



All you need to know about **CHICKENS**

Val Moody, who runs Chicken School, explains why you should consider keeping garden hens

There are so many benefits of keeping chickens in your back garden – not only do they produce fresh eggs but chickens also eat insects, making them a natural form of pest control. You can recycle their waste, making a great composting material to feed

your flowers and vegetables.

Chickens also make fantastic pets – they have their own personalities and are fun, amusing and relaxing to watch and listen to.

Chickens are believed to have descended from the Red Jungle Fowl, a tropical member

of the pheasant family, which originated from India. The Romans introduced chickens to England after invading in 43AD.

Today there are more chickens in the world than any other bird. In the UK, we eat around 29 million eggs a day.

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FOUR KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER

1 KEEPING YOUR HENS HEALTHY

Chickens need exercise, a lack of stress (so do not allow dogs or children to chase them), protection from predators, cleanliness and a healthy diet. They require pellets, mash or meal, and you can give them a treat of mixed corn in the late afternoon to keep them warm and full for the night.

The addition of grit to their feed will grind the corn in their gizzard, and they must also have access to a constant supply of fresh water. It is a good idea to supply some calcium in the form of oyster shell in a separate container to get strong eggshells, as well as occasional vitamin and mineral supplements for good health.

If your chickens are permanently housed in a run, or have no grass to eat, hanging up greens will keep them occupied, give them valuable vitamins and minerals and will colour the yolk naturally.

If your chickens are free ranging, a regular worming routine will be required as the bugs they eat will host worm eggs. The house and your chickens will also need to be checked regularly for mites and lice.

2 BREEDS

There are hundreds of different breeds of chickens. These can be egg layers, meat birds or dual (good for eggs and meat). Each breed has its own qualities, for example, some lay large eggs, some are known for being tame, docile and friendly, and others have broody tendencies (want to raise chicks). Chickens range in size from 450g (1lb) to over 6kg (13lbs). Some breeds are harder than others while some may need special attention, for example the Polish has very fancy feathers and so is not good in poor weather.

3 HOUSING

You do not need a lot of space to keep chickens – one of the reasons why they are so good for the garden. You can make or buy a house – some will have an attached run while others will be freestanding. A house with no run means

that, in bad weather, the chickens will only have their dark house to shelter in – egg production is influenced by day light patterns – and they cannot forage. A run will also give them protection from predators. The fencing should be dug into the ground down to 30cm (1ft).

Chickens need a house to roost in at night and to protect them from predators. The size will depend on the breed you choose and the number of chickens you keep. Three large chickens need to have at least 90cm (3ft) of roosting pole, or 45cm (18in) for bantams. A nest box is required in the darkest corner of the house, because they like to lay their eggs in secret places. The house also needs to have good ventilation but no draughts.

It is always a good idea to go for a larger sized house because keeping chickens is addictive and your flock may increase. The size of the run is again determined by the breed, number of chickens and if they are allowed to range free daily or occasionally. If they are kept permanently in a run, figure on needing 1sq m (10sq ft) per bird. Partial or full roof coverage on the run gives them important weather protection, allows them to continue foraging, keeps their food dry and prevents wild birds from contaminating it.

4 LEGISLATION

You do not currently need a licence to keep chickens, but if you keep 50 or more poultry (including ducks, geese, and chickens) you have a legal obligation to register with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). You need to check your house deeds to check for any covenants stopping you keeping chickens, and it is wise to check that your local council does not have restrictions on keeping poultry.

If you would like to keep a cockerel, it is a good idea to check your neighbours are fine with him crowing noisily, often from 4.30am and throughout the day. Keeping a noisy cockerel can be relevant to the Environmental Health Act under noise pollution.



FACT FILE

- Prices of chickens vary from £15-100 for pure breeds and £12-25 for hybrids.
- The internet is a good place to start when buying chickens and housing. Joining the Poultry Club of GB, at www.poultryclub.org, will also give you access to advice and breed information.
- Most agricultural shows have poultry, where you can see and buy certain breeds, or you can choose to give a home to an ex-battery hen. Contact the Battery Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) at www.bhwt.org.uk

FURTHER INFO

Val runs Chicken School, which provides tailored chicken-keeping courses ideal for families. They also offer small group courses. You can learn everything you want to know about getting started keeping chickens – and more – to ensure you get the most from your hens. A free information pack is provided on all courses. For existing keepers, there's also an advisory service, and a service for schools and other organisations. To find out more, call 01793 331796 or visit www.chickenschool.co.uk