

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Raising Chickens

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Choose and purchase
healthy chickens

Construct the right housing
for your flock

Feed and care for
your chickens

Kimberley Willis

Horticulturalist and chicken expert

Robert T. Ludlow

Owner and manager,
BackYardChickens.com



Raising Chickens

2nd Edition

by Kimberley Willis with Rob Ludlow

for
dummies[®]
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Raising Chickens For Dummies® , 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Across the United States, from California (where Rob lives) to Michigan (where Kim lives) and beyond — and even in other countries — people are discovering the joy of chickens. Some people want to produce their own food, some are nostalgic and longing for a simpler and more pastoral time; and others were sucked in by some cute chicks. Whatever sparked your interest in chickens, we hope this book helps you become a happy, knowledgeable chicken keeper.

Chickens are a special part of both authors' lives. Every day we listen to the questions and concerns people have about chickens. We take great enjoyment in the chickens we own, too. We're thrilled that more cities and townships are allowing people to keep chickens. But that means there's an ever-growing body of folks who need information about chickens. Because Rob and I can't always be there to answer everyone's chicken questions, we decided it was time for a modern, comprehensive chicken book that provides quick answers to all your chicken questions.

In this, the second edition of *Raising Chickens For Dummies*, we've kept all the good parts of the first edition and done some updating to reflect new technology and knowledge about keeping chickens. We've also expanded some chapters to bring you even more information about chicken keeping.

About This Book

This chicken book is different from some of the others out there. It's easy to find the answer you're looking for because of the way the book is organized. Go ahead, flip through the book and see for yourself. Nice bold headings direct your eyes to just the section you need, and you don't have to read the whole book for a quick answer.

This book gives you a broad overlook of all aspects of keeping chickens, from laying hens to meat chickens, but you don't have to read it all at once or in any particular order. You can start anywhere in the book that interests you. Today you may be interested in learning how to care for some cute, fluff-ball chicks you fell

in love with at the hardware store, and you'll find that information here. In 5 months or so, when they begin laying eggs, you'll need information on what to do and how to manage hens. That information is here, too.

And if you get tired of those chicks because they all turn out to be big, fat, noisy roosters, well, we give you good butchering instructions to turn them into chicken fricassee. So put this book on your bookshelf in a prominent place. We're sure you'll refer to it again and again.

We're careful to use modern, scientifically correct information on chicken care, and we direct your attention to sources of additional information when necessary. If you don't want to read the sidebars or the technical points, you don't have to; you'll still get the information you need to become a great chicken keeper. To round out the information, we also throw in lots of good, homey, down-to-earth advice that comes from owning and enjoying our own chickens.

When you're reading this book, you may notice that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and you want to visit one of these web pages, simply type the web address into your computer exactly as it's written in the text, as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to go directly to the web page.

Foolish Assumptions

To get this book flowing, we had to factor in some assumptions about you, the reader. Here's how we've sized you up:

- » You want to find out more about keeping chickens or eating the chickens you have.
- » You like animals and want to treat them with kindness, and you need some knowledge of their needs.
- » Although you've seen and heard chickens, you aren't an expert on them yet and you need some basic information.
- » You don't want to raise chickens on some monster scale, like 500 laying hens or 2,500 broilers. (We assume the readers of this book want information on small home flocks.)

» You have some basic carpentry or craft skills. (Although we include some very basic plans for building chicken housing in this book, we don't have enough room to teach you building skills. So if you don't have the skills, we give you permission to call on a friend who does.)

Icons Used in This Book

Icons are special symbols set in the margins near paragraphs of text in the book. They are meant to draw your attention. Some people use them as a way to access certain pieces of important information, such as tips. This book uses the following icons.



TIP

Tips are special time- or money-saving pieces of advice. They come from our years of experience with chickens.



REMEMBER

This icon urges you to remember this piece of information because it's important. Sometimes a referral to another chapter for more precise information is nearby.



WARNING

A warning icon means we're mentioning something that may pose a danger to you or your chickens. Pay attention to warning icons — they contain important information.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This icon means we're providing some technical information that may or may not interest you. You can skip this paragraph if you want, without missing any important information.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this book comes with some bonus information on the web that you can access from anywhere.

