

Keeping Backyard Chickens: The Rooster Crows but the Hen Delivers!



Sherwood J. Best
John W. Best



Our Place



- 1/3 acre total
- Front yard – flowers, citrus, ornamental shrubs
- Back yard – the “farmette”



Swans – or Chickens? You Decide...



Ambiguous topiary!

Front & Side Views



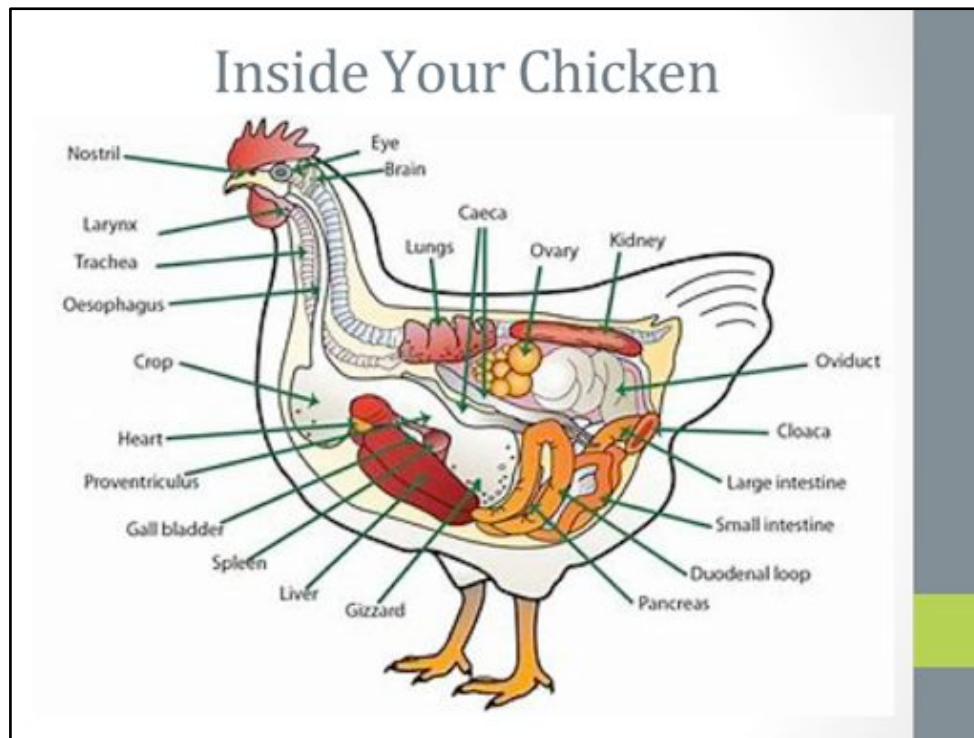


The raised beds are completely enclosed with netting to keep the chicken, which love veggies, out. The red-roofed coop was custom designed. The chickens roam free during daylight hours and keep down the weed and slug populations.

Chickens: AKA Garden Jewelry



There isn't any difference in nutritional value between white and brown eggs, so just buy chicks for the breed(s) you think look best! You can mix them and they will sort themselves out and create a "pecking order", with one giving the orders and one at the bottom of the heap. (Do make sure your flock all starts out at the same age, tho--if you try to add a new chick or adult to an established group, it very likely will not end well.)



Since chickens have no teeth but like to eat a lot of different things, their method of digestion is different from ours. Food moves down their oesophagus to the crop where it is moistened and 'sorted'. Soft bits go to the proventriculus where stomach acid and enzymes break them down. Harder bits go to the gizzard where grit (small stones) and muscular contractions grind them up. The food then moves into the intestine and waste products move out the cloaca. Eggs also exit the cloaca, but as the yolk moves down the oviduct, egg white and a shell are added and this makes it so big that the opening to the intestine is closed off and the egg pops out nice and clean.

Designing the Coop



There are lots of plans in books and online but this one was custom-designed by us.

