



Getting Ready To Bring Your Hens Home

All chickens need shelter – shelter from excessive heat in the summer and shelter from harsh winter conditions. In the summer, your hens' sleeping quarters need adequate ventilation in the form of screened, closable windows and/or large vents up above where the hens will roost. In the cold weather, they need to be sheltered from wind, cold rain, and especially, drafts. However, some ventilation is always required, as chickens are susceptible to respiratory diseases. And, all chickens need your help in preventing predators from getting in. Keep these things in mind when building or buying housing for your chickens.

To better understand what to provide in the manner of shelter, you need to know the habits of hens. Chickens like to be on the ground during daylight hours and to roost at night. That is to say, they like to fly up onto perches and settle in at dusk. Being off the ground is instinctual, as they are safe from harm.

Chickens literally put themselves to bed each night. Your job is to see that their henhouse or coop is closed up tight from predators each evening, keeping ventilation in mind. Most nighttime predators get in from the ground so the house must be secure. Raccoons and weasels are the main culprits. In a country setting, you can add coyotes and foxes to the mix. Weasels can sneak in through the smallest of holes (in the floor if it's an old shed, for example). You get the idea.

Inside the henhouse, you'll want to place bedding on the floor to absorb liquid from droppings and to provide odor control. Bagged pine shavings work well. You can buy these in any feed store or from your local sawmill. A small manure fork is the ideal way to clean the floor of your henhouse, as solids are scooped up and the clean shavings drop through to be reused. You need to provide perches (2" tree branches work fine) and provisions for food and water. You can buy wall feeders that hold several pounds of feed at a time. In any event, all containers should be about 6" off the ground for adult birds to keep droppings out. Provide access to fresh water at all times, winter as well. Think about how you can accomplish this in freezing weather. If the coop doesn't have electricity, can you run a heavy-duty extension cord to it for a heated water bowl? Or, will someone be home to change bowls 4-5 times a day? Keep water and feeders away from the perches to prevent droppings from contaminating them.

You will need to add or build nesting areas or laying boxes in the henhouse. Provide one box for every 4 or so hens. Instinctively, hens seek out small, darker out-of-the-way places to lay eggs. Nesting boxes should be about 14" wide by 14" high by 12" deep. Nests should be at least 10" off the ground. If the boxes are attached or built on are on an outside wall, consider cutting in lockable, hinged door hatches so that you can retrieve your eggs from the outside.

You may find housing ideas on the internet but remember that we live in a harsh winter climate in New England, so the hens living quarters need be up off the ground. You can build your shed just the way you want it or buy a pre-made shed or even a child's playhouse and adapt the inside for your girls. This will provide you with the room to keep the feed right there in tight bins (metal trash cans are the best) as rodents can chew through plastic.

Basic Needs of Chickens

During the day, your hens must be able to go outside. Fresh air and sunshine are critical to all creatures. If your hens are going to be permanently confined to a run, provide about 10 square feet of outdoor space per bird. Use a heavier gauge, small-holed wire for the side walls as much of the flimsy chicken wire sold won't keep a determined raccoon out. Besides, they can reach in a grab – not a pretty sight. You'll want to bury sidewall wire about a foot deep all the way around to prevent predators from digging under. It's a good idea to cover the outdoor pen with a light wire too, as it will keep hawks out. With a wire cover you can

draped a shade net over the top in the summertime, too. You may provide a ramp up into the henhouse, especially if your hens' wings are clipped to prevent flight. If they do not have clipped wings, a hen can hop up into the house.

Outside, your hens will need lots of elbow room to prevent the hens from pecking each other. You can wire-fence in an area attached to your henhouse so they can come and go as they please safely. If you choose to let your hens go completely free during the day, you run the risk of losing them to daytime predators – fox, neighborhood dogs and hawks to name a few. You must also keep in mind that your hens will wander in daylight hours. Don't let them become a nuisance to your neighbors. No matter where they roam, they will find their way back to the coop each evening.

If your hens are going to be allowed their freedom during the day when you are home, you can get away with a smaller fenced yard for them for the times when you are not. If they are loose, they must have free access to the henhouse to lay their eggs or you will find them in the oddest out-of-the-way places! When the hens roost each evening, remember to lock them in.

Notes about totally free-ranging hens – dogs. Yours, your neighbor's and your visitor's. They WILL chase chickens. They can't help it. If they grab one and you get it away, most likely the hen will die within a day or two. You can't see the damage but it's there. Cats are generally no threat. Some cats actually have a great time scattering hens in all directions but generally, even if the cats are great bird hunters, they don't bother with hens. Some larger hens will actually chase cats.

Totally free hens can be healthier, as they eat grass, bugs and seeds along with the food you supply. On the flip side are the dangers. Besides the dogs and neighbors, they will eat grass from your lawn so you'll need to rethink the chemical fertilizers, weed and grub control you might have used in the past. Chemicals will poison them and you! From chemical-free lawns, you can put some of the clippings in your hens' yard to scratch through.

If your hens will be permanently confined, which is probably the safest thing to do in a neighborhood setting, you must provide other things to keep your hens healthy. All birds need grit to digest their food since they do not have teeth. What is grit? It is small stones that the bird stores in its gizzard, where they act like teeth and are used to grind up food. When a hen is free, she will pick up bits of coarse sand while pecking. If she is confined, you'll need to provide this for her. You can purchase bird grit at any pet store and keep a small feeder full or scatter a handful daily. Or you can provide clean coarse sand in an area of the coop and yard.

