

What Do I Need To Know about Poultry (or FAQ'S

The first thing you should decide is whether you want to raise poultry for eggs, meat, or you just want to be entertained. Each breed has specific attributes that make them good layers, good eating, or just so ridiculous you can't help but laugh when you see them. There are some really good websites that will go into each breed in detail if you have questions-these websites are:

www.ansi.okstate.edu/poultry

www.feathersite.com

Consider raising an endangered breed! These breeds have become endangered because of the modern agricultural practice of factory farming and streamlined production based on what breeds are economically most efficient. If you would like more information on endangered breeds, go to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy website, at www.albc-usa.org.

Housing

If you decide to raise poultry, whatever your reasons may be, you will need adequate housing from predators. Poultry can be picked off by dogs, coyotes, hawks, eagles, owls, and raccoons. Some people like to let their birds free range (meaning no confinement at all) which is fine, but you should expect some losses if this is the way you choose to set up your poultry area. I highly recommend having a coop with a nesting area if you are raising egg-layers or a chicken tractor if you are raising meat birds. There are plenty of designs to choose from. Some options can be found in Storey's book "Chicken Coops" and on line if you need some help figuring out how to build what best suits your situation. It doesn't need to be fancy; you just need to be able to lock them in at night to keep predators away. I would also recommend a fenced outside yard where they can roam and have dust baths (this helps cut down on mites and gives them an additional source of calcium for eggshells). Also outside access allows them to eat bugs if you are not going the chicken tractor route.

When building your coop and outside run, keep in mind different birds have different space requirements. Here is a chart for reference:

	Inside	Outside
Bantams	1 sq ft per bird	4 sq ft per bird
Layers	1.5 sq ft per bird	8 sq ft per bird
Large Chickens	2 sq ft per bird	10 sq ft per bird
Ducks	3 sq ft per bird	15 sq ft per bird
Geese	6 sq ft per bird	18 sq ft per bird

This is meant to be a general guide in terms of space needed. I actually have more birds than this chart recommends and they seem to do fine, so just use your judgment. The one thing I can say is that the coop really should be stout and you need to be able to lock the poultry up at night, so there is no way predators can get into the coop and wreak havoc-raccoons are really good at finding holes and can reach in and kill chickens easily, so make sure your coop is as safe as you can make it.

Chicks

If you choose to start with babies you will need a brooder box and heat. If you order through the mail or purchase your babies from a feed store they will be little enough that they still need heat-if you can find a brooder light with a 250 watt heat bulb that is ideal.

Some people prefer red light bulbs instead of clear ones. My understanding of the reasoning behind this is the red light bulbs discourage toe picking amongst the babies and works better for the babies that are being raised under less than ideal circumstances, such as mass production or very tight confined quarters. In terms of the temperature, 90-95 degrees is ideal. What I tell people is to watch the chicks-if they are gathering at the outermost circle of heat, you have the lamp too close and need to raise it to cool the area down. If the chicks are clustered under the lamp in a lump, you need to lower your heat lamp because they are too cold. If they are milling about, the ambient temperature is fine. You should raise the heat lamp every week so that when they lose their baby fuzz and are feathered out (into their adult plumage) in about 6-8 weeks they won't need the lamp any more. A good bedding material for the baby area is wood shavings or pelleted wood bedding. The chicks have a good footing on this material and it is fairly absorbent so it will help keep odors down. I have made a brooder box from an old sandbox, a stock tank, and I have even used a spare bathtub. You just need some way of keeping them confined safely for a while.

