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**Practical
Stages**

**So You Want to
Raise Chickens...
A Beginner's Guide**

by **John White**

6

**Planning
Stages**



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Introduction

(stop here and read)

THIS MEANS YOU!

Hey folks, John here. I know, I hate reading introductions and forewords like just about everyone else, but there is some important information tied up right here so I'd like to ask you to stop and read this section before continuing with the 'exciting' parts. I promise it won't be boring and I PROMISE it's useful!

If you read my guide on chicken illnesses and diseases then you can skip this part. Otherwise, please continue here:

I wanted to address something here based on several emails I've received:

I'm not a doctor or a vet. I know, big surprise! With that obvious statement made, I need to advise you all to speak more with your vet if you suspect a serious problem or have an issue that you don't read about in my guides. Sure things like garlic, oregano, cayenne, yogurt, and vinegar are going to help keep your chickens healthy and can reduce the severity of many common illnesses. And giving your chickens greens in winter will help keep them strong. But how can you tell the difference between a common illness and a serious disease? Or how about common problems with newly hatched chicks? What to feed your chickens if they aren't responding well to their current feed? Even experienced chicken farmers can't do that sometimes so getting a vet you trust will help out enormously in the long run. Remember, if they recommend a course of treatment it doesn't mean that you have to follow that exact protocol if you feel another way is right. But you do need to get a good idea of what you're working with first. If it's something serious you may be legally required to destroy your flock to protect the people and animals nearby. Or if your vet starts prescribing a bunch of antibiotics for your chicken's cold, well . . . you can probably treat that as you see fit. It all has to do with using common sense (which they say isn't common, incidentally). Sometimes you have to bite the bullet and accept a treatment which would otherwise be something you wouldn't use. Perhaps if I describe to you the term 'allopathic medicine' then you will better understand what I mean.

Allopathic medicine is the type of medicine most commonly practiced in Western countries for humans and animals. It was originally meant only for emergencies, then it became used for all situations. Think about it like this: if I break my leg I'm definitely going to the ER and I'm going to be thankful for the allopathic medicine the doctors use there such as x-rays and pain meds. However if I have a cold I'm not going to call in the AMA's S.W.A.T team. I'm going to treat it myself instead of proverbially dropping napalm to kill a squirrel in the forest.

One of the best things to do is to grow some gentle medicinal plants in the area where your chickens are. Things like oregano, holy basil, calendula, nettles, etc. are great for birds to self-medicate themselves with. Have you ever noticed your dog or cat eat grass for no apparent reason? They're self-medicating. Animals have an instinct of what they need to make themselves better so if you give them the materials they'll often do the work themselves and save you the trouble.

Lastly, before I get to the meat of this guide, I'd like to ask you to not believe everything you read on the internet or even in books when it comes to herbs and natural healing (or raising chickens!). When my wife took a course on herbalism she was told to cross check everything among at least 3 separate sources but preferably more. A lot of forums will have information that is very helpful but is usually incomplete and written by folks that are hardly experts. I've even seen many folks recommend things like dousing gasoline on a chicken to get rid of external parasites! On the internet, knowledge gets passed around like kids playing Telephone. D Mannose might be great for people with UTI's, for example, and it prevents bacteria from sticking to the urethra which eliminates them and usually cures the UTI. But if you rush right out to treat yourself with it and happen to have diabetes then you might wind up in the hospital since it also raises blood sugar levels. See what I mean? Do your homework. I know too many people who just accept something they read on Dr. Google (or hear from Dr. Oz or Dr. Phil) as fact without further research. Your chickens (and you) deserve better.

How to Check Regulations

Many people know that chickens are generally accepted in rural areas, but few know that you can also have chickens in suburban and urban areas. In fact, it's becoming increasingly more popular to do this.



Years ago, I heard about the Path to Freedom urban project and I wanted that for my family. Path to Freedom started back in the 1980's with a little urban backyard in southern California, 1/10th of an acre to be exact, and now on the same property they harvest over 3 tons of organic food each year! They have a business selling their surplus to local restaurants and now showing others how to build the dream for themselves. It's an amazing thing.

Makes you want to live that dream yourself if you look through their history. However, dreams sometimes get tangled in reality and the next thing you know you're fighting with a myriad of local government officials for your right to have an urban micro-farm.

Before you get too deeply entrenched in building a coop and buying the perfect breed of chicken, check out your local regulations. They can be surprisingly accepting like Lexington, KY where in most parts of the city you can have up to 25 hens to only having 3 hens in one small town in Florida I know of, all the way to no, no, NO for many other towns. You never know until you check. Call your local city hall, county extension office, and/or animal control to find out the facts for sure. Usually a quick google search will also give you the information you need as well but sometimes it comes down to calling someone.

I will tell you, though, don't always take no for an answer! Find out when your local city council meetings are, get some like-minded friends together, and show up. Make sure to have your research in hand first and a list of cities who changed their minds about chickens (there are hundreds). Change starts with one person . . . but the more people who show up at the town meeting wanting chickens the better!

Choosing Breeds

Before you can choose a breed, you have to figure out why you want chickens in the first place. Want them for meat? (I'm thinking of writing a separate guide for this lengthy subject) Pick one that is bred for that purpose. Eggs? Pick a good layer. Companionship? You want a bird that is good-natured and has a great temperament. I prefer a dual-purpose breed myself so I can have eggs and then we can grab a bird for dinner if the need arises.



There are also other considerations. For example, if you want an egg layer but you also have children then you aren't going to want birds that are flighty and prone to attack or peck at people. It's important to look at the whole picture before purchasing. I would also suggest making friends with local farmers and hen lovers to ask them what their opinions are on certain birds and which ones are most commonly raised in your local area so the birds will be comfortable. If you live in a cold climate then you don't want to pick a gentle egg-layer who will freeze at the first cold wind.

What about the space available? If you're in the city then you don't want an active bird in a cramped area.

Below is a link to the best breed chart I've seen so I couldn't possibly improve it. It's available from the Livestock Conservancy and should help you with your decision.

<http://albc-usa.etapwss.com/images/uploads/docs/pickachicken.pdf>

I do recommend the Cream Legbar if you need a dual-purpose breed, however. Cream Legbars are a heritage breed, auto-sexed British chicken that lays early, between 20-24 weeks, have a good amount of meat, are cold/heat tolerant, and produce awesome blue eggs like an Araucana! There are mixed reviews on their temperament. Many find them to be calm, intelligent birds. Others find them to be loud and flighty. Likely it depends on how they mix with your existing flock. We've never had a problem with them and they're pretty curious. They like to follow you around a lot and seem to like people. I know you can pick them up from Meyer Hatchery in the States, but a google search can probably find other places to get them as well.

You can also try everyone's favorite breed, the Orpington. These are generally very sweet-natured and friendly. Great for people with children. We have one entire coop full of beautiful Buffs.

How to Source Chickens

So you've figured out what breed will work best for your needs and you've made sure of how many chickens you can have in your area. Now how do you get them?

