

# Basic Guide for the Backyard Chicken Flock<sup>1</sup>

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Raising a small, backyard chicken flock has gained interest in recent years as many small-farm owners desire to produce their own high-quality food. In addition, youngsters can learn to care for animals and experience the enjoyment of keeping animals as a 4-H project.

## Brooding

Newly hatched chicks need a heat source the first few weeks of life. The most common way to brood a small flock (25–50 chicks) is with a heat lamp. The 250 watt heat lamp should be placed 12–18 inches above the chicks. Day-old chicks need a temperature of 90°F–95°F. The behavior of the chicks is a good indicator of their comfort. If the chicks are huddled close to the heat source, they are cold; if they stay away from the heat source, they are too hot. Quiet, evenly distributed chicks are a sign of optimum temperature. A thermometer is the most accurate way to keep track of the temperature. Be sure the height of the thermometer is at the same height as the chicks for an accurate temperature reading at “chick level.” The temperature should be lowered by five degrees per week until the chicks are four-weeks-old or have feathered. Adjust the height of the lamp to adjust the temperature. Raising the lamp a few inches each week should drop the temperature by five degrees. More information on the care of baby chicks can be found at (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/an182>).

## Housing

A flock house in Florida does not need to be expensive or elaborate. An area that is covered by a roof and enclosed

with a minimum of two sides for protection from prevailing rain and wind is sufficient. The size of the house should be based on a minimum of three square feet of floor space per bird. Twenty-five birds with three square feet of floor space will require about 75 square feet of floor space; a house 8 feet by 10 feet will be sufficient for this example. The use of fencing (chicken wire) helps in confining the birds and provides protection from predators. The top of the enclosure also needs to be covered to prevent flying and climbing predators from entering. Using an enclosed run or free range during the day provides an open area that reduces stress, pecking, and will allow the birds to supplement their diets with a variety of greens and insects.

## Feed and Water

The type of feed recommended varies with the age and intended use of the bird. Good nutrition is very important in maintaining a healthy flock.

If the chicks are female, the following feeding schedule can be used to grow the birds until and during egg production:

- Newly hatched chicks will require a commercial starter feed (20–24% protein) that is usually fed until six weeks of age.
- Expect to use at least four pounds of starter feed per bird.
- After six weeks, switch to a grower feed (16–20% protein), and feed this up to 18 weeks of age. Many feed stores carry a combination starter/grower feed that will work well for both stages of growth.

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- At 18 weeks, switch to a layer feed (14–16% protein) to prepare the birds for egg production.
- Do not feed layer feed to birds less than 18-weeks-old or starter/grower feed to birds producing eggs.
- To support rapid growth, the starter diet for chicks has the highest level of protein a chicken will receive during its lifetime.
- If layer feed is fed to male or female chicks, a reduction in growth can be expected and an unnecessary stress will be placed on the young birds.
- Chicks fed layer feed will develop kidney problems and rickets since the calcium to phosphorus ratio is out of balance.
- Layer feed normally contains approximately 3.5–4.0% calcium; however, birds less than 18-weeks-old require only about 1% calcium in their diet.
- Layer-age birds need a diet lower in protein and higher in calcium for eggshell formation.

If the chicks are male, then they can be fed the same starter or starter/grower feed as the females until six weeks of age and then switched to the grower feed indefinitely.

- Do not feed layer feed to males.

Many commercial starter feeds are medicated to control coccidiosis. This disease is caused by a microscopic parasite that infects the intestinal tract. The mild strength of the drug used in the feed will kill most, but not all, of the parasites. This will allow gradual immunity to develop so the birds usually will not have problems with coccidiosis as adults. Grower and layer feed usually do not contain medication.

It is important that chicks have easy access to clean, fresh water. Manufactured chick waterers usually consist of a quart or gallon jar with screw-on base that allows for water level adjustment. If water spills occur in the location of the waterer, then these should be cleaned as soon as possible to prevent bacterial growth that leads to odors and possibly disease. An automatic waterer placed six inches off the ground is the most adequate way to ensure the birds have clean, fresh water daily. A constant supply of clean, fresh water is essential for healthy birds. Twenty-five hens can drink a gallon of water each day. Water consumption will increase dramatically during hot weather.