Coop Features

- Design:
 - Access
 - Cleaning
 - Egg retrieval
- Coop features:
 - 3'x3' per hen
 - Perches
 - External nest boxes
 - Flooring
 - Temperature considerations
 - Shade & air circulation
 - Bedding choices



Chick to Hen

- You get what you pay for
- Chicks need to be inside from birth-8 weeks
 - Chick equipment: brooder, brooder light, chick feeder & water dispenser
 - Early education/enrichment
- Adjusting to the outdoor coop
- Daily routines (theirs & yours)
 - Good morning/good night
 - When & what to feed
- Seasonal care issues



Chicks are covered with downy fluff and can't stand cold or windy conditions. They do best inside or at least away from drafty areas. We brooded our chicks inside with an infrared brooder light attached to our breakfast room hanging lamp. The chicks were in a large cardboard box on the breakfast room table. We moved the light down toward the box, gradually moving it farther away as the chicks got older. You can tell when chicks are sufficiently warm because they will move around the box, eating, drinking, and scratching. If they all huddle together for warmth they may need the light a little closer. If they spread out to the far edges of their brooder they are too warm.

Chicks are babies – they need frequent sleep and a constant supply of fresh food and water. They are also messy. We lined the brooder box with several layers of newspaper and put soft towels on top. After a week we replaced the towels with cedar shavings. At 4 weeks we went to straw.

Chicks need socialization. We picked them up constantly, handled them frequently, and talked to them. We handled them.

Depending on the weather, move the chicks outdoor between 8-12 weeks. We put them into our outdoor coop and they stayed inside for a full week before we opened the coop door so they could venture out. This helped them to “imprint” the coop as their safe place. At first they huddled on the floor of the coop at night instead of perching but after a couple of weeks they were big enough to hop onto their inside perch and stay there all night.

Chicken Feed

- For chicks
 - Commercial chick food
 - Chopped boiled egg, fresh greens, treats
- For layers
 - Commercial lay mash combined w/ scratch
 - Calcium supplementation
 - Fresh fruit
 - Protein
 - Dairy



We buy commercial chick and hen feed and supplement this with calcium in the form of oyster shell and fresh food. With chicks, start with commercial chick food (small crumbles) and add small amounts of fresh foods to expand their repertoire. Our chicks loved raisins cut into slivers, finely chopped boiled egg, and minced fresh greens. Their favorite treats were mealworms. At 6 months you can switch to lay mash, for hens who are ready to produce eggs. I also supplement with oyster shell which I place in a dispenser attached to the coop door. Pellets are less messy than mash because chickens gobble their food in whole pieces and pellets also fill up the chicken's crops more quickly but this means the chickens "graze" less throughout the day. We like our chickens to return throughout the day to their food can for mash and/or oyster shell which gives them something to do and makes them less liable to pick at each other. Check the water can at least once a week, more in hot weather and/or if you have several chickens. I like the double-sleeved can that ensures fresh, cool water. We have a wooden baffle on the top of the water to keep the chickens from perching on the can and pooping into their water. Every day, our hens get two heads of romaine lettuce, veggie scraps from our cooking, fruit in season, and bread torn into hunks but no table scraps. Hens love protein in almost any form: spiders, grubs, grasshoppers, lizards, cottage cheese, brick cheese, milk, and all cooked meat protein. Never feed raw eggs or leave a broken egg in the nest. Once they figure out the treat that lies inside their eggs they will start breaking their own eggs. The rest of the hens will imitate your egg breaker and then you'll have to eliminate the entire flock and start over again.



You need to keep your garden safe from your chickens, and vice versa. We garden veggies, which are all grown in raised planters surrounded by nylon netting. The planters are equipped with drip watering so the veggies get sufficient water without dragging (then forgetting) hoses. The herb garden is planted with things that chickens don't love – rosemary, chives, mint (in planters), thyme.

Chickens will get into every garden bed you have to scratch. They have very destructive claws and will uproot flower beds to get to the dirt. They will jump up like basketball players to pick at low-hanging stone fruit. They don't like citrus.