There are a few options available to you:

1. Check your local feed store, especially in the spring. Call ahead to see when chicks are available and what breeds they will have. Selection is usually limited, but generally you will be able to easily see if the chicks are healthy and have been immunized or if they are certified healthy.
2. Check freecycle.org or craigslist.org. Although it's more difficult to tell if the chickens have been well kept to a novice eye, I've found some great deals on some beautiful birds that came home to be good layers. You need to make sure to ask plenty of questions such as how old they are, if the flock has ever had an illness, and if they've been vaccinated or given medication before. You want birds that are 6-18 months old, never ill, and preferably never given antibiotics but usually you can counteract this by feeding the chickens some yogurt to heal them. Be sure to pick bright-eyed birds with clean, unruffled feathers and strongly colored combs without any scaling on their legs.
3. Put up an advertisement at the local feed store and farmer supply stores for chickens. Someone may call and I've purchased hens this way.
4. Purchase chicks from a hatchery and raise them. This is good because you know what you're going to feed them and how you're going to take care of them. But this can be bad because hatchery chicks are prone to many illnesses, are generally weak on arrival, and it takes time to raise them before you get eggs. However for companionship only, raising your own chicks can't be beat.
5. The Livestock Conservancy has a great online directory you can search by region.
<http://www.livestockconservancy.org/index.php/directory>

What Type of Coop Do You Need?

In order to answer this question... you need to ask yourself a lot more questions:

1. How many chickens do I want/need/can have/will eventually have?
 - a. Unless you have a strict limit where you live, you'll want to determine if you plan on expanding your flock later. This can happen unintentionally, such as buying fertile eggs for a broody or taking a hen from a neighbor or farmer. I always recommend leaving room for a few more.
 - b. You'll also want some replacement chickens. Once my chickens get to be about 2-3 years old, I purchase very young pullets to replace them since I know I'll soon be phasing the older hens out.
2. Am I keeping the hens in a small run, keeping in the coop all day, or letting them roam free?
 - a. Again this comes down to space and where you live. I firmly recommend against keeping hens in a coop all day as they can start fighting with each other and it's just inhumane.
 - b. A small run means they need a larger coop for space, minimum of about 8 sq. feet per bird if they won't have a lot of outside room.
 - c. Free-range chickens don't need a large coop so count on about 4 sq. feet per bird for them.
3. Are there a lot of predators where you live?
 - a. Even in the city there can be raccoons, possum, and foxes. Some cities also have wild dogs and coyote in addition to hawks and eagles.
 - b. Are you going to have to put up netting to keep predatory birds out?
 - c. Do you need to dig down to put in a fence or put up other things to keep predators at bay?
4. What does the land look like?
 - a. You don't want a mobile coop flying down a mountainside. The chickens will cry.
5. How much do you have to put into this part of the project?
 - a. Have you already budgeted for buying the chickens and feed to start things off?
 - b. Don't forget things like fencing, feed dishes, waterers, grit, etc.
 - c. Can you get any reclaimed materials like lumber, windows, roofing, etc?
6. Do you want your coop mobile or stationary?

Exploring Ventilation and Insulation Options

Ventilation and insulation...This is a place where everyone seems to 'know' the answer and yet there are a lot of wrong answers. I'm hoping to clear up some of the confusion in this area for everyone. There are a few things that you **MUST** do.

Have a DRY coop

The cold, wet air can encourage illnesses of the head and lungs such as flu, cold, bronchitis, cough, or some of the more 'official' sounding chicken diseases like coryza (a bacterial cold bug). But more than just illnesses, the damp conditions will breed a horde of fungi and molds that can be very dangerous or even fatal for your flock. To prevent this, start by removing anything that can serve as a breeding ground for mold or fungus inside the coop.

- Hay and straw usually come with their own types of molds and fungi so if they start to get damp, scrape and dump it. In wet weather I usually don't even bother putting it in the coop to begin with. Instead I use a variety of local options to keep it dry in that type of weather.
- Water dishes that have been repeatedly filled but never washed. Slimy mold tends to build up and then the hens are actively drinking it. Yuck.
- In places where it is often rainy (like the Pacific Northwest) or has a long rainy season (Florida and the low areas) it's best to make a coop that does not have insulation between the walls because unless you spray it with nasty chemicals that can outgas into your coop, it's going to get damp and because of lack of air circulation it will stay damp which turns into mold and mildew. Possibly even the dreaded black mold that is guaranteed to get into the lungs of your flock and YOU!

Have a TEMPERATURE STABLE coop

So let's say that in the summer your coop has good airflow, catches the breezes just right, and stays nice and dry even in the rain. Your hens are happy and productive, giving you a lot of eggs because you also give them good feed and access to fresh water and insects.

Then winter comes...

This same coop that worked so well during the summer months becomes a nightmare. It doesn't keep the drafts out completely. The plastic you put up over it catches the wind and frequently rips pieces of the coop or blows away. Your hens are freezing cold and huddled together so tightly that you don't think you could pry them apart with a stick. The water is frozen in the dish.

What do you do?

Insulation is needed to keep the temperature from hitting extremes inside the coop. And the ventilation needs to flow up from the bottom to keep things moving inside and prevent air stagnation. I would recommend covering half of the vents to keep out wind if that's a major issue and get a water warmer. The residual heat will help keep your flock warm without overheating them. As long as big drafts aren't getting inside, the water stays fluid, and the coop is clean things should be good for your hens.

Have a FUNGUS/MOLD-FREE coop

So your hens are warm and cozy. They've snuggled up together against a big hay bale to keep warm and there are enough hens to generate heat that prevents them from getting cold in the 20F temperatures outside. But the air grows moist from a combination of spilled water, ammonia fumes from the chicken waste, and no ventilation. Soon the hay bale wilts and the fungal spores start to grow from inside. Even the walls themselves are growing mold and mildew from the moist conditions. The chickens start to get sick from the damp, moldy air and the fumes from their own waste.

Or you could take those warm, cozy hens you started with and keep them that way by making sure there is a good airflow from bottom to top (cool air comes in on the bottom and carries away the air that is too moist or too warm up through the roof). You can use hay bales if you want, but keep in mind that they carry a lot of fungi and molds so it's critical to keep the air the perfect balance between moist and dry or you'll have problems. We've already explored how the temperature variations can cause problems, as well as the moisture, but try taking some additional steps to keep your flock safe in the very likely event that you aren't perfect and will never have the perfect balance of temperature and moisture.

- When you do seasonal cleaning, spray the walls with a light solution of vinegar and lemon, lavender, or thyme oil (thyme oil is a potent disinfectant). This will help prevent mold and mildew.
- Paint the interior of your coop at seasonal cleaning time with mold and mildew resistant paint. They have a low VOC paint that is safe for animals and humans.
- Put a couple of drops of apple cider vinegar in your chicken water to help combat mold or fungal growth where the water gets spilled.
- Stay on top of chicken waste, especially in the winter.
- If you serve your flock a hot mash or peelings for a treat, make sure they eat it all and if they don't make sure it's cleaned out of the coop within two days.

There are several options for insulation that work for coops depending on your needs. If you live in a hot, dry area then the type of insulation you need is drastically different from someone who lives in a cold, damp climate.

<i>HOT & DAMP</i> (Florida, Coastal South, etc)	Insulation isn't needed, but ventilation is a must to prevent mold and fungus.
<i>HOT & DRY</i> (Southwest US)	Insulation isn't needed as much. Focus on keeping flock hydrated.
<i>COLD (or COOL) & DAMP</i> (Pacific Southwest)	Light insulation since temperatures rarely go below 25F. Ventilation is important to prevent illness, mold, and fungus.
<i>COLD & DRY</i> (Midwest states)	Insulation required, ventilation type depends on amount of chickens in coop. May need additional heat source, but usually a heated water dish will provide enough warmth unless you have very few chickens or a very large coop.
<i>EXTREME COLD</i> (Upper Midwest, Canada)	Insulation required, ventilation depends on amount of chickens in coop. Will certainly need additional heat source.

