

# Backyard Chickens Things to Consider....



## Keeping chickens for eggs

Keeping chooks provides your household with a daily supply of sensational tasting eggs from a sustainable pet that consumes your kitchen waste and weeds your garden.

Keeping chickens is a great way to turn waste into food, entertain yourself (and your kids), and they increase the nutrients and health of your soil while eating bugs, insects and sometimes mice.

So you're interested in raising your own small backyard flock but Chickens aren't right for everyone - even if you love the idea of having them so here are a few things to think about before you get started:

### Why?

- Simple - Fresh eggs! Do you know the real age of the 'fresh' eggs bought at the supermarket are? Of course you don't, that's half of the problem. Are you sure free range chickens don't eat the same modified foods that their sisters in the sheds next to them eat? The best way to know that you are eating fresh eggs by free range chickens is to keep your own.
- For the budget conscious - Chickens are cheap to keep and more so if you buy your Free Range eggs. Balanced chicken feed is not expensive and you don't need a lot of space to house the chickens.
- Other reasons for keeping chickens include the taste (eat a freshly laid egg and you'll know what I mean), teaching your kids the values of where their food comes from and also simply as pets!

### Do you think they're cute?

Maybe , Possibly , Probably do. Sure do .....

Seriously though, if you've spent time around chickens and you're not particularly fond of them, or having them doesn't appeal to you, you may be less inclined to care for them, which isn't good for you or your chickens.

And be forewarned: if you love them but your partner does not, be prepared to be the sole caregiver

### Can You Dedicate Some Time Each Day?

Although low-maintenance, chickens do require a small amount of daily care as well as some monthly and semi-annual maintenance.

Plan on spending :

- 10 minutes a day on your pet chickens,
- an hour or so per month,
- plus a few hours twice a year on semi-annual chores.
- 

If that sounds like too much, then chickens aren't right for you.

We will talk later about the necessary daily, weekly and annual chores.

### How many chickens do you need? More importantly.....How many eggs do you need?

There are several factors that you need to consider when determining how many chickens you want.

The first depends on how much space you have and how many eggs per day you need. Chickens don't need a lot of space, but they also don't like to be cooped up! The general rule is one chicken per square metre.

For a family of four, 2-3 chickens will provide enough eggs to feed the family. Remember you will receive about an egg per day from your chickens – so you'll have a carton about every 4 days. The eggs will keep for a couple of weeks but if you have abundance, why not give some to your friends and family!

### **At what age do hens start laying and how many eggs will they lay?**

Typically hens will start to lay when they are around 5- 6 months of age and will lay approximately 200 to 300 eggs annually, based on the breed type. Breeds like Rhode Island Reds and White Leghorns are considered some of the most prolific egg layers. Peak production generally occurs at two years of age and slowly declines thereafter.

### **How much space do I have?**

Each chicken needs space to flap their wings, move about and build a nest, a rough figure of 5 m<sup>2</sup> for each bird is usually sufficient. The chicken house, where the chooks are locked up overnight, and the broader enclosure would need to be about 15m<sup>2</sup> for a three chicken set up at the minimum.

### **At least two birds**

Chickens are herd animals, they love company, so for happy hens, aim to have at least two birds. Local regulations may limit the maximum number of birds you can keep.

### **Speaking if which...**

### **Does your Council Allow Chickens?**

Not all councils do. Check before you get chickens  
Research this first and you'll avoid unwelcome surprises.

But , if you're planning on keeping roosters you should find out about local noise regulations. If your neighbours complain you may be forced to get rid of them.

Which takes us to...

### **Considering Your Neighbours**

If nothing so far has given you pause, you still need to consider your neighbours, especially if they're close by. They may not be educated about chicken-keeping and so could have concerns ranging from noise, to smell and increase in rats & mice.

(Which shouldn't be a problem if you follow the housekeeping checklist).

Avoid roosters—they're not needed to produce eggs and are generally not popular when kept on residential premises (the noise of a cock crowing at odd hours won't be excite some neighbours). Roosters do not just crow in the morning, they crow throughout the day and even during a brightly moon lit night !