Chickens need to take dust baths to stay clean. They preen their feathers but must also pack dirt up under their wings which is an instinctual behavior designed to smother insects. They "dust" as a group activity and can reduce good garden soil to fine dust after several sessions. Our solution was to provide dirt areas so they don't have to dig up our plants to expose the soil.

Chickens like to sunbathe. They will flop onto their sides, toes pointed, and lift up one wing to expose their "pits." After a few minutes they roll to the other side or hop up and strole away.

Chickens like places to shelter. We have an extensive stand of bamboo that they love. They also love to go under the pomegranate and camellia trees. Their favorite is a backyard orange tree whose branches we've let grow to the ground. This forms a shady spot where they congregate in summer.



Chicken Ailments

- Our free rangers haven't been infected with disease because:
 - We clean the coop frequently
 - We don't have too many chickens
 - They are out all day
 - They get a varied diet & lots of exercise
- Our chickens have good mental health for all the above reasons

Winner, Winner, Chicken for Dinner



Preventing Predator Incursions

- Prevention is the key
 - Floor the coop with stout wire mesh that you cover with sand
 - Wait until clear daylight before letting your chickens out
 - Close your chickens up every night
 - Keep feed in varmint-proof containers
 - Feed pellets instead of mash, then remove feeders
- The circle of life... it happens
- If you keep chickens you'll have rats

Upsides & Downsides

- Fresh & delicious eggs
- Garden fertilizer
- Entertainment
- Easy maintenance
- Chickens can learn
- Other animal visitors: domestic & otherwise
- Municipal codes
- Neighbors
- When you go away
- Elder chicken decisions: The circle of life



We think chickens are worth the hassle and expense. They very quickly (at about 6 months) begin laying eggs. Since our chickens are free rangers, they are disease-free because they are not overcrowded, dirty, or have a restricted diet. Ours quickly acclimated to their coop and put them selves to bed every night at dusk. We have a neighbor who cares for them when we go away in exchange for their eggs. Their poop makes great fertilizer. They form their own society and are very entertaining to watch. They are very imitative and learn to be calm and friendly. My husband and our black austrorlp nap together on his recliner. There are downsides to keeping chickens. Their eggs are not cheaper than store eggs when you consider the initial cost of the coop, chicks, brooder equipment, and the ongoing cost of chicken feed. If friends are bringing a dog, we lock up our chickens for their safety. Hens are pretty quiet except when they lay an egg – their cackle is loud. We are follow the city code that restricts us from keeping roosters but we ignore the limit of 2 hens. We've had four to nine and we'd rather apologize than ask permission. The biggest problem with keeping chickens is what to do when they get past the point of laying eggs. Chickens can live for 10 years or more but egg production tapers off after the second year and goes down until there are no eggs but still hungry chickens. You have various choices: keep them as pets, give them to a chicken rescue, make them into food for you. We have evolved the philosophy that these are barnyard animals and we gave them a more beautiful life than they could ever have had on a commercial chicken establishment. We learned how to slaughter our chickens humanely and dress them for the pot. Backyard chickens older than 6 months are too tough for anything but soup or stew.

Chicken Myths

- Your hens won't lay eggs without a rooster...
- Don't mix breeds...
- Hens love all baby chicks...
- Chickens are vegetarians...
- Chickens love one another...
- Chickens are color blind...
- Home eggs are more nutritious than store eggs...
- Home eggs are less sanitary than store eggs...
- Hens lay eggs all their lives...



Chicken Resources



Suppliers:

Murray McMurray Hatchery.

www.mcmurryhatchery.com

Randall Burkey. www.randallburkey.com

Subscriptions:

❖ *Backyard Poultry*. www.backyardpoultry.com

Books:

❖ Damerow, G. 2010. *Storey's guide to raising chickens*. North Adams, MA: Storey.

❖ Ussery, H. (2011). *The small scale poultry flock*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green.

The End