Roll insulation works really well, but to prevent mold problems inside the walls where I can't see it, I like to use a safe roll insulation like bamboo or recycled denim. I'm not really concerned that way if the hens peck at it a little. Just staple it up on the walls, then cover the walls with cut to fit chicken wire or micromesh. If for some reason it does mold then I can rip it down and replace it easily instead of tearing down a perfectly good coop.

Local Predators and Making a Solid Plan to Stop Them

Funny true story - or not depending on your view of things - our entire first flock of hens were killed by raccoons. We figured that since we lived in an urban area at the time that they would be okay but we were wrong. We were shocked to discover that aside from the stray possum (who also eat chickens!) and squirrels there were heaps of critters plotting to invade the coop at any time and take off with our little feathered friends.



I think the reason it shocked us so much was that at the time we just assumed that wild animals lived in the country and it doesn't work that way. Shortly after we started seeing wild rabbits and foxes in the small wooded area near our house. Later when we moved to the country we were doubly prepared and completely paranoid for the first several months until we got our protection routine on track and we knew our area better.

1. Identify

- a. Predators common in your area
- b. Safer sections of your property
- c. Trouble areas like overhanging trees and back fences that might provide a place for predators to drop in from above
- d. Holes and gaps where predators can enter your coop area
- e. Farmers, neighbors, extension office, farmer supply stores, and clubs where you can get local information about what predators to expect (better than reading a book about it)

2. Prevention

- a. Cover holes or gaps with fine mesh (holes no bigger than a pencil can fit through)
- b. Line bottom of coop with landscaping fabric, staple in place along edge of wood, and cover with 2" of soil to prevent digging predators
- c. Dig a trench before installing fence and place it approximately 18" down into the ground. Tie or staple landscaping fabric from the bottom to about 18" above ground along the fence. Cover trench back up with dirt and pack firmly.
- d. You can also run electrified wire along the ground around the run but make sure children and pets are safe from it and it's only enough current running through to deter, not kill
- e. Sometimes pheromone sprays or certain animal urines will keep predators away naturally so check with your local extension office and farmer supply store for more information

List of Common Predators in North America:

Hawks
 Eagles
 Owls
 Bears
 Coyotes
 Wolves
 Dogs (wild and otherwise)
 Mountain Lions/Panthers/Cougars
 Bobcats
 Alligators
 Raccoons
 Skunks
 Weasels/Minks
 Foxes
 Possums
 Snakes
 Mice/Rats

3. Control

- a. Set traps for common predators in your area
- b. Set metallic pinwheels around perimeter of fence tops to deter birds
- c. Purchase or make false predators like owls, wolves, bears, or coyote. This works better if you use pheromone sprays with it.
- d. Motion sensors (your hens should be inside sleeping at night always)
- e. Set a large pole in the middle of the run and cover the run with fine netting, stapled to the fencing, to prevent large birds in areas where this is a major concern
- f. Create artificial brush cover for pastured birds to escape from predatory birds
- g. Roosters are natural guard animals, but also think of geese and some dogs

Care and Feeding

The care of chickens isn't terribly difficult. Since I like bullet points and they help me focus when I'm reading (sort of like a checklist) I'm going to use them here:



- Chickens need at least 4 square feet of space (in the coop) per bird if you pasture them and if you plan to purely pasture raise them (no feed seasonally) then you need to provide about ¼ acre per bird to accomplish this along with adequate supplies of water, grit, and calcium.
 - For coop raised birds, I recommend about 10 square feet per bird just because chickens are happier when their friends can come to visit and go back 'home'. They're social creatures, but crowding + boredom = cannibals.
 - Coop birds also need fresh water, grit, and calcium like oyster shells. I also recommend more entertainment or you'll run into that boredom problem again. I recommend hanging cabbages at pecking level in the wintertime and throwing seeds (scratch) down occasionally for them to poke through. But don't overdo it with the scratch. I know it's fun to watch them go bananas after all the little seeds and such, but it's not good for them to have it more than once every couple of days.

- The water should be easy to access but not easy to poop in. Hang it about 6-7 inches above the ground so everyone can get to it and it's harder to knock over or pollute. Make sure to keep it from freezing or getting so hot it can't be consumed.
- Whether pastured or coop raised, make sure there are nesting boxes (about 1 box per 3 birds) set in a cozy, private area so they feel safe when laying.
- Also, roosting bars for the hens to rest on should be easy to climb up to but the hens sometimes require some training from you. They aren't mind-readers so how are they to know that those pretty bars you worked so hard on installing are for them? Help show them initially by setting them on the bar and helping them climb up and down a couple of times. They'll get the notion eventually. The bars should be about 2 inches round and make them long enough so that each bird gets just shy of a foot of space.
- Watch your chickens and see how they are naturally so you can tell when something is wrong. If a normally active, inquisitive hen starts acting funny it could mean she's broody or ill and you want to address either one right away.
- There are several litter control methods to choose from, and this isn't the place to cover them all, but my favorite is to have a pan built into the floor of each small coop that is removable so once a week I can just dump everything into the compost pile and move on until seasonal cleaning (twice a year). There is usually a fine mesh floor covered with (dry, clean and not molded) straw to prevent the hens from hurting their feet and you can just poke this all through with a broom before dumping the pan and refreshing everything again. I tend to keep several smaller coops of 10 hens or so to prevent the spread of serious illnesses, but for folks who have large coops that definitely isn't practical. Do a little research to find what's best for you.
- For other bedding material, I've been experimenting with shredded cardboard and I like it pretty well. Other folks who do different litter methods also recommend sand as a perfect bedding material since it can be raked and reused and they just toss down fresh sand occasionally.
- Chickens require trimming, particularly at least one wing, to keep them from flying off. Oh yes, they can sort of fly and you will find them in trees and on fence posts unless you keep them clipped. I recommend going to a vet or a local farmer and asking them to show you exactly how to trim a chicken's wing. It's not hard, but it's one of those things that you really want to see in person at least once before you attempt it. Otherwise you could possibly injure the chicken or yourself in the process.
- Don't forget a dust bathing area! This makes your job easier by helping prevent external parasites, especially if you toss some diatomaceous earth in the dust bath area. Just dig a small shallow bowl shape in a corner of the run and fill it with a bag of play sand and diatomaceous earth (DE). Shouldn't have to refresh it but maybe once a year if that and they'll have fun there for ages to come.

Herbs and Greens for Health



Chickens love green growing things! Not only are herbs fun for them but they are healthier for the eating. Animals tend to self-medicate very successfully. If you give them the right tools they gravitate toward what they need to help them without any interference from you. I suggest planting some herbs in large flats and setting the flats where the chickens can reach them easily. If you just plant the herbs in the ground then they're very likely to just eat the seeds or kill the seedlings. Once the herbs are fully established simply move them in or you can feed them a mixture by hand a few times a week. However, I prefer to let them pick what to eat. Helps me know what they need more of in their diet or environment.