If you want some fast answers on some of the most basic parts of chicken keeping, you can go to the *Raising Chickens for Dummies* Cheat Sheet, at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/raisingchickens. In addition to the Cheat Sheet, you'll find links to some bonus articles not found in the book. For example, we've got bonus articles on feeding chickens organically, making your chicken coop a special place, and showing chickens. These links are found on the page preceding each new part of the book. You also can go to www.dummies.com/extras/raisingchickens and find all the bonus articles there.

Where to Go from Here

Time to get reading! May we make some suggestions on where to start? Of course, eventually you'll want to read every scrap of this book, but some things you need to know — now!

Here are some ideas of where you may want to begin, depending on your situation:

- » If you're one of those rare people who likes to be well prepared before you start a project like raising chickens, you may want to start with Chapter 1.
- » If you're sitting here with the book in one hand and a box of chicks at your feet, turn to Chapter 14 to get more info on raising chicks.
- » If you have some chickens and they aren't laying the eggs you expected, you need to flip to Chapter 15.
- » If you have chickens and they don't appear to be doing so well, check out Chapter 11 to diagnose and treat whatever your chickens are suffering from.
- » If someone gave you some chicks for Easter that turned into ten fighting and crowing roosters, try Chapter 16, which discusses how to turn them into something more valuable — meat for the freezer.

1 Getting Started with Raising Chickens

IN THIS PART . . .

Find out if owning chickens is right for you. Get all the details of chicken ownership to make an informed decision on starting your own chicken journey.

Whether you're a seasoned chicken owner or you're new to the chicken world, get information on chicken biology, how chickens interact with one another and other animals, and how to identify illnesses that plague chickens.

Will it be the cute, loveable Silkie or perhaps the brown-egg-laying Isa Brown? Discover the different breeds and what they offer.

Get some tips on buying chickens. From starting with adults or chicks, to figuring out costs, to finding the right place to buy your birds, we cover all your bases to get your flock started.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Checking on local legal restrictions for chicken-keeping
- » Considering the commitments you need to make
- » Counting the costs
- » Being mindful of your neighbors

Chapter **1**

The Joy of Chickens

We love chickens, and we hope you're reading this book because you love chickens, too. So we're going to discuss a very basic issue in this chapter: whether you should actually keep chickens. Chickens make colorful, moving lawn ornaments, and they can even furnish your breakfast. But they do take some attention, some expense, and some good information to care for properly.

So consider this chapter as chicken family planning. If you read the information in this chapter and still believe you're ready to start your chicken family, then you have the whole rest of the book to get all the information you need to begin the adventure.

First Things First: Dealing with the Legal Issues

You may be surprised one day to notice chickens in your suburban neighborhood. Many urban and suburban communities are bowing to public pressure and allowing chicken-keeping. But not every community is so enlightened. The person keeping chickens in your neighborhood may be flouting the law. So before you rush out and buy some chickens, too, check whether any laws in your area prevent you from legally keeping chickens.

Almost all property is classified into zoning areas (some very undeveloped areas may have no zoning). Each type of zoning has laws that state what can and cannot be done to property in that zone. This legislation is a way to regulate growth of a community and keep property use in an area similar.

Zoning classification is the job of local governments. Each local governmental unit then assigns laws governing property use within each zone. These laws vary from community to community, but laws and ordinances can regulate what type and how many animals can be kept, what structures and fences can be built, whether a home business can operate, and many other considerations.

The good news, though, is that many cities are giving in to pressure from citizens who want to keep a few chickens for eggs or pets and are allowing poultry-keeping. In most places, a person who wants to use his or her property in a way that's prohibited by the zoning can ask for a zoning variance. Zoning classification can also change if several property owners request the change and it then is approved. The high population of emigrants in some cities who are used to keeping a few chickens in small quarters has also contributed to the relaxation of some rules.

Knowing what info you need

To know whether you can legally keep chickens, first you need to know the zoning of your property. Then you need to know whether any special regulations in that zoning district affect either chicken-keeping or your ability to build chicken housing.

Some common zoning areas are agricultural, residential, and business. You may also find subcategories such as single-family residential or suburban farms. Here's what those categories generally mean for you:

- » **If the zoning is listed as agricultural**, you can probably raise chickens without a problem. With this type of zoning, you'll probably also find a notice about the Right to Farm bill on your paperwork. The Right to Farm bill states that any recognized, legal methods of farming can exist or begin at any time in that zone.
- » **If the zoning is listed as residential, residential/agriculture, or some other type of zoning, or if you rent or lease your home**, you'll need to determine just what is allowed. Because these zoning areas can have different rules across the United States, you need to have to check with local officials to find out what that zoning allows you to do. And your landlord may have restrictions in the lease against pets or livestock, so read your lease or talk to your landlord.