You will need to feed your chicks a chick starter until they are approximately 6 weeks old. **You really need to feed starter.** Some people ask about this and it really is important because starter is very high in protein and lower in calcium and your chicks need this ratio when they are first starting out. If you are raising ducklings with the chicks make sure the starter is non-medicated, as the medicated starter is medicated for chick weight and consumption and waterfowl consume much more and will medicate themselves to death (unless the feed bag tag specifically lists waterfowl). If you are raising turkeys or meat birds, you will need either a gamebird ration or meat bird ration, as these are extremely high in protein. You will also need to make sure they have fresh water. Watch your chicks for pasty-butt (I call it Cacky Bum)-sometimes their behinds can cake over with dried poop and it needs to be taken off so they can relieve themselves. If this happens, just soak their bottoms in warm water and pull the poop wad off. You may also try adding a little oatmeal to their rations, as I've heard this can help. They grow out of this by 3 weeks or so. Also in terms of feed rations, the usual rule of thumb is 1 pound per bird per week, but this can vary amongst breeds, age, and time of year. After 6 weeks the chicks should be moved to a grower/finisher ration until 16 weeks (again, unless the feed has a different listing on the tag), and by the time they are 16 weeks old, they should be on a layer ration. (The layer ration is less in protein and higher in calcium which is what the layers need at that point).

Egg Laying

Hens typically start laying at 5-6 months of age. **You do not need a rooster to have eggs.** A hen will lay eggs regardless of whether or not there is a man in the house. Some people like having a rooster around because they can serve as a watchdog for the hens, alerting them to predators so the hens can hide or get away, and some people like roosters because of the crowing. The things I would caution you about with roosters are that they will crow (and crow and crow) at any time of day, not just in the morning, and they can be aggressive because their job is to protect their flock. Aggressiveness can be a problem if you have small children around because roosters can run up behind them and attack them and it's pretty scary. They can also do a fair amount of damage to a person when they get aggressive. As far as I know, there really aren't any tricks to taming a rooster. I've heard from people that their rooster was handled a lot as a chick and has now turned aggressive,

whereas I've heard from some people that they have never handled their rooster and he seems to know his place. One last thing about roosters-too many is not a good thing! The usual ratio is one rooster to every 12 hens. More than that and there could be constant fighting between your roosters.

Chickens heading into their second season of laying will decrease in egg production when daylight starts to decline. Some people will put a light in their henhouse on a timer to give their chickens a minimum of 14 hours of light per day to continue laying. If you do not choose to do this, expect a complete drop in production and your chickens to go through a molt, where they lose some of their feathers and regrow new ones. This is normal.

Straw makes a great nesting material for the nest boxes. The nest boxes should be kept in the darkest part of the coop. You should also have 1 nest box per 4 birds. Chickens will sometime have "favorite" nest boxes-I've seen hens waiting to use the favorite while someone is in there doing their business, but regardless the ratio is 1 nest box to every 4 hens. Eggs should be collected at least once a day, if anything to discourage egg-eating by your own hens. When your chickens are 16 weeks old they should be put on a layer ration as their protein needs decrease and their calcium needs increase. When your chickens first start laying the eggs will be small and sometimes not have a very thick shell around them. Keep watching the shell thickness-if you have chickens that lay consistently thin-shelled eggs, they may need additional calcium (commercially prepared layer feed does have calcium added, but sometimes they just need more). You can put out oyster shell if this is the case. Remember too-chickens do not lay every day! At the height of production a hen should lay at least 2 eggs every 3 days. When starting out pullets (young hens) lay only one egg every three or four days. A good laying hen will lay about 20 dozen eggs her first year. During the second year, she'll average about 16 to 18 dozen. Most pullets reach peak production at around 30 to 34 weeks old. Most people I know keep their laying flock for 2 years, and start their next batch of layers halfway through the old layer's 2nd year so the new batch will be laying reliably by the time they will "retire" their old batch. By retiring, I mean finding their old layers a new home, whether it's in the freezer or somewhere else. Chickens will continue to lay eggs while they age, they just are not as consistent as the first 2 years, so some people rotate their flocks in the above mentioned way so they do not run out of eggs. Also, when collecting eggs some people feel it is not necessary to wash the eggs unless they are dirty. Eggs have a natural coating on them that is called the "bloom" and it acts as a sealant, so when the egg is washed it takes the bloom off. If you have really dirty eggs, it might be time to change the nest box material. Simply using a small piece of fine grit sandpaper to sand off the dirt works well.