- Basil
- Cilantro
- Cumin (especially when it's gone to seed)
- Dill
- Fennel
- Lavender
- Lemon Balm
- Marigold or Calendula (this will color their skins and eggs to be more yellow/gold)
- Mints (if you're sure that the hens will eat it all, otherwise it might get away from you!)
- Nasturtium
- Oregano
- Parsley
- Sage
- Thyme

Homemade Chicken Feed

Those of us who are extra picky about what goes into our bodies (especially via our chickens) have probably played around with the idea of making our own chicken feed.

Ideally, chickens deserve pasture and plenty of it. Rooting around for bugs, worms, and the spare blade of grass makes them happy and healthy, which in turn makes us the same. But when the sunlight goes dim and the nights lengthen, the blades of grass usually shrivel and turn brown. Those lovely little insects and worms get more difficult to find since they're further underground, which makes our chickens sad.

Or perhaps you don't even HAVE pasture land for your chickens! That's a common problem for urban farmers. The ¼ acre per hen goal isn't always possible.

Then there are costs to consider. Trying to purchase organic, non-GMO feed without corn or soy can be a nightmare. If you aren't lucky enough to be able to purchase it from your local buying club via Azure Standard, then you have to mail order it. The shipping often costs as much as the feed itself.

Frugal people with a DIY attitude will turn to making their own feed. The benefits are numerous. Cheaper, better for your chickens, and you can even add supplemental herbs to the feed to increase nutrition and prevent parasites.

First things first, keep your weeds.

Do you have nettles overgrowing patches of your yard? Dandelions? Alfalfa grass (avoid the GMO variety of this). What about that pest to all farmers, pigweed (or lambsquarters as they're also called)? A great solution is to let them grow tall, harvest them, and feed them to your chickens. With lambsquarters, the chickens don't have much of a chance in the early spring because I beat them to the punch and eat at least half of them myself. They are a darned tasty substitute for creamed spinach!

Later in the fall months of course, weeds don't taste as good for human consumption. This is prime time for letting the chickens at them, as well as storing them up for the winter months. After you harvest, simply hang them up to dry and grind them for a supplement. These are all 'weeds' that happen to be very nutrient dense. The seeds of lambsquarters are even called 'fat hen' in some places, and for good reason. Even the Romans would make cakes from those nutritious seeds to eat on their long marches.

SOME of the wonderful weeds that may grow in your yard near the flock:

- lambsquarters
- nettles
- dandelions
- comfrey
- plantain
- cleavers
- mint
- mullein
- catnip
- wormwood (great for worms, who'd have thought!)

Until you can harvest your weeds, you can purchase bags of nettle and dandelion from places like Mountain Rose Herbs. They're fairly cheap and you can get huge bags for not that much. A one pound bag is enormous and will last you all winter for most smaller flocks.

Recipe for homemade chicken feed:

6 cups oat groats
4 cups hard red wheat
4 cups rye
2 cups black oil sunflower seeds
2 cups soft white wheat
2 cups split peas
2 cups flax seeds
1 cup sesame seeds
3/4 cup kelp granules
3 TB sucanat (molasses granules)
1/2 TB cayenne pepper powder
1/2 cup fennel seeds
1 cup dried nettle leaves
1 cup dried dandelion leaves
I generally give the grit and such separately, but throw in as much as you like if you add it directly to the feed.

The cayenne in this will help prevent internal and external parasites, including worms. I used to recommend adding garlic powder but new information has shown me that it's better to control that separately. The nettle and dandelion leaves will add extra nutrients, as will the kelp. Not only that, but the fennel seeds are enjoyable for the chickens AND they boost egg production.

You may have to tweak this recipe for your own flock. Some flocks aren't partial to peas, for example! Maybe they want something else and you need to find another protein source. But this is a good standard layer feed. If you want to add some hot water and cook it up for them as a mash, they'd probably love it even more - especially in the winter months.

If you're looking for resources, try Azure Standard for grains. Mountain Rose Herbs tends to carry all the other things at very reasonable prices and great quality. I've even ordered bulk from Whole Foods of all places and it was quite reasonable. Generally WF gives you 10% off if you purchase a 'case'. They usually just charged me what it cost them to purchase the bags of grains or whatever else I purchased.

For a good starter blend, take the recipe above and remove the cayenne. Take out the nettle leaves as well since chicks don't need that much calcium. Add 2 cups of lentils to the batch. Grind it all up so it's a fairly homogeneous crumble that can be eaten by chicks. For grower, do the above but also remove half the split peas and make it a bit more chunky so they can have fun with it. Simple enough to do!

The protein in the first formula is about 18%, the starter formula is 19.8% approximately, and the grower feed version is about 17% give or take. If you want to lower the protein content you can. It depends on your flock's needs. I found a really great calculator tool here: <http://www.myfitnesspal.com/recipe/calculator>

And if you're not quite sure how to figure out the percentages of protein to overall calories, there's an easy formula for it. Find your grams of protein and times it by 4. Then divide protein by total calories, then times that all by 100. So it would look something like this:

731 grams of protein * 4 = 2,924

2,924 / 14,771 total calories = .197955 * 100 = 19.79% protein

With luck, you can not only use the above homemade formula for your chickens, but you now have the confidence to do this on your own!

Chicken Personality

There is a lot of ground to cover for the simple title of ‘personality’ so I’m going to stick mainly with what breeds usually display what traits for this section and discuss a little of what types of basic personality traits you’ll run across. This can help you decide which breeds would be best if you have children, for example. But please keep in mind that just like people, chickens are sometimes hard to classify into a ‘type’. You can have two birds of one breed that display widely varying personality traits. So don’t be surprised if you happen to find a sweet, mild Leghorn, for instance.

Some breeds are well-known for their tendency to be flighty and aggressive. I’d stay away from Malays and any bird known as a ‘game’ bird or has ‘game’ in the name. These were usually bred and raised for their aggression in cock-fighting so it’s not what you want in your backyard.

For the most part, people tend to want birds that are calm. The last thing you want is a hen-fight at 3am or to have your neighbors complain about hens fighting and cackling if you live in town.



Best breeds for children (known to be mellow and docile):

- Orpingtons (we love big Buffs)
- Cochins
- Wyandottes (we have some beautiful gold-laced that are real sweethearts)
- Delawares
- Faverolles
- I have found mixed breed birds to be awesome, but different folks have different results. We had a silkie crossed with something else we couldn’t quite identify. We think it was an Arucauna but it could have been Cochin. She had fur covered feet so we named her Boots. She was like a pet to the kids. The sweetest bird you ever saw and the kids loved her. She laid pretty well, too.

Best breeds for cuddling:

- Silkies, especially mixed breed Silkies
- Araucanas
- Wyandottes
- Australorps (usually gentle enough for children as well, but evaluate first)
- Sussex (again, usually okay for children, too)
- Orpington (really can’t go wrong with these birds)

Best breeds for showing:

- Yokohamas (can be flighty and bratty, very high maintenance but worth it if you are looking for a big prize)
- Orpingtons (Buffs are especially good for children showing at 4H)
- Ameraucanas (another one good for kids to show)
- Cubalaya (slow to mature and if a child is showing it’s best for older kids)
- Dominique
- Silkies (purebreed show best, but they’re really hard to raise)

Coop Maintenance

Basic coop duties are fairly simple. On a daily basis you want to feed and water them. Bi-weekly you want to throw them a treat and greens if it's winter time. Weekly you need to check them over individually for signs of illness (pale combs, limping, etc.), wash and dry any feed and watering containers, dump or rake their manure, and lay down fresh bedding.

