



Raising Backyard Chickens

Backyard Chickens By Jennifer Cook. Small Acreage Management Coordinator NRCS/CSU Extension, Brighton, CO

Raising backyard chickens can provide you with fresh eggs, pest control, and hours of entertainment. It may even save you some money. But before you get started, it is important to learn about what chickens need to be healthy and happy. First step, make sure your local municipality allows you to have chickens! I visited with Greg and Patty Michaud for an afternoon on their small acreage in Laporte, CO to learn more about raising chickens. Greg and Patty produce organic and conventional eggs and raise pullets (young female chickens).

They also run a small feed store. They convinced me that keeping a small flock of hens can be easy. Hens are productive egg layers for two to four years depending on the breed. Expect one egg every day or two per chicken for the first two years, and realize that egg production will decrease during the winter. Roosters are not necessary unless you want the eggs to be fertile. Greg told me the trick to having consistent egg layers is simply meeting their food, water, and shelter needs.

Food and Water

Chickens need constant food and water supply. Water must be under 80 degrees Fahrenheit and not frozen solid. Provide a free choice supply of complete LAYER feed which will have extra calcium, 16-18% protein, and essential amino acids/vitamins/minerals. Also feed ground oyster shells or ground egg shells for calcium if needed. Chickens are great nutrient cyclers. They will eat kitchen scraps like veggies, fruit, meat, bones, and dairy. They love grass clippings, bugs, seeds, worms, and weeds. During cold weather, provide extra energy

with "hen scratch" such as corn or soy grains. Flax seed will provide omega-3's when greens are not available. Alfalfa hay can also be fed.

Chickens have gizzards which are like secondary stomachs that help them grind their food before digestion. This process requires chickens to swallow gritty substances like gravel. If chickens do not have access to gravel in the chicken run, you can purchase "grit."

Sunlight and Soil

Access to outdoors is essential for healthy chickens. Install chicken fence around your property and let the chickens "free range" a few hours every day. If needed, clip their wings to keep them from escaping. In the chicken run and coop area, shoot for at least 10 square feet per chicken and make sure there is soil because chickens like to take dirt baths to deter mites. When it snows, it's good to shovel the runs because chickens don't like to walk in the snow.

The Coop

Coops need to protect chickens from heat, sun, wind, extreme cold, and predators. Use lots of high carbon litter like wood shavings, tree leaves and straw as bedding. The coop should provide a place for the chickens to lay eggs and a place to roost.

Wild chickens roost in trees at night. To simulate tree limbs, build roosting bars as high as practical and accessible in the coop. Chickens are very docile and vulnerable at night. Make sure predators like raccoon, fox, mountain lion, skunk, hawk, and coyote, are closed out. Farm cats can stay in the coop at night to hunt mice.

Nesting boxes should not be directly under the roosting area because chickens poop a lot at night. Greg recommends building the boxes 12" X 12" X 18" tall with a 6" tall front to hold straw. Plan on one box per four or five birds. Keep the boxes cleaned daily so your eggs will be clean.

Other Considerations

Labor - Daily egg collection and feeding.

Smells - Use high carbon litter to reduce manure smells.

Greg and Patty use the litter from the coop as compost in

their garden.

Noise - Hens make some noise when they lay an egg.

Roosters crow every morning. Tell your neighbors in advance if you expect noisy chickens.

Pathogens and Diseases - Not much in a small flock.

Don't kiss the birds, and wash your hands and equipment.

Disposal - How will you manage the older chickens which are no longer laying eggs? Keep them, eat them, euthanize them according to local regulations, or donate to animal rescue operations such as the Raptor Rehabilitation Center.

For more information:

"Home-Produced Chicken Eggs" CSU Extension factsheet at

<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/foodnut/09377.html>

CSU Veterinary Extension Avian Web Page at

<http://veterinaryextension.colostate.edu/menu2/avian.shtml>

