

Chickens In Your Backyard



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Why Chickens?



FRESH EGGS, BETTER THAN ANY YOU CAN BUY
FERTILIZER FROM THEIR DROPPINGS
CHICKENS ARE FUNNY TO WATCH
THEY REQUIRE ABOUT AS MUCH CARE AS A CAT
THEY LIVE OUTSIDE YEAR ROUND
THEY PROVIDE A CONNECTION TO SUSTAINABILITY



(L to R):

Buff Orpington: English Class, heavy breed, lays a light brown egg

Australorp: English class, heavy breed, lays a medium brown egg

Easter Egger: A hybrid, not a true breed, usually lays a green egg (ours lays a brown egg however)



**Waddle, KJ and Hippy Chick
(12 weeks old in this photo)**

Our New Girls



Fancy Breeds



White Crested Polish



Bearded D'Uccle Belgian



White Silkie



Columbia Cochon



Buff Crested Polish

What does a chicken need?



Their needs are few, all they require are:

- a COOP safe from predators. Hens have no natural defenses
- the right FOOD. Full grown chickens eat layer feed. They also enjoy vegetable peelings, seeds, worms and bugs
- potable WATER. In the winter and in hot weather this is especially important

Chicken Coops: Space Requirements



- A coop and run is the biggest up front expense
- Space requirements for full grown hens:
 - ✦ Inside Coop: 2 sq. feet per bird
 - ✦ Outside Run: 4 sq. feet per bird
 - ✦ Err on the side of more space if possible because...
- Crowding is dangerous:
 - ✦ More feather picking occurs
 - ✦ Cannibalism can occur, although some breeds are naturally more aggressive than others
 - ✦ Health conditions decline, disease and accidents occur
- Predators: chickens need protection from dogs, cats, raccoons, hawks, foxes, coyotes and humans
- Pests: chicken feed needs to be protected from mice, rats, squirrels and chipmunks and other rodents



The Playhouse Coop

PROS: \$35 plans available on the web from Dennis Harrison-Noonan (URL below) Easy to build with basic tools. Attractive, efficient, predator-pooof design. Can be added onto. About \$500 build cost in the Boston metro area. Houses up 3 or 4 heavy breed hens. 4 x 8 foot print. 6.5 feet tall. Easy to clean. All materials from Lowes/Home Depot.

CONS: Run is a bit small, I recommend an extra 4 feet of length. Requires medium-level construction skills. Finish details in the plans a bit sparse.

www.isthmushandyman.com





The Eglu

Award winning UK design,
Available over the internet
from Omlet USA.

PROS: Turn key solution,
easy to assemble, easy to
clean. Just add chickens!
Comes in six colors.
Insulated for winter. Two
versions: original Eglu
houses 2 chickens, Eglu
Cube houses up to 10.

CONS: Expensive; original
Eglu is \$495 to \$530. Eglu
Cube is \$995 to \$1250.
Shipping is extra. Original
Eglu could be buried by a
heavy snowfall.

omlet.us.com/hmepage





Catawba Coop Chicken Ark

PROS: Available as plans or a kit. Attractive, efficient A-frame, simpler to build than a Playhouse Coop. Easy to clean. Portable, can be carried and placed in different spots in your yard (people use chicken arks for insect control.)

CONS: Small, cannot add onto it if you get more chickens. Good for only 2-3 birds, run is small. Heavier than it looks, it weighs 100+ lbs when finished. Some people add wheels. Could be buried in a heavy snowfall.

Catawbacoops.com





Coop kits

PROS: more choices all the time as backyard chickens increase in popularity. Many different styles and sizes. Shipped flat and just need to be assembled. Made from wood if you don't like the plastic Eglu.

CONS: Still need to add a run and nest boxes. Still a rather expensive option and about the same price the Eglu Cube.

Chickencoopsource.com





Other Coop Solutions: Dog Houses

PROS: A large size dog house is big enough for 2-3 hens and a wooden dog house can be had new for about \$100 on the internet or for less used on Craigslist . There are many styles to choose from.

CONS: You still need to add a run, a door, nest box, roost and be able to get inside it to clean (sometimes the roofs are removable though.) You may need to raise it off the ground to keep it from being buried in a heavy snowfall.





Kids Playhouses

PROS: Bigger than a dog house, so good for more than 3-4 chickens. Often very decorative. Wide choice of styles. Wide range of prices; easy to assemble.

CONS: Often not weather tight and water proof. You still need to add a run, nest boxes and so forth.





Old Wooden Swing Sets

PROS: Often FREE if you haul it away (check Craigslist). The sets with a small “house” over the slide can be converted into the coop. The A-frame of the set can be converted into the run. Comes with a ladder the chickens can use. Big enough for 5-6 chickens.

CONS: Will always look like a old swing set.

This is our swing set – any takers?