There are also seasonal duties, which can be similar, but in prepping for the two major seasons I've divided it up into the following sections:

Fall/Winter Checklist

Whether you're new to chicken raising or an old hand, just knowing that winter is near can be a bit intimidating...unless you live in Florida where that's the only temperate time of year. If that's the case then you can probably tune out most of the following. Many farmers fear the cold more than the heat, when it really should be the other way around since most chickens are more susceptible to dying in extreme heat versus extreme cold.

That said, it doesn't mean that fall and winter can't be difficult times for your flock. Domesticated fowl started off thousands of years ago in Europe and Asia as birds who lived in the forests and fields, flying only to low hanging branches. Eventually someone got the bright idea to start keeping these wild critters since they tasted so darn good and lay eggs almost every day! But we have to remember that it wasn't too long ago that these birds were fully able to look after themselves. So I say unless you live in Siberia somewhere (and perhaps even then) your flock should be able to keep themselves warm enough provided they have friends to cuddle with (one of many reasons I feel it is very cruel to only keep 1-2 hens at a time) and a place that is reasonably free of drafts.

Surviving is one thing, but thriving is another and the goal of most farmers I know is for their flocks to thrive in the winter and hopefully even make some eggs. It's my belief that nature intended the colder months to be a time for all egg-laying birds to rest and recover from the constant cycle of egg production; also helps prevent prolapse caused by too frequent laying. For truly healthy birds, I always suggest letting them keep to their own natural cycle. You'll have better birds and better eggs at the end. I know that many still use lights to force hens to lay and that is a choice you'll have to make on your own after research. At the White homestead, we don't do this and have followed a more seasonal eating pattern barring the holidays where my wife usually saves up the fall eggs so she has enough for Thanksgiving and Christmas baking.

So how do you ensure that your hens are healthy all winter long as well as comfortable?

1. *Much like when you get ready for spring, cleaning out the chicken coop is a must. Shovelling out any pine shavings or raking the sand bed – whatever your litter control method is – it's very important that this is tended to and set up for the next few months. Do this as late as possible in the season and as soon as you have a warm break in the weather ensure that freshening up the coop is one of the first things on your list. One reason this is important is because your hens will 'flock' together and if you have a completely draft free environment then they are going to be susceptible to moisture-based illnesses, especially if you consider that the bedding will break down and create more moisture and heat. The heat will help the flock, but the moisture won't. Depending on where you live a fan might help with this, just like it does during spring and summer. But if you live in extreme northern climes then a fan may not be prudent.*

2. *Create an environment free of drafts that is well insulated. Patch any cracks or holes in the chicken coop. Break down any parts of the coop that could blow off in extreme winds or collapse with too much snowfall. While you're at it, go ahead and knock on the flooring, walls, roof, etc. to make sure everything is secure. Poke at the siding and roof shingles so you know everything is good to go for a harsh winter without a leaky roof or walls. Look at any wiring you have set up to make sure your girls haven't pecked through or scratched it since a frayed wire is an awful way to make fried chicken.*
3. *If you have your coop wired up, then it's likely you live in a place where you have at least one or two zero degree days per year if not more. When you live somewhere where the temps dip to zero then you need a heater in your coop, even if it's just a small heat bulb. Do some asking around to see what farmers or chicken keepers in your area do in order to keep the flocks warm in winter. You may even have to have a water warmer for part of the year so your girls have fresh water instead of icicles.*
4. *My wife likes to spoil our hens like they were extra kids or something, so our flock often enjoys warm oat groat mash and a lot of green vegetable scrapings as well as all the seeds we've saved from the lambsquarters to fatten them up. Fat hens are warm and generally healthier hens which equals less intervention from us and possibly a few more eggs over the darkest months. Extra corn if you feed your flock corn (we usually give extra peas and lentils since we don't give our hens corn) is always a good idea during the darkest part of the year.*
5. *Go and visit your hens when the weather permits over the winter and fall months. It's a good morale booster for you and the chickens.*

Spring Cleaning

Every time the season changes there is work to be done. By the time spring comes around your coops are probably a dirty mess, possibly damaged by the winter weather, and the honey do list gets longer and longer.

1. *Get inside the coops and scrub every available surface with a mixture of white vinegar and hot water. About half and half usually does it. And if you happen to be making lemonade or something similar, my wife usually tosses the used lemon halves in the hot water to soak overnight before adding vinegar and straining them out so you have a solution that is cheap, effective, and anti-bacterial. Use this to wash and scrub EVERY inch of your coop, inside and out. I usually make and use about a gallon of this stuff. The vinegar smell evaporates after a few hours and leaves just a clean coop. While you do this, it's good to have your hens sunning themselves somewhere in the run. Make a point to scrub the walls as well as the nesting boxes.*
2. *Check over the coop for any repairs that need to be made or items that need to be replaced. Are the sticks you used for perches beyond a good scrubbing? Did the wind blow off part of your coop roof? Did the chickens scratch holes through anything? How about their feeding and watering equipment? Does it need to be replaced or will it survive another season?*
3. *Is the temperature above 35 degrees fahrenheit at night yet? If so then it's time to retire the heat lamp until late fall.*

Now that you have the spring cleaning done, it's time to take a look at your chickens and make sure that they came through the winter healthily.

- Look at their legs and nails. Do their legs look scaly and dry? How about their nails? If they're always in the grass they won't grind down naturally so if the nails look too long then you may need to take care of it.
- Feathers? Do you need to clip their wings again? What about the appearance of the feathers themselves? Are they still smooth and glossy? Have they lost feathers anywhere? Check at this time for parasites like fleas and lice as well.
- Do any of the chickens have watery eyes or a crust around them? A normal chicken's eyes should be bright, shiny, and curious.
- Are they acting funny? Kind of laying around or changed behavior suddenly?

Follow up on any and all concerns about your chicken's health with a vet (or an old farmer who knows chickens well, too).

Taking one day out to accomplish all of this is very much worth the investment. Generally, unless your flock is very large, it'll only take you an afternoon to clean, repair, and check the health of your birds. You will save time and money in the long run and your chickens will thank you.

Unexpected Benefits of Chickens

If I had to estimate, I'd say that 80% of people who start raising chickens raise them strictly for the eggs. It's usually what people first think of when starting a chicken farm. After that is meat, then sometimes showing or for company. I'd like for you to consider the following unexpected benefits of chickens:

Chickens in the Garden



To those of us who love gardens, weeding and pest control is generally pain more than pleasure. Our first few years gardening was a constant exercise in finding new and innovative ways to avoid weeding or spraying anything nasty on our plants.

We tried wet newspaper first (no one told us that it would blow away!). Then raised beds with the lasagna method. You know, layering wet newspaper, straw, and a manure/topsoil layer then letting it ‘bake’ for a few months under sheets of paper stapled to the edges before ripping it off to plant. The soil turned out awesome. Too bad horses eat a lot of seeds. We introduced more weeds to our garden, but my wife got some great new wild herbs that way and we found that lambsquarters are an excellent ‘wild’ food source. We’ve intentionally grown a bed of it every year since and that soil grew the biggest, sturdiest weeds you ever saw and enough zucchini to choke a horse. If horses eat zucchini. Do they?

