breed and the time of year, the chicks should be ready to move out of the brooder within four to five weeks.

Basic Chicken Care

- Chickens will need a coop to roost in at night and a nesting box to lay their eggs in.
- Chicken food can be purchased at a feed store. Chickens are excellent at foraging, but they still need to be fed prepared food on a regular schedule.
- Chickens require grit to aid in the digestion of food. This can be achieved naturally by consuming small rocks or coarse sand, or you can supplement grit, such as oyster shell, to the chickens' diet. Take into account where the flock will be living when deciding how grit will be provided.
- Fresh water is essential and must be provided at all times.
- For more information on feed and nutrition, visit <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultry/feeding.html>.

Mobile or Permanent Pen?

It is up to you to decide whether you want a mobile or permanent pen for your chickens. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, such as the following:

- Having a permanent pen will save you a little time as you will not have to move it every so often.
- Chickens are beneficial to soil. However, if kept in the same place long enough they can destroy the vegetation.
- Mobile pens allow the chickens to have fresh ground to scratch on every time you move the pen.
- If you choose a mobile pen, you will need to create a system for how, where, and when you're going to move it. This will take a bit of extra time.

Raising a chicken flock in urban areas is a great way to provide fresh eggs for your family and fertility for your soil. It is important to know your local ordinances before you buy chickens and to be sure you have the time and resources to care for and manage your flock.

For more information on poultry, visit <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultry>.



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