Food



- Chickens are omnivores but primarily herbivore. In addition to chicken feed they eat vegetable peelings, bugs, worms and seeds.
- Baby chicks up to 8 weeks old eat chick starter, sold as mash (looks like bread crumbs or corn meal) or crumbles. Available medicated or unmediated.
- Pullets from 8 weeks to 20 weeks eat chick grower, sold as mash or pellets
- Hens from 20 weeks: Layer pellets or layer mash. I prefer pellets because there is less waste.

Other Supplements



- **Grit:** required by baby chicks and full grown hens throughout their life.
- **Oyster Shell:** provides calcium to laying hens and promotes strong egg shells. Do not give to pullets until after they lay as it can cause kidney problems.
- **Black Oil Sunflower Seeds (BOSS):** High in oil and protein, builds beautiful glossy feathers. Mine get BOSS daily in the winter.
- **Cracked Corn:** only as a treat. I don't bother with it because it has no real nutrition.
- **Diatomaceous Earth (DE):** Useful for pest control, kills flies, mites and fleas, dries up poo, harmless to chickens. You must use **FOOD GRADE** (not pool or garden grade!) Sprinkle it on pine shavings and on the chickens themselves. Some claim its a "natural wormer" which is hogwash. Expensive but you don't need to use much, a 10lb bag is about \$25 with shipping but lasts a year.

Organic vs. Nonorganic Feed



This is a personal choice. There are cost considerations:

- A 50lb bag of Blue Seal Feed is \$13.00 at Gilmore's in Walpole. Blue Seal is a high quality feed recommended by poultry exhibition judges. It's a local product, the company is in New Hampshire.
- A 50lb bag of organic feed will be about double the cost of regular feed. My feed store (Gilmore's) doesn't carry organic feed so I'd have to get it over the internet. A 50lb bag from Northeast Organics in upstate NY is \$25.00 + \$29.73 shipping.

How and Where to Buy Chickens



**DAY OLD BABY CHICKS
VS.
STARTED PULLETS**



Day Old Baby Chicks

Day old baby chicks are ordered from hatcheries and shipped live through the postal service. The Post Office is the only carrier who will ship baby chicks and they have been doing it successfully this since the 1930's.

There are advantages to raising baby chicks:

- You can choose the breeds, colors and the lay rate you want
- You can choose the egg color you want (white, cream, brown, green blue or chocolate brown)
- They can be vaccinated (or not, you choose)
- You will be able to tame them because they will have been with you from virtually day one.
- They are SO darn cute!



How a Hatchery works

Hatcheries generally have chicks available from January to July. In New England, a good time to order your chicks is between March and June. Any earlier than March and it's too hard to keep them warm and if you have them arrive later than June means you'll be dealing with setting up a coop as winter arrives.

Hatcheries work like this:

- Hatcheries have minimum orders. Big producers like Murray McMurray have a 25 chick minimum. Myer Hatchery in Ohio has a small order program and you can order 3. Mypetchicken.com also sells chicks in orders as small as 3.
- 15 to 25 chicks are about \$2.50 apiece and in a small order program they will run about \$10 apiece. In an order of less than 25 shipping will be about the same cost as the chicks (they are live animals after all.)
- The Post Office will call you when your chicks arrive and you need to go in person to pick them up. They arrive at the post office within 48 hours after shipment and most hatcheries ship on a Monday. It's a good idea to instruct the hatchery to ship to the main post office for your town so there is no delay in getting your chicks home. I always call the post office in advance to let them know a baby chick order will be arriving. I have never encountered a Post Office employee who doesn't know what to do with baby chicks, they have all been really great.
- When in doubt, call the hatchery; these folks know what they're doing.



Raising Baby Chicks

There are advantages to ordering baby chicks from a hatchery. You can select the breeds and mix of breeds you like and the birds can be vaccinated against common diseases that account for early chick mortality.

Baby chicks are far more self-sufficient than most baby birds. The minimum requirements are:

- A heat source to keep them at 95° to 70° F for the first few weeks. An infrared bulb from Lowes or Home Depot will work.
- Enough space to grow. For three birds I like to use the large cardboard produce boxes from Costco that are about 3 or 4 feet tall with a 3 x 4 footprint. The store will give you one free for the asking.
- Water and feed. Baby chicks need starter feed, I use Blue Seal Chick Starter at 1 - 8 weeks, switch to Blue Seal Grow-Cal at 8-20 weeks and then switch to Blue Seal Layer pellets at 20 weeks. As the chicks grow raise up the feed and water so they don't spill it or poop in it. Cake pans are good for this.
- Give them lots of human contact so they will be tame.



Make sure your brooder is set up with heat, food and water the night before they arrive.

After you get them home, open the box, immediately pick up each chick and dip its beak into the water. This teaches them to drink.

Place them gently in the brooder and let them explore.

Leave the heat lamp on 24/7. Week 1 is at 95° F and go down 5 degrees each week (just raise the light up)



The green stuff is Gro-Gel (prevents dehydration) and the white packet under the black chick is a heat pad, commonly used for orders of less than 15 chicks

Brood Box Gear



Heat Lamp w/Infrared bulb



Thermometer
(inexpensive is fine)



Feeder



Waterer



Pine Shavings

Our Brood Box Set-Up





Started Pullets

PROS: They are full grown at this stage and will be laying soon, within 2 months or so. None of the extra expense and time of raising baby chicks.