Lastly, we set aside our aversion to plastic and started laying landscaping fabric down covered in mulch and planting through it. It’s works okay, but weeds still pop up in there and drive us bananas. But not nearly as bananas as all the bugs make us.

Fortunately, chickens prove to be a delightful solution when you make a controlled introduction to your garden.

The key to success here is a few of things: timing, age, and direction.

Timing (age of plants)

- Before planting your garden, let the chickens in to scratch, peck, and loosen the soil.
- Added bonus to letting the chickens get the garden ready: manure!
- There is an assumption here that you are NOT using chemicals in your garden as they can hurt you, your plants, and any chickens pecking around in there. Even stuff like Bt is coming out now as possibly harmful to humans. Think about it this way: Bt blows up the digestive system of bugs who eat it. GMO's are infused with Bt so the plant makes its own pesticide. GMO's are linked mainly to digestive disorders in humans among other things. Therefore, not using Bt on my plants makes some vicarious sense to me!
- Ensure that the plants are old enough to be picked or scratched at gently by a chicken; it needs to be obviously different from the little picky weeds coming up.
- When 'chicken training' I usually start things off by pulling weeds for a week and tossing them into a pile so they start eating those and getting a taste for them.
- Once plants start to bear fruit or if you are growing green leafy vegetables, then you may want to run netting around these to keep the chickens out of them.
- By the time you are ready to start harvesting, the plants are usually big enough to help keep weeds down anyway.
- Growing a special area just for the chickens is great.
 - oats
 - chard, spinach, lettuces
 - millet
 - beans
- Chickens can help glean your fields and garden after the season is over.

Age (of your chickens)

- Any chickens you 'ask' to be a weeder in your garden should be a couple of months old.
- Start them fairly young and you can 'train' them to avoid certain plants.
- Guineas are great for weeding a garden because they're so small.
- Directing your chickens
- Light netting over garden to prevent hawks from swooping down.
- Protective caps and other barriers over any tender, young plants.
- If the chickens start to dig up plants, then put a barrier around it, eventually you will be able to determine which areas are best for the chicken-powered weeding.
- Generally chickens love to peck at fully formed fruits, vegetables, and green leafy stuff so keep this protected after a certain point. It's really easy to put in stakes and then wrap some netting around it so you can still get in there and weed it yourself if needed, but by this point it usually isn't required to weed if you plant close together.
- Brassicas and other cole crops are usually very safe and very sturdy to be weeded by chickens as are most nightshades. They may peck, but they usually don't eat much of these.
- Chickens will eat any and all pests in your garden. So if you are having an infestation of, let's say, Japanese beetles, then you can still dust wood ashes on the garden and let the chickens go to town on those fellas. The wood ashes won't bother the chickens and your squash plants will thank you.
- Down side is that they will eat ANY insect, even beneficial so make sure to encourage the beneficials and even purchase extra lady bugs, etc. if necessary.

For many people, chickens are just glorified egg layers or meat birds until they really get to know them. The benefits of owning chickens number in the hundreds. Aside from production as food, many ethical vegans and vegetarians are starting to keep chickens for the joy they bring. Even better, they are also now making them help-meets in the garden in a completely symbiotic relationship that I can't help but admire and respect (even though I do eat chickens myself). While the chickens are helping with some of the hard work of weeding, they are feeding themselves and having a great time doing it. Weeding is true chickentainment for both you and the chickens!

A Little Cluck Therapy

I read an article about a three year old autistic boy in Florida who has therapy chickens. I've had a few people email me about therapy chickens I've done some looking into it. Most people think of therapy animals as being dogs or cats, maybe even horses. But in recent years chickens have become an incredibly popular therapy animal for people with a number of different disorders from autism, to blindness, to seizures.

Most of us already know how much our personal flocks can lift our spirits just by looking at them. Chickens are hilarious! They have little personalities and do some really silly and just downright stupid things. They chase each other around, chase us around, maybe sometimes chase the dog, too. Nothing makes me laugh more than to see our great dane run away from a flock of chickens. That's some therapy, there.

But aside from their entertainment value, chickens have been found to be especially helpful to autistic and asperger's kids. The little boy in Florida I mentioned previously, his parents have said that the hens have helped bring him 'out of his shell' metaphorically speaking. He makes eye contact now, his personality has calmed down, and he laughs and smiles more easily than before.

The chickens, which he calls his 'ducks', run around the yard with him, and let him cuddle them. His parents apparently picked very docile breeds. I think I spotted a Faverolle in one of the pictures somewhere but maybe I'm wrong. They're a wonderful breed for therapy.

This boy and others like him aren't the only ones who have been benefiting lately from therapy chickens. Since chickendiapers.com rolled out and

invented the chicken diaper, it seems to have really expanded the places chickens are going these days. Many therapists are starting to take chickens into nursing homes to cheer up elderly folks. They're going into hospital burn wards. They're going into children's centers where the majority of the kids there are in foster care.

So apparently the world is catching on to something we already know: chickens rock!

Egg Collection

There isn't a whole lot to collecting eggs for eating, but there are some general guidelines you want to keep in mind, as well as some little tricks folks usually pick up along the way.

- Try to collect eggs often. If you work outside the home it's a good idea to go out to look before you leave and once again when you get home. If you have older kids then you can let them do this. I haven't gone out to look for eggs in years.
- When collecting, I like to use a basket with some shredded paper in the bottom to prevent them from rolling around and cracking or breaking against each other. A wire basket is usually best and you can get one of those from any farmer's supply store.
- If you keep things clean then the eggs you find should be clean, however accidents happen so if one of your gals lays an egg in a pile of poop just throw it away. It's not really safe to eat after that. If it's just a little dirt or a few feathers then set those aside when you get back in the house to be washed and eaten sooner rather than later. We're 'unwashers' at our house so usually we wouldn't wash an egg but if it's dirty that is an exception.
- Store eggs pointed end down and flip them once a week whether you keep them in cold or room temperature storage to prevent the yolk from sticking to the inner membranes.
- If you're unsure of whether you can eat an older egg, float it freely in a bowl of water. If it floats so that the egg no longer touches the bottom, throw it away. If it just barely touches it's still good for baking. If it sits on the bottom and barely floats at all then that's one good egg you've got there.
- You'll occasionally run into weird eggs such as no yolks, double yolks, soft shelled, or very small (I've seen other weird things, too, but I'll keep it simple here) eggs when you raise chickens. Most of the time, unless it's a hereditary trait (Sussexes and Leghorns usually are more likely to lay a double yolk) these weird eggs are a signal that there is a disruption in the hen's cycle. Most often it's caused by the hen being very young or older and near the end of their laying time. If your hen isn't older or young and is laying soft-shelled eggs then I suggest supplementing their diet with more calcium.

What To Do With All The Eggs!

