

Starting a Backyard Flock



Starting a Backyard Flock: What You Need to Know

Adapted from Oklahoma State University Extension Fact Sheet AFS-8202

Raising a backyard flock can be a rewarding experience, providing fresh eggs, meat, fertilizer, and a closer connection to where your food comes from. However, before diving in, it's important to understand some common barriers. City ordinances and homeowner association (HOA) rules may limit or prohibit keeping poultry within city limits. Neighbors' concerns about noise, odor, or wandering chickens are valid and should be addressed with good management and secure fencing. Another barrier is the time and labor commitment; backyard chickens need daily care, and someone must tend them during vacations or emergencies. It's wise to research local regulations, talk with neighbors, and honestly assess whether you have the time, space, and resources to manage a healthy flock.

Housing

Proper housing protects birds from weather, predators, and disease. A sturdy, well-ventilated coop with secure doors and windows is essential. Coops should provide at least 3 to 4 square feet of space per bird inside and 8 to 10 square feet per bird in an outdoor run. Roosts should be installed to keep birds off the ground at night, and nesting boxes are needed for laying hens. Housing should also be easy to clean, as good sanitation helps prevent parasites and disease.

Breed Selection

Choosing the right breed depends on your goals. Dual-purpose breeds like Rhode Island Reds and Plymouth Rocks do better in heat and are popular for both meat and eggs. Leghorns are prolific egg layers but lighter in body size; they do well in heat but need cold protection. For meat production alone, fast-growing broiler breeds such as Cornish Cross are common, but don't do as well in the heat as Red Ranger/Freedom Ranger breeds. Climate is a big consideration; some breeds handle heat or cold better than others.

Baby Chicks

If you're starting with baby chicks, purchase them from a reputable hatchery to ensure they're healthy and vaccinated if needed. Day-old chicks are delicate and require special care during the first few weeks. Always check local and state regulations when ordering live poultry.

Brooding

Baby chicks need a warm, draft-free area called a brooder. Use a heat lamp or commercial brooder to maintain proper temperatures: 90-95°F for the first week, then decrease by 5°F each week until chicks are fully feathered. Provide enough space to prevent piling, which can cause suffocation. Clean bedding, such as pine shavings, should be used and replaced regularly.

Feed and Water

Access to clean, fresh water at all times is essential. Chicks require a starter feed with about 20% protein; as they grow, transition to grower feed, then to a layer ration for hens producing eggs. Broilers may need higher protein feeds for rapid growth. Keep feed dry and stored securely to prevent spoilage and pests.

Lights

Lighting is vital for egg production. Hens need about 14-16 hours of light daily to maintain consistent laying. In winter, supplemental lighting in the coop may be needed to extend daylight hours.

Equipment and Bedding

Basic equipment includes feeders, waterers, brooders, and nest boxes. Invest in durable, easy-to-clean equipment. Bedding such as straw or pine shavings should be dry and absorbent to control odor and moisture. Clean bedding reduces the risk of parasites and disease.

Disease and Parasites

Healthy flocks require biosecurity and regular observation. Practice good sanitation, limit visitors, and quarantine new birds before introducing them to your flock. Common parasites include mites, lice, and worms, which can be managed through proper housing, cleanliness, and approved treatments. Promptly address any signs of illness, such as lethargy, unusual droppings, or poor feather condition, to prevent spread.

Processing Broilers

If raising chickens for meat, plan for humane and legal processing. Processing may be done at home if local regulations allow, or you may choose to use a licensed processing facility. Familiarize yourself with safe and sanitary methods for slaughtering, plucking, evisceration, and chilling. Proper processing ensures meat quality and food safety.

Producing Eggs

Backyard layers will begin producing eggs around 5-6 months old, depending on breed and season. Provide clean nesting boxes, collect eggs daily, and refrigerate promptly. Expect a hen to lay about 250-300 eggs per year under good conditions. Egg production naturally declines with age and during molting.

Molting

Molting is a natural process where hens shed old feathers and grow new ones, usually in late summer or fall. During this time, egg production drops or stops entirely. Good nutrition and low-stress conditions help birds molt efficiently.

Economics of Backyard Flock Production

Backyard flocks can provide high-quality eggs and meat, but costs should be considered. Expenses include housing, feed, bedding, equipment, and occasional veterinary care. While not always cheaper than store-bought eggs or meat, many people value the freshness, quality, and self-sufficiency of home production. Selling surplus eggs may help offset costs, but check local regulations on selling eggs or meat from your home flock.

Learn More: OSU's Backyard Chickens Course

Raising chickens can be a fun and educational project for the whole family, but success depends on good planning and sound management. For step-by-step guidance, Oklahoma State University offers an online course called [Backyard Chickens](#), covering all aspects of small flock production. This course is a great resource for beginners and experienced flock owners alike. To learn more, visit the OSU Extension website and start building your flock with confidence!

Resources

[Oklahoma State University Course Catalog: Backyard Chickens](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet AFS-8202: Backyard Flock Production](#)