Birds also take dust baths. It is essential for their health. They will scoop out a depression in fine, clean dirt and shovel it over their back and wings. This prevents lice and cleans scales and dirt from their skin. You can make a "bath" tub with 6" of very fine, sandy loam (the finer the better) in a corner of the pen in a 3' x 3' x 6" box. Putting it in an area of sunshine and about 6" off the ground will keep it cleaner. This feature is overlooked by most confined hen owners and is detrimental to the birds. If your outdoor pen has a nice large dirt floor, the hens will create their own "bathing" area.

Garden lime is good at controlling odors in the chicken yard. You just sprinkle it around and it won't hurt the chickens' feet. A rainy day would be a good time to do it. The lime would dissolve and meld with the wastes. This dolomite lime actually sweetens the soil.

The Pecking Order

Chickens will peck each other for a number of reasons. They can be too hot, too crowded, not enough fresh air or short of feeder or waterer space. Sometimes it is to establish the "leader" or pecking order of the flock. To stop it, try fresh grass clippings, weeds, and lettuce in the

pen. In cold weather, fresh hay works. You'll see this mostly as the hens settle in on their perches for the night. One will peck the one next to it for no obvious reason. Maybe it's to tell the hen to move over. Usually, the bird being pecked just hides its head and takes the abuse. If you see a hen with blood on it, remove it from the flock. Hens are cannibals and will eventually peck that chicken to death.

What to Feed

Commercially made grower and layer feed is the best option for your chickens at various stages of their lives. These feeds were designed to provide all the basic nutrients for chickens. You can buy regular or organic feeds at most grain stores. At 20 weeks old, you will switch from grower feed to layer feed. It comes in forms known as mash, crumbles and pellets.

You can give your chickens other feeds such as rice and fresh table scraps. They like melons, cantaloupe, grapes and some veggies. Leaf lettuce is good. Hens will eat bread and most meats, as they are scavengers by nature. To keep them laying well, their main diet should be the feeds made for them. Always be sure that any table scraps you feed are fresh. Old or moldy food is bad for them and you.

Chicken Facts



Chickens will molt at about 18 months of age. Molting is where they lose all or some of their feathers and stop producing eggs. This is a natural shedding of feathers. Molting may take 2 to 4 months. Laying will resume when the molt is over.



A chicken can live between 10-15 years although there have been instances where they have lived longer.



Hens will lay best when the temperature is between 45-80 degrees.



Most hens will start laying between 5-7 months of age. They will lay best at 1 to 2 years of age. All pullets (female chicken under 1 year of age) lay small eggs at first and after a while will lay larger eggs. Younger hens will lay 1 egg every 3-4 days. A hen 30 weeks old can lay 2 eggs every 3 days. Some have been known to lay an egg a day. All breeds have different laying abilities. We have chosen the most prolific.



How can you tell if an egg is fresh? Put it in cold water. A fresh egg contains little air so it will sink. An older egg will float – throw it away. If you break open a fresh egg into a dish, the white is compact and firmly holds the yolk up. In an old egg the white is runny and the yolk will flatten out

Egg binding is when the egg gets stuck inside the hen and she is unable to deliver it. We have never had this happen on our farm but it can.

It can happen to hens that are overweight but mostly it happens to new layers. Sometimes the hen can be helped, but don't break the egg. If you break the egg the hen is so traumatized it is supposed to cause her to have a heart attack, and die.

If you see a hen walking funny and with her bottom kind of tucked in, it is a signal that she is having a problem with her egg. Put her where she can be warm and away from the other hens that may be bothering her. Give her some electrolytes or at least some sugar in her water to give her an energy boost. Leave her be for a while and she may pass the egg by herself.

You can oil up the area with warmed cooking oil, to help the egg slide through more easily while she is contracting. (A squeeze bottle, a spray bottle and even a syringe without the needle with the oil in them, will make the job easier).

As a last resource, and you can see the egg, try to puncture it just enough to let the contents drain out. The empty shell will just crush as she pushes. Try to make sure all the shell is removed. Let her recover before putting her back into the flock.

Sometimes all you do is not enough, but that is nature. (except for the fat hen, that is).

Giving your hens plenty of room, fresh air & sunshine, fresh feed & water goes a long way in preventing disease, unwanted behavior and early death. You will be rewarded with a profuse number of healthy eggs in return.



Bringing Your Hens Home

You've picked up your pullets and are on your way home. If you cover your crate or box, they will ride quietly. As long as it's relatively dark, birds stay still and quiet.

Have your coop ready with food and water and depending on the weather, place the crate in either the henhouse or its yard. Make sure all gates and doors are closed tightly. You can gently turn the crate or box on its side if it opens from the top, open it and let your new arrivals just walk out. If they don't come out right away, just leave them alone. In minutes they should be out pecking and scratching.

If you have installed a wall feeder, it's a good idea to spread some feed on a large paper plate or low pan that they can access until they discover the wall feeder. Remove it once you see that they are eating from the feeder you provided.

Let them go in and out of the henhouse at will. Remember, however, to lock them in their house each evening after dusk. Lock their hatch to their yard as well.

If you choose to let your new chickens "free range", it's best to leave them in their yard for a week or so to get used to the house's location. The first few times you let them loose, do it about a ½ before dusk and stay outside with them. If necessary, you can guide them back to the henhouse with a long stick. Hens can be easily confused when things are new to them.

Folks who have portable coops face a special challenge with free-range hens. If you move the house, your hens will pile up on the spot where the house was even if it's in the middle of nowhere! They do not have the capability to process the fact that their house has moved. They are creatures of habit. It may take a few frustrating (for you) days for them to realize that the house is somewhere else.

What to Expect

Your pullets will have changing voices. As new arrivals, their sounds will be halfway between and the peep of a chick and the cackling of a mature hen.

Your hens will easily adapt to their surroundings.

Most importantly, you will begin to find fresh eggs in about 75 - 90 days!!!