- Scramble, fry, or boil them obviously. But also look at frittatas and quiches as a fun way to use up extra eggs.
- My wife adds extra volume to cakes by whipping the whole eggs to ribbon stage with her stand mixer and folding the batter into the eggs.
- She also makes mayonnaise super quick with her hand blender.
- We keep the shells and crush them up to amend the soil in our garden. It helps prevent blossom end rot on tomatoes beautifully! They also keep snails and slugs out of your cabbages when you sprinkle them around the growing plants. And we like to grow our seedlings in the old eggshells as well. When it's time to plant we just whack the bottom of the shell with a spoon to break it up and pop it in the ground.
- SELL THEM! Co-workers, farmer's markets, food co-ops, buying clubs are all great places to sell those extra eggs (read my separate guide on how to sell your excess eggs for profit & fun)
- You can preserve your extra eggs. Pickled eggs are really good, especially the pink ones my wife makes with left over pickled beet juice. You can also freeze the extra eggs. Just crack them into ice cube trays and then pop them out into bags to keep in the freezer.
- Share your extra eggs by donating them to a local food bank or even giving them to a neighbor in need.
- If the eggs are fertilized then you can satisfy a hen that's gone broody, which is better than having to purchase fertile eggs from a hatchery for the purpose.

Mrs. White's Mayonnaise (don't be scared, it's easy!)

*2 eggs at room temperature
2 cups cold-pressed avocado oil
1 tsp sugar
½ tsp salt
½ tsp dry mustard powder (Frontier brand tastes best, other brands can be bitter. Just use a drop or two of dijon prepared mustard if you can't find a good brand of dry mustard)
1 TB lemon juice
Optional ingredients for special mayo:
garlic powder
fresh green herbs (parsley, dill, tarragon)
extra lemon juice
capers
smoked paprika
½ an adobe chipotle pepper*

When all items are at room temperature, put all ingredients in the bottom of a pint mason jar (except the oil) and blend with a hand blender. Once you've given it a good mix, slowly pour the oil into the jar while the blender is running. Move the blender up and down a few times while you mix it until all the oil is incorporated. The mayonnaise is good for at least a week, usually two. Avocado is a heart-healthy oil that is high in omega 3's and is not normally diluted with soybean or canola oil like olive oil often is when you buy it in stores. You can purchase a large bottle of Avocado oil from Costco for about \$10. Enough to make quite a bit of mayo!

Pros and Cons of Egg Refrigeration

This may be a new subject for some of you, but anyone who's been talking shop with fellow chicken aficionados will eventually hear a passionate debate on the pros and cons of keeping eggs cold. Unless you were raised in Europe, you were probably taught that eggs always belong in the fridge and that's that. The fact that this is even a debate may be an eyebrow raiser for you.



If you think about it, raising chickens for eggs has been a way of life for people around the world for centuries. And they certainly didn't always have a way to keep them in cold storage! It's a fallacy to think that ancient peoples ate spoiled food because they didn't. What makes us sick made them sick, too.

If you happen to be able to tour an old estate or go visit an Amish farm, you might see how they did things in years before. They usually had a spring house, which was built over or next to a spring or well and made of stone to insulate against the summer heat. This little structure is where they would store milk, cheese, eggs, yogurt, etc. to keep a consistent temperature year round. Even to the point of putting everything in a sealed container and lowering it on a rope into the spring or well so the water would keep it cold. There were usually shelves for eggs and cheese on the side, even in the heat. However during the temperate seasons, eggs and cheese would go right on the pantry shelf inside their homes. I suspect sometimes in the not so temperate seasons as well, but that's purely speculation.

So what is the danger here? Provided you were responsible for raising the chickens yourself, there really isn't much danger at all. Just like with raw milk from cows you raised yourself, as long as you know what you're doing (mostly sanitary things) then the end product is perfectly safe. Don't tell that to the USDA or FDA, of course. Then, they tell you that raw vegetables are a safety hazard. I suppose with conventional produce that hasn't been washed this could be very true. The same goes for factory-farm eggs. I'd rather trust the farm-fresh unwashed egg that has been stored at room temperature to the factory-farmed egg that has been washed, bleached, pasteurized, and kept in a fridge.

It really comes down to what you personally feel is safe for you and your family. Doing your own research on the differences between family farm eggs and factory farm eggs may help you make that choice. Keep in mind, the eggs that the USDA and FDA usually test are directly from factory farms. Chickens kept in those conditions are generally very unhealthy. Sick chickens = eggs that can make people sick.

Anyway, I have personally stored my eggs on a little shelf in the walk-in pantry for years. I know that the temperature of the pantry is relatively stable because I've shut off the heat vents to that small room and it's located under shady trees. The little gauge on the wall always says between 55-68 degrees. This is a great temp to keep just about anything fresher for longer. I also like to put desiccant packs around that room to prevent humidity as well, but that's more for the dry storage than the eggs.

Here are some general guidelines you should follow if you want to keep eggs outside of the fridge:

Don't wash them, the bloom protects the egg inside from bacteria and viruses

- Keep them below 74 degrees for optimum freshness
- Flip the eggs upside down once a week to prevent them from rotting
- Cover lightly with straw or paper
- If you must wash your eggs, coat them lightly in oil
- Once you refrigerate an egg, keep it there. Don't store it at room temperature after you've already put it in cold storage.

Starting or Finding a Buying Club

What is a buying club? Many people have never even heard of this concept and I'm continually amazed at how most people still consider things like organic fruits and vegetables to be something that 'snobs' eat! I've really heard people say this and it hurts to hear because I feel if they only knew the benefits (or even worse, how bad conventional food is!) that they would switch in a heartbeat.

Even sadder are those who KNOW and just can't afford it!

Years ago we fell into that category. We'd pinch every penny and shop around for every deal to get a better quality of food for our family. Back then, and I mean perhaps 2004-2005, organic food was getting a little easier to find but it was still outside the norm. If you went to a grocery store you usually wouldn't see anything organic there yet. If you were lucky enough to live near a Wild Oats, Henry's Market, Earth Fare, or Whole Foods then obviously you could find organic food easier. I remember shopping around in health food stores with my mother back in the 80's and looking in wonder at the pathetic little selection of organic produce. A few shriveled hands of ginger and some bananas were usually it. I wondered then why people just didn't get their vegetables at the grocery store where they were bigger and shinier.

These days, unless you never get into a big city, you can usually find organic fruits and vegetables a little easier. My wife tends to shop in town once a week and since we have a magic fridge that keeps things for a long time this works great for us. Our raw milk lasts close to three weeks and our salad greens for about two weeks. Most people aren't that lucky, though. And many who are raising chickens are in rural areas. Or the organic stuff at the store just isn't affordable! And at our local farmer's market I saw some folks scalping the poor yuppies. \$7 a dozen for eggs and \$8 a pint for organic berries? Are they serious?

As everyone is usually looking to lower their food costs I recommend buying clubs. These are local co-operatives where people usually volunteer a little of their time to keep the group running (things like sweeping after close, helping to stock the shelves, put together orders, etc.) in exchange for getting access to wholesale prices on perishable and non-perishable items.

Our buying club here in Kentucky is awesome because not only do they have connections to local farmers for fresh, raw cow and goat's milk, but also other local products at cheap prices. In addition, they buy from Azure Standard, Frontier, Tropical Traditions, and other companies that cater to buying clubs. Local farmers (like me) also bring in their eggs to sell or trade at prices that are much more reasonable than those crooks at the farmer's market or grocery store sell them for. They even bring back the cartons for me to refill and I give them a little discount for each carton I get back.

