

Fine-feathered friends

Celebrate spring with a flock of backyard chickens

Do you long for a more idyllic life, but aren't sure how to get it? Is there a bit of farmer lurking in your otherwise citified soul? Have you ever looked up from the pale, factory-farmed eggs on your plate and felt like breakfast ought to taste a whole lot better?

If you've offered a resounding "yes" to the questions above, have a little extra space in your garden, and are ready to take your locavore commitment to the next level, there's a chance that a flock of backyard chickens could be just right for you.

You don't need to know a lot to get started keeping chickens — part of their charm is their overall simplicity — but you do need to know a little. To get you going, here, in an eggshell, are the basics.

Picking up chicks

Spring is the perfect time to start your flock, and what could be more emblematic of the season than a new baby chick — a tiny fluff of peeping perfection? You can order your chicks direct from a hatchery, but the best way to ensure you're getting healthy birds that suit your needs and climate is to hand-select them from your local feed store or farm supply.

Consider choosing "sexed" chicks, who have a 95 percent chance of being female (gentle clucking is typically preferred to sunrise crowing, and no, you don't need a rooster to get eggs). Pick chicks that are vibrant and bright-eyed, and don't show signs of listlessness. Fair Warning: baby chicks will beguile you with their cuteness. Decide ahead of time how many chickens you want and stick to it.



Photo by Lynette Rae McAdams

Undoubtedly one of the best rewards of chicken keeping, fresh eggs come in a beautiful variety of colors and sizes.

From brooder to coop

Once home, you'll need a brooder for your little ones — a cozy space that will be their quarters until they're fully feathered and can live in an outdoor coop (three to four months). Your brooder should be small and simple to clean (wooden crates work well, as do wire dog kennels). Place it out of drafts and close enough for frequent checking while chicks are small, and be sure to equip it with a heat lamp for temperature control, as well as the obvious feeder and waterer.

When they mature from chicks to pullets (immature hens), move your birds gradually to the coop — a few hours at a time each day — in the same way you would "harden off" plants for the garden. Whether it's a chicken palace or a humble lean-to against the potting shed, your coop needs to shelter your birds for years to come, and a little planning goes a long way.

Your henhouse should provide at least 2 square feet of interior space per hen, with 4 square feet per hen in an accompanying outside run. Place the roost away from feeders and waterers (chickens are professional poopers, especially while roosting at night), and create easy access to nesting boxes for both your "girls" and you.

Remember this above all: Everyone loves a chicken dinner; secure your coop against all predators. It's wise to cover your run and even bury wire around the perimeter to discourage persistent diggers (like dogs and raccoons).

Caring for hens

The day will come when your birds finally become hens (around five months of age), and that day is marked by the happy arrival of an egg. For the next year or so, even the smallest flock will likely provide more eggs than you can eat (you'll be popular with neighbors and friends). The more your hens have access to fresh air and food, with plenty of garden scraps and bugs to scratch after, the more beautiful their eggs will be, with thick, firm whites and delectable golden yolks.

Multiple studies confirm that eggs laid by pasture-raised, free-ranging hens are healthier too, with less fat and cholesterol, more Omega 3's, and higher levels of the beneficial vitamins K, E and D.

Though a hen's peak egg production begins to decline after two years, healthy birds will continue to lay for eight to 10, just not at the same rate. To keep your gathering basket full, think about staggering your flock and adding a few new birds every other year.

But don't value your chickens only for their eggs — instead, think of them as peaceful, sweetly clucking extensions of your garden. Even in retirement, they're superb cultivators that offer compost-enriching fertilizer, chemical-free pest control (no slug is safe), and a new life for breakfast and baked goods.



Submitted photo

She's only a day old, but this little chick is ready to take on the world.

More info

Chickens are welcome in all unincorporated areas of Pacific, Clatsop and Tillamook counties. If you live inside city limits, check local municipal codes before starting your flock. Here's an overview:

Long Beach, Washington: Not allowed

Ilwaco, Washington: Allowed, pending coop design approval (\$50 fee applies)

Astoria: Allowed (roosters discouraged)

Warrenton: Allowed on properties larger than one acre.

Gearhart: Up to four birds allowed; no roosters.

Seaside: Not allowed

Cannon Beach: Not allowed

Manzanita: Not allowed



Photo by Lynette Rae McAdams

Pearle and Virginia, two 8-year-old hens in Ocean Park, Washington, wait outside their pen, longing for an extra ration of scratch grains.

Coastal Life

Story by LYNETTE RAE MCADAMS