

# In the chicken house

By Craig Rullman  
Correspondent

If you are entertaining the notion of raising a few backyard chickens — which many people are these days — there are a few things you need to know ahead of time. Here's the big one, a single fact that often surprises folks jumping into the weird world of poultry: Chickens are dinosaurs, feathered T-Rexes with the capacity for shocking violence. Start there, and everything else will fall into place.

Don't let this natural fact discourage you, because they can also be the source of a lot of fun, loyal friends, and a healthy, inexpensive supply of food.

I won't recommend a particular breed of chicken, because I like them all, and coming down on a particular side will earn me hate-mail from various chicken-defense groups, but there are some particularly suited for our climate, and others more suited for egg production, versus broilers. Generally speaking, the breeds available in local feed stores are perfectly adapted for our part

of the world, and many folks like the heritage breeds — to help preserve them and maintain diversity in the chicken universe.

You don't need — or probably even want — a rooster, unless you plan to raise chicks. Roosters are a noisy, occasionally aggressive annoyance, and there is nothing quite so unpleasant as cracking open a fertilized egg while making your famous omelet for house-guests. If you are buying chicks at a feed store, they have been sexed already and the chances of accidentally acquiring a rooster are minimal. If you end up with a rooster, you'll know it soon enough, and so will all of your neighbors.

The same is not true of turkeys, which are infamously difficult to sex when young, so if you roll the dice on turkeys, you take your chances. But raising a few turkeys for eggs — which are much bigger than chicken eggs, and taste great — or for your home-raised Thanksgiving dinner, can be as educational and rewarding as any dalliance with our chicken friends. Plus, turkeys are just fun to

have around. They are incredibly smart, and have a sense of humor, as Ben Franklin realized so many years ago.

Introducing new chickens into an existing flock should be done with the full understanding that pecking orders are real, and the old chickens aren't going to happily embrace young chickens into the henhouse. What will happen, if you introduce young ones too soon, will resemble a full-blown riot on the 3 Yard at San Quentin, with the same ugly consequences. If you want to introduce young ones, do yourself — and them — a favor, raise them separately until they are large enough to defend themselves.

Another tip: don't leave injured chickens among the flock. Remember that dinosaur bit? An injured hen triggers something primordial in the others, and they will attack her relentlessly if she shows weakness. Get her out of there, or they will ultimately kill and even eat her. Think Velociraptor and you get the idea.

Sisters Country gets cold in the wintertime, so be prepared to safely employ a heat



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

Young velociraptors at the Figure 8 Ranch.

lamp to keep the girls warm. Dry bedding, a heat lamp, and plenty of water and feed will see them happily through even the coldest winters, and they will continue to crank out eggs. Be warned though, that excessive use of heat lamps, meaning light, can also stress the chickens over time and cause a drop in egg production.

Be certain your enclosure is covered. We have owls, hawks, and eagles. They love chickens as much as we do. Be sure that our other critters, coyotes, cats, or skunks, can't find a way in — and they will try everything.

Give your chickens sufficient space. To be happy and healthy they need some room to run around, and a few pieces of structure — things they can climb on, flap over, scratch around — go a long way. Chickens roost at night, so give them something elevated to sit on inside the coop, in addition to having some warm, comfortable nesting boxes. Consider a chicken tractor, too, if you have a lawn. You can move it daily and have them fertilize and aerate the grass while you enjoy a fabulous mimosa under perfect Central Oregon skies.

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