CONS: May not be tame (or tamable, they will be too old.) Limited choice in breeds. Minimum order usually 6. You need to have the coop set up and ready for them when you get them home, as they are full grown and too big to live in a brood box.

- Sold at feed stores in the spring or over the internet through hatcheries
- Usually about 17 weeks old
- More expensive than chicks, about \$50 per bird
- Treat them like full grown chickens, give them layer pellets right away

The Natural Life of A Chicken: Weeks 1-8



Weeks 1- 8

- A basement or garage is the ideal location for a brooder
- Keep them warm and fed. Lamp must be at 95° for week 1 and reduce temp 5° per week. Leave the heat lamp on 24/7 until they can tolerate 70° and then give them darkness at night
- Change the pine shavings weekly
- Give them lots of attention to tame them
- Feed with chick starter and you can start to give them grit and treats like lettuce after 2 weeks

The Natural Life of A Chicken: Weeks 8 - 18



- Switch from chick starter to chick grower feed. They will be big enough to eat seeds like BOSS
- Raise up the food & water because they will start to fly and perch on the top.
- When they can tolerate 70°F you can take them outside if it's warm enough. They need to be supervised.
- Keep giving them loving attention, after they are about 17 weeks you can't tame them.
- Start putting together your permanent coop
- Get them out of the house no later than week 10 (Trust me you will be more than ready to get them into their coop.)

The Natural Life of A Chicken: Weeks 18 - 26



- Switch them to layer feed and start to give them oyster shell
- They can eat a full diet of seeds and scraps, but don't let them fill up on it, chicken feed is balanced nutrition and should be 90% of their diet.
- Your first egg will appear at about 22-26 weeks (Approx six months of age) depending on the breed
- Lay rate depends on the breed and will range from 2 to 5 eggs a week per bird

The Natural Life of A Chicken: Weeks 26+



- The first molt will occur at about 1 year. Molting is stressful and egg laying may stop or seriously decline.
- Lay rate declines about 20% per year after one year of age.
- Chickens can live 8- 10 years
- It's a personal decision whether or not to keep them as the lay rate declines. Commercial laying flocks are processed after one year.

The Natural Life of A Chicken: Health



- Chickens are generally healthy, they are well adapted to humans and have been domesticated for 8,000 years.
- Bird Flu:
 - ✦ Has not been reported in the US. Commercial hatcheries have strict bio-security practices.
 - ✦ Confined chicks will be less exposed to wild animals and wild bird droppings than free ranging chickens
 - ✦ Respiratory disease in chickens tends to be a problem in flocks larger than 20.
- Marek's Disease: A contagious viral plastic disease. Chicks can be vaccinated against it (add extra \$.50 per chick). Its generally fatal to unvaccinated birds.
- Coccidiosis: A fatal parasitic wasting disease, tends to be more of a problem with free-ranging hens and large flocks. Spread through feces and infected soil, tends to be a problem in damp and wet conditions.
- Disease can be largely prevented by good sanitary practices (e.g. a clean coop with good ventilation, a healthy diet and no crowding.)



- Chickens live outside all year round and they will go into their coop everyday, on their own, at sunset
- Choose breeds adapted to a cold climate
- Heating your coop is a personal decision (we don't bother)
- Heavy breeds adapted for cold climates will lay right through the winter
- They can be left alone for up to 4 days with food & water, however someone must collect eggs daily to prevent broodiness
- They need unfrozen water in the winter
- Someone will need to give them fresh feed and water after 4 days



What about Winter and Vacations?

Chicken Keeping Bylaws and Your Town



- In MA chickens are regulated at the town level under M.G.L.
- Bylaws often on-line, or call the Town Clerk's office to see who regulates chickens in your town. Generally regulated by:
 - ✦ Animal Control
 - ✦ Board of Health
 - ✦ Code Enforcement
 - ✦ Zoning
- Do not rely solely on what a town employee tells you, read the bylaw yourself!
- Permits and inspections are sometimes but not always required
- Roosters are generally not allowed unless your town is rural

Chicken Keeping Bylaws

YES as of March 2010

- Belmont
- Boston (very limited)
- Brookline
- Brockton
- Dedham
- Hanson
- Lynn
- Newton
- Marblehead
- Salem
- Westwood
- Weymouth
- Scituate
- Arlington

NO as of March 2010

- Cambridge

Chicken Keeping Bylaws and HOA's



- Home Owners Association bylaws often prevail over town law with respect to chickens although this depends on the town and the HOA
- HOA's can be very restrictive against chickens and generally regulate against them
- HOA bylaws often not well written or clear on the issue of chicken keeping
- Often neighbors can be more problematic in newer subdivisions (the NIMBY issue) and just because an HOA bylaw may be silent on chickens doesn't mean you won't have problems with the neighbors