It is a good idea for you to check in with the neighbours early on and address any concerns. When you do, don't forget to mention all the free, fresh eggs they'll be getting

(Plus, having their support could mean free pet-sitting when you go away for vacation.)

## The Cost Factor

Having chickens won't save you money any more than backyard gardeners save money on their tomatoes. There are plenty of good reasons to keep chickens, but this isn't one of them. Between building or purchasing a coop, supplies, and the birds themselves, getting your brood up and running involves some significant upfront expenses. These along with ongoing expenses for food kind of undermine the idea that the eggs are "free."

## Where do I keep my Chickens?

It is important to have a fox-proof coop which is still easily accessible and adequately ventilated. Chickens require a comfortable, clean and secure coop to sleep and nest in.

Chickens are usually housed in either a permanent "deep-litter house" or a "small portable house" that can be moved about every couple of days.

A house can be custom made, or could be a converted old shed or cubbyhouse

But it must be fox proof, weatherproof, with not too many cold drafts and no leaky roofs.

The house should be fully enclosed and the chickens locked away every night.

Locate the chicken house facing east so that the back is towards the strong westerly, rain-bearing winter winds. A belt of vegetation to the east will provide protection against the wind but ensure it still lets in the morning sun.

Cover the floor with sawdust (at least 8cm) so that it mixes with the poultry droppings to form 'deep litter'.

## Chicken run

The chicken run should be bordered by 1.8m high chicken mesh and enclosed to discourage foxes from killing the chickens and wild birds from eating the chicken food and possibly introducing diseases.

To deter foxes from digging under the fence, dig the netting into the soil to a depth of 50cm or continue the netting outwards at the base of the fence.

## Where do Chickens sleep?

Chickens like to perch off the ground at night, so perches should be 30cm or more off the ground allowing 30cm space per bird. You can use appropriate left over pieces of timber or sturdy tree branches—40-50mm wide is ideal

## Where will my chickens lay?

Hopefully they will lay in your provided nest box and not under some far distant bush! Chickens need nesting boxes where they can lay their eggs in private, an old lawn mower – leaf catchers or wooden boxes are good. They like it dark and quite. Add straw or wood shavings to the laying boxes to help keep eggs clean. You need to allow 1 nesting box for every 3-4 chickens.

## When will they start laying eggs?

Waiting for your first egg can take an eternity! Hens will generally start laying around 20 weeks and will keep laying well until they reach about three years of age. Their production will sometimes go down in winter

### How long do chickens live?

The life expectancy of most standard chicken breeds shielded from predators and deep fryers can range from 3 to 15 years.

There are many reports of pet chickens living as long as 20 years!

Chickens are very hardy animals that rarely need a trip to a veterinarian, no matter how long they live.

### How do I get my chickens to go in their house at night?

Chickens instinctively move into their house when the sun goes down. It may take a little coaxing for grown chickens to move into a newly built house but once they realize it's home, they generally go right in at night.

Your job is to close the door behind them once they enter, and then to open it back up in the morning.

Remember MR Fox will be waiting for the opportunity that an open chicken house will present. - Dinner

### Do Chickens smell?

You would be surprised to hear that chickens really don't smell. They will start to smell a bit if their house and run are left uncleaned, if the pen stays wet for an extended period or you have too many chickens confined in a small area.

Chickens are no different to any other animal, so as long as their pen is kept dry and relatively clean, then your chickens will be happy and odour free.

### Are chickens noisy?

Unlike roosters, hens are not noisy. The sound of hens clucking in the background of your garden is quite soothing as they scratch around. When hens lay an egg they make a louder than normal clucking sound and if the hens are unhappy or scared they may make more noise than normal.

### Do I need to worry about predators and pests?

Yes even in the suburban areas.

Pests such as mice are attracted by food and not by the chickens. You have as much chance attracting mice with chickens as you do with other pets such as birds in an aviary or a bird feeder, rabbits and guinea pigs.

Chickens are messy eaters so keeping wasted food to a minimum will help pests be less attracted to your chicken pen.

The key to keeping chickens safe from predators is a good strong pen – with sturdy walls, enclosed top and measures to stop predators burrowing under the wire.