Another reason to collect the eggs once a day is to discourage hens from becoming "broody", meaning wanting to hatch out a clutch of eggs (unless this is what you want). A broody hen undergoes a physical change-her body temperature rises and her feathers fluff because she is in hatch mode. If you have a hen that is broody and you want to discourage that, you can dunk her in a bucket of cold water. I know that sounds brutal, but by doing that you shock her system back into the normal temperature ranges and sometimes that's enough to snap her out of being motherly. If that doesn't work, try putting her in a wire cage with food and water for her in it, suspended in the coop. This makes it so she doesn't have access to the nest and is snapped out of being broody. This can take as long as a week, so be patient. Bear in mind that there are also certain breeds that are more prone to

being broody than others, so if this is not what you want, or is what you want, select your breeds accordingly.

Mixed Flocks

— You can run a mixed flock—you can raise different breeds of chickens together and it is not a problem, unless you have a rooster and want your chickens to breed true and not be a hybrid. You can also raise chickens with ducks and geese, although the ducks and geese are much messier and you will need to clean the house more often if you want to keep your chickens dry. It is generally not recommended to raise turkeys and chickens together as chickens can pass on blackhead disease to turkeys and this is usually fatal to turkeys.

If you choose to start out with adult birds instead of raising poultry out from chicks, I would recommend visiting the existing flock—check the birds to see if their eyes are clear and bright, no scale on their legs (ugly, crusty skin buildups caused by scale mites), etc. In other words, ask yourself if the birds look healthy. If you are running a mixed flock, meaning you are raising babies and adults, I would suggest you have a separate fenced area for the babies that is right next to the adult flock with the fence raised up about 4 inches or so—by doing this you are providing both flocks both aural and visual contact to acclimate to each other, but the fence is high enough so that the babies can go under and mingle with the adult birds, but scoot back under the fence if they start getting picked on and the adult birds can't harm them by getting under the fence. They really do establish a pecking order—there always is one dominant female and one sad sack that is at the bottom of the heap, so anytime you introduce new members; expect some squabbling while they shuffle the order around.

Butchering

Now for the not-so pretty side (for some people) of raising poultry—**butchering**. As far as I know, there are no commercial butchers that handle poultry, so you are on your own in terms of finding help with butchering. If you are interested in raising birds for meat production, you have options. There are some breeds of chickens and ducks that are known as “dual-purpose” birds, meaning they lay eggs reliably but also are bigger and heavier in the body so if you choose to eat them their carcass is a decent size. You do not have to feed these birds a meat bird ration if you are raising them. You can choose to feed a layer ration to somewhat control the rate of growth so you have more flexibility in terms of your butcher time. If you choose to raise straight meat birds, go with Cornish Cross (for chickens). These are a hybrid chicken whose sole function is to gain weight. They have the most efficient feed to weight gain ratio of all the chickens. The one thing to bear in mind if you choose to raise these birds is that **you do not have a lot of fudge room in terms of time to butcher**. These guys (and gals) are ready to go in 6 to 8 weeks, and they will continue to grow and eventually die if you do not butcher them in a timely manner. Their bodies are just not built to support that much weight and since their genetic soup is all about weight gain, they will continue to do so at an alarming rate. So if you do not want to be locked into a rigid schedule with butchering, Cornish Cross would not be a good choice. If you want to be more relaxed about butchering time, White Rock Roosters are a great choice because they are slower to mature and they dress out really well because of the white feathers.

In terms of water temperature for plucking, you have a number of choices:

The Hard Scald or Full Scald: The water temperature is 160 to 180 degrees and you submerge the bird for 30 to 60 seconds. The feathers are very easy to remove at this point, but the hard scald method causes a dark, crusty, blotchy appearance on the skin and makes for poorer keeping quality.

The Subscald: The water temperature is 138 to 140 degrees and you submerge the bird for 30 to 75 seconds. This method causes some breakdown of the outer layer of skin but the flesh is not as affected as in hard scalding. The advantage of the subscald is that the feathers are easily removed and the skin stays a uniform color. This temperature is most frequently used for turkeys and waterfowl. The water temp for scalding ducks is normally 135 to 145 degrees and for geese it is 145 to 155 degrees, with the length of time for submerging 1.5 to 3 minutes.

The Semiscald: The water temperature is 125 to 130 degrees with submerging time being usually 30 seconds. This temperature spreads the fat beneath the surface of the skin, which improves the appearance of the dressed bird. The older the bird, the hotter water temperature and longer submerging time you need.