So you're ready to find or start a buying club, huh? I've got some links below that can get you started with that:

<http://startabuyingclub.com/>

<http://www.coopdirectory.org/>

<http://www.unitedbuyingclubs.com/>

<http://www.foodcoopinitiative.coop/buyingclubs>

Let's say, though, that there are no local buying clubs and you can't or don't want to start one in your area. There is now a really great alternative I heard a week ago called Thrive Market. I put in my first order and I'm waiting eagerly for it to arrive. They have a good selection of natural products now, but when I emailed their customer service I was told that the selection will get even bigger soon. They're a new company, just started, and their mission is to make healthy food affordable for everyone. They only deal in non-perishables for now, but think of Costco or Sam's Club but for a place like Whole Foods? Their prices are even cheaper than Amazon in most cases, and a LOT cheaper than Whole Foods.

Raising Chicks

For the first two years of our chicken adventure, my wife and I stayed away from raising chicks. It was kind of intimidating to think about raising these tiny, helpless creatures when we already had a few of our own human helpless creatures back in the house. But then one of our hens went broody again and instead of going through the hassle of breaking her we bought some fertile eggs from a hatchery and let her have at it.



There are too many ways to get fertile eggs and too many little details of how to breed and cross breed chickens for me to go into that in this guide. I'd have a 200 page book just about that and could still write more! But here I will put down the basics of hatching and raising chicks so those who are contemplating that task can feel more prepared to handle it. Deal? I promise I will have a section at the end of this guide for further reading that will blow your chicken-lovin' mind. This section of the guide will be devoted more to chick rearing than chick hatching.

For numerous reasons including health and well-being, I always recommend that you reserve hatching chicks for the very early spring. I usually start around March 1st by getting a random broody to sit on a clutch of eggs. If you do it around that time the chicks get a good start in clean, cool air and will start laying by the end of summer.

Now this isn't always possible, especially if you get a hen go broody in the middle of summer and you don't want to break her with one of the normal methods. I prefer to keep my hens on a natural cycle and they usually reward us with good laying and healthy bodies. After years of letting the hens have their own head, as it were, I've found that they tend to be ready to hatch eggs in early spring and avoid broodiness for the rest of the year all on their own.

If you're doing this for the first time and don't have hens yet, or maybe you just want a bit more control of things, then you can get an incubator. I don't like this for a few reasons, mostly just the extra cost and time involved. I'd rather do something else other than babysit eggs all day. But for incubators they can be good if it's perhaps winter time and you want to get a head start on laying (you'd get summer layers but it's very likely that they'd stop laying when they molt and you'd be without eggs until the next spring).

If your only reason for starting with eggs is for bonding, I wouldn't be worried about that. Handling them as baby chicks isn't like the movies. They won't form a magical bond with you or 'imprint' you as their mother. You're just as likely to have a good relationship with a pullet or mature hen of your choosing as you are with a chick. For first timers I heartily recommend going to a local farm and purchasing pullets or adult hens directly. I wouldn't buy from commercial farms for certain, but advertise that you're looking to buy a few and I'm sure folks would come out of the woodworks wanting to sell you some hens. I bought six layers my first time for about \$8 a piece from a wonderful local farmer. She let me look around and get ideas and I felt really safe knowing that her hens were so healthy. She even showed me their clean bill of health from the vet! I remember being excited and satisfied knowing that the six birds in the back of our minivan were going to be the stars in our little urban farm.

Back to raising the little fluffballs, though. Those cuties can be a handful, but with some foreknowledge you can be a pro at this in no time flat.

Using a Broody Hen

This method is usually the most fool-proof as you'll lose the same or less hatchlings as you would with a mechanical brooder system. But you've also satisfied a broody hen who is doing 90% of the work for you.

You've got a few options for setting up broody hens. I have tried putting her in a large-ish sized cage with fresh straw and a box and keeping her fully separated from the other hens. This didn't work so well for us when it came time to reintroduce them to the flock so I can't recommend it. The way that worked best for us was to close off a section of the run so the broody or broodies can sit in there and do their work. They had their own little mini-coop, feed, water, straw, etc. But it kept them close enough to the other hens so that they had a visible presence and were more quickly accepted back into the flock by the other hens.

Whatever you do, it needs to be warm and free of the wind or the chicks may catch a chill. I even put some material up over the fence in that area to break the wind in that area. I feed the hens layer mix until the chicks are born and then change over to a starter crumble for everyone. Just don't feed layer mix to the chicks as it can make them very sick.

The first couple of weeks you won't see much of the chicks as they'll be nestled up under the broody or poking around very close to her. At around the 14 day mark you'll notice them getting a little more bold and wandering farther away from the mother hen. At this point it's important that they are in a safe place free of hazards, but free to roam and explore so they grow strong.

You want strong chicks because when they're 6-8 weeks old it'll be time to introduce them to the rest of the family. Some transition tips for any time you introduce new birds to an established flock.

- Make places for the new ones to hide when things get scary. A small teepee of branches, leaves and grass clippings, etc.
- Hang up some fruit or a cabbage for the older birds to peck at so they'll leave the new ones alone
- Give a few more treats than normal for a week or until things settle back to normal

If you are unable to get a broody hen and you just HAVE to rear chicks, get yourself a mechanical brooder to do the job. But I must warn you that this is moderately expensive (brooder, lights, other equipment) and tedious. I don't ever, ever do this anymore. I just don't have the time for it and I feel like I get healthier chickens when I let them take care of themselves. For more information on mechanical brooders, there is a great book that has about 30 pages covering that subject in the Further Reading section that I'll make sure to point out a

Further Reading

http://www.amazon.com/Storeys-Guide-Raising-Chickens-3rd/dp/1603424695/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1425600393&sr=8-1&keywords=storeys+guide+to+raising+chickens

A great book, almost the only one you'd ever need, and goes more in-depth into subjects covered in this guide. As mentioned in the raising chicks section, this book has a lot of detail about mechanical brooders.

http://www.amazon.com/Storeys-Guide-Raising-Poultry-4th/dp/1612120008/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1425600393&sr=8-2&keywords=storeys+guide+to+raising+chickens

http://www.amazon.com/Chick-Days-Absolute-Beginners-Chickens/dp/1603425845/ref=sr_1_12?ie=UTF8&qid=1425600393&sr=8-12&keywords=storeys+guide+to+raising+chickens

http://www.amazon.com/Barnyard-Your-Backyard-Beginners-Chickens/dp/1580174566/ref=sr_1_16?ie=UTF8&qid=1425600393&sr=8-16&keywords=storeys+guide+to+raising+chickens

http://www.amazon.com/Homemade-Living-Keeping-Chickens-English/dp/1600594905/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&qid=1425600553&sr=8-4&keywords=chicken+care

So You Want to Raise Chickens... A Beginner's Guide

by **John White**



I have to say that this book has been really invaluable to me. Everything is laid out pretty well and is full of fun little stories and a lot of detail from someone who obviously has been working with chickens for a long time. I was particularly pleased to see all the ideas of what to do with the eggs since it's just me here. I think I might make some pickled eggs and share them with the girls at my Bunco game once my hens start laying. I haven't made pickled eggs since I was a girl in my mother's kitchen and this book reminded me of how good they taste. I might just go and get some eggs from the store until then!

You know, it made me nervous when I first thought about getting chickens, but I feel better about it now. I think I'm prepared to handle the first few hurdles and I should have some good little feathered friends soon. They'll be happy, too, knowing that I'm not a dunce at chicken rearing now!

~ Gloria Nedderman - Hollywood, FL