## Nesting

As the birds reach the age of 18–20 weeks, nesting boxes should be in place. Boxes measuring 12 x 12 x 12 inches, half filled with straw are ideal. Provide one nest box for each five hens in the flock, and place them about two feet

above the ground. A perch may be placed in front of each box allowing a spot for hens to land before entering the box. Nesting boxes should be checked twice a day for eggs. Eggs should not be allowed to accumulate in the nests. Otherwise the hens will go out of egg production and want to sit on the eggs to incubate them. This type of hen is commonly referred to as a “broody” hen.

Day length influences egg production. If day length decreases during the laying period, the number of eggs may decrease. The use of artificial light can add extra time at the beginning or end of the true daylight. A combination of natural and artificial light resulting in 14–16 hours of light per day is effective to maintain egg production throughout the year.

Egg production for a small backyard flock should be about 200–240 eggs, or 17–20 dozen, per hen a year.

## Breed Description

You have two basic choices when deciding what type of poultry to keep. You may choose a breed that excels in egg production or a breed noted for meat production; a few breeds produce both fairly well. Chickens bred to produce eggs fall into two classifications—the leghorn type that produces white eggs and the sex-linked type that produces brown eggs.

While the leghorn strain of chicken will produce the most eggs, these birds are quite small and are not a good choice for meat. The Rock-Cornish, a commercial broiler-type bird, has been bred for rapid meat production. Breeds that may work well for dual purpose include the Rhode Island Red, Plymouth Rock, New Hampshire, Wyandotte, and Orpington.



Figure 1. Buff Orpington hen. (Photograph by Tom Wright, UF/IFAS.)



Figure 2. Barred Rock hen. (Photograph by Tom Wright, UF/IFAS.)



Figure 3. Rhode Island Red hen. (Photograph by Tom Wright, UF/IFAS.)

## Hatcheries

**Murray McMurray**, P.O. Box 458, 191 Closz Drive, Webster City, Iowa 50595, (800) 456-3280 <http://www.mcmurrayhatchery.com/index.html>

**Ideal Poultry Breeding Farms Inc.**, P.O. Box 591, Cameron, Texas 76520-0591, (254) 697-6677 <http://www.ideal-poultry.com/>

**Mt. Healthy Hatcheries Inc.**, 9839 Winton Road, Mt. Healthy, Ohio 45231, (800) 451-5603 <http://www.mthealthy.com/>

**Cackle Hatchery**, P.O. Box 529, Lebanon, Missouri 65536, (417) 532-4581 <http://www.cacklehatchery.com>

Table 1. Breed Description

Breed	Plumage Color	Eggshell Color	Rate of Lay	Breed Information
Barred Plymouth Rock	Black and white barring	Brown	Excellent	Oldest breed; excellent dual-purpose breed
Black Sex-Links	Black with gold hackle and breast	Brown	Excellent	Cross of Rhode Island Red and Barred Plymouth Rock
Brown Sex-Links	Dark red with black tails and wings	Brown	Excellent	Cross of Rhode Island Red and White Plymouth Rock
Gold Sex-Links	Light red with white tails and wings	Brown	Excellent	Cross of Rhode Island Red and Rhode Island Whites
Red Sex-Links	Dark red with black tails and wings	Brown	Excellent	Cross of Rhode Island Red and Delaware
Rhode Island Red	Very dark red	Brown	Excellent	Old Breed; popular dual-purpose
Black Australorps	Black with greenish sheen	Brown	Excellent	Excellent, small-flock producer; hardy
Ameraucanas	Multicolored (white, brown, red, black)	Green, blue, light brown	Excellent	From South America; nicknamed "Easter Egg Chicken" due to color of eggshell
White Leghorn	White	White	Excellent	Excellent layer
New Hampshire Reds	Chestnut red	Brown	Very good	Popular, dual-purpose breed; grows fast
Silver Laced Wyandottes	Silvery white; edged with black	Brown	Very good	Beautiful old breed; popular for cold areas
White Plymouth Rock	White	Brown	Very good	Medium-sized, dual-purpose breed
Golden Laced Wyandottes	Golden; edged with greenish black	Brown	Good	Same as Silver Laced
Buff Orpingtons	Rich golden buff	Brown	Good	Large breed with quiet disposition; popular backyard flock