If you are fast enough right after chopping their heads off, you should be able to dry pluck the breast and back. Dry plucking is an option until the skin cools down, which then tightens around the feather shaft, making scalding the option for plucking at that point. Just be careful when dry plucking and monitor the skin temperature, because you wouldn't want to tear the skin.

After you pluck, you will need to remove the pinfeathers and singe hairs for a more finished-looking dressed bird. This is not necessary, but it gives the carcass a very nice look.

I divide my "food" flock into half - one half will get plucked and one half will get skinned. I choose to do this because skinning takes less time. I choose to pluck half because I love roasted chicken and then being able to make soup from the frame.

When killing, some people choose to chop the heads off the birds. I hang them up by their feet, and stretch their necks out and cut their heads off. I then pluck or skin, depending on what I want. When I am done, I put the carcass in a garbage can (cleaned and sterilized) full of ice water, let the birds cool, then package them for the freezer. This method has worked really well for me. I also choose my butcher time carefully-I try not to butcher in July, August, or September because it's hot and the wasps can be very aggressive. If you need any more information on butchering, Storey Publishing Company has a number of excellent reference books that should be available through your local library or to order online

Diseases/Injury

If one of your birds seems to be hurt or sick, it is best to isolate them away from the rest of the flock while you figure out what to do for the injured/sick bird. Separating them gives a better chance for recovery and does not allow the other birds to pick on the sick or injured one. Keeping them in a small cage (like for rabbits or guinea pigs) with food and water is best for isolation, as well as in a darker, quiet place.

Here is a list of some common illnesses and parasites that poultry can be prone to:

Scale: This disease is caused by a mite that burrows into the skin on the legs, wattles, and combs of poultry. The result is very raised, rough, scaly skin. Unfortunately, this mite is not easy to eradicate and can spread within the flock. There are several different

remedies available for dealing with this parasite-you can paint the bird's legs and roosts once a month with a mixture of one part kerosene to two parts linseed oil. You can also use an injectable ivermectin, but only in show or exhibition birds-ivermectin should not be used for birds used for eggs or meat.

Fowl Mites: These are small mites that can cause feather loss and skin damage. You can tell if these mites are being a problem by looking at your birds-part the feathers and you can either see the small mite or the "dirt" left by the mite. This parasite can be exterminated by thoroughly cleaning the poultry house, changing the bedding, and dusting the birds with a permectrin dust rated for poultry.

Coccidiosis: This is a protozoa that is very common. It is most likely to strike chicks 3 to 6 weeks of age. The worst cases are most likely to occur with chicks from 4 to 5 weeks old. Some of the symptoms are slow growth, runny, off color or bloody droppings or diarrhea. Calling your vet to perform a fecal test is best, and if your birds test positive they can also recommend what type of medication your birds will need.

Egg-Bound: This is when a hen has an egg lodged inside that she cannot pass. Some of the symptoms are listlessness, holding her tail down, and obviously straining to pass something. The prognosis for fixing this problem is not very good. If you can isolate the hen and put her someplace warm, sometimes the warmth is enough to relax her to be able to pass the egg. If that does not work, try putting some warm oil in her vent to try to lubricate the egg out. If that does not work, punching a hole in the egg to drain it, and then allowing the hen's internal contractions to crush the shell might work. You need to be absolutely sure to remove all the egg pieces from the inside of the hen. Unfortunately when things progress to this stage the likelihood of saving the hen go down drastically. There is also the slight chance the hen could prolapse, meaning her membrane in the vent could protrude along with the egg-at this point, breaking the egg and cleaning the membrane and gently trying to put it back in the hen may work, but I would be doubtful at this point that the hen is savable. Some people feel that adding extra calcium helps to prevent this.

All in all, raising poultry really is very rewarding. Chickens can live to be pretty old if they've had a good life-15 years or more is not uncommon if not culled and fed regularly and housed properly. Ducks love slugs and do a great job of keeping your property slug-free, and their eggs are great for baking. Geese make wonderful watchbirds, alerting you to when someone or something is present. Turkeys are very beautiful, stately birds-plus they taste good too!