REMEMBER

If you've lived in your home for several years and you've never raised livestock or chickens, you may want to check the zoning with your township because zoning can change over time.

After you've looked into your zoning, you can ask your government officials about any laws regarding keeping animals and erecting sheds or other kinds of animal housing in your zone. You need to be concerned about two types of laws and ordinances before you begin to raise chickens:

» **Laws concerning the ownership of animals at your home location:**

Restrictions may cover the number of birds, the sex of the birds, and where on the property chicken coops can be located. In some areas, the amount of property you have and your closeness to neighbors may determine whether you can keep birds and, if so, how many. Your neighbor may own 5 acres and be allowed to keep chickens, but on your 2-acre lot, poultry may be prohibited. Or you may be allowed to keep so many pets per acre, including chickens. Or you may need to get written permission from neighbors. Many other rules can apply.

» **Laws that restrict the types of housing or pens you can construct:** Do you need a permit to build a chicken coop? Does it need to be inspected?

Finding the info

Just because others in your neighborhood have chickens doesn't mean that it's legal for you to have them. Your neighbors may have had them before a zoning change (people who have animals at the time zoning is changed are generally allowed to keep them), they may have a variance, or they may be illegally keeping chickens.

Not only do you need to find out what *you* are allowed to do, chicken-wise, but you also need to make sure that you get that information from the right people. If you recently purchased your home, your deed and your sales agreement likely have your zoning listed on them. If you can't find a record of how your property is zoned, go to your city, village, or township hall and ask whether you can look at a zoning map. Some places have a copy they can give or sell you; in others, you need to look in a book or at a large wall map.

In larger communities, the planning board or office may handle questions about zoning. In smaller towns or villages, the county clerk or an animal control officer may handle questions about keeping animals. In either case, another government unit may handle the issue of building fences and shelters.



REMEMBER

Don't take the word of neighbors, your aunt, or other people not connected to local government that it's okay to raise chickens at your home. If you're in the midst of buying a home, don't even take the word of real estate agents about being able to keep chickens or even about the property zoning. You never know whether the information you're getting is legitimate when it comes from a secondary source, so you're better off avoiding consequences by going straight to the primary source of legal info.

If you can, get a copy of the laws or ordinances so you can refer to them later, if the need arises. You may need them so you can show a neighbor who challenges your right to keep chickens or to remind you of how many chickens you can legally own.

Confronting restrictions

If your city, village, or township doesn't allow chicken-keeping, find out the procedure for amending or changing a law or zoning in your location. Sometimes all you need to do is request a zoning variance. A variance allows you, and only you, to keep chickens, based on your particular circumstances.

Finding out what you have to do

In some areas, getting permission to keep chickens is just a formality; in others, it's a major battle. Some places require you to draft a proposed ordinance or zoning variation for consideration. In either case, you'll probably be required to attend a commission meeting and state your case.

Ask your city clerk, township supervisor, or other local government official whether you need to attend a planning commission meeting, another special committee meeting, or the general city commission meeting. Find out the date, time, and location of the meeting. In some areas, you need to make an appointment to speak at a meeting or bring up issues.

Be patient — some of these changes can take months of discussion and mulling over. If you don't succeed the first time, ask what you can do to change the outcome the next time. Then try again.

Presenting a compelling case

Come to any necessary meeting prepared and organized. Try to anticipate any questions or concerns, and have good answers for them. Be prepared to compromise on some points, such as the number of birds allowed. Research bulletins and other information prepared by university poultry specialists that have guidelines and sample ordinances for keeping chickens in urban settings.

Ask other people in your community who seem involved in local government about the process in your community. They may give you valuable tips on how to approach the officials who have the power to change a law or grant a variance.

If you can afford it, you may consider hiring a lawyer to represent you. However, most people want to handle it on their own, if they can. If you have a city commissioner or other official assigned to your neighborhood, you may want to enlist his or her help.

It helps to find other people in your area who also want to keep chickens and who are willing to come to meetings to support you. Local experts such as a 4-H poultry leader, veterinarian, or agriculture teacher who can speak on the behalf of poultry-keeping may help. You can also draft a proposed law or ordinance and get people to sign a petition in support of it.

Assessing Your Capabilities: Basic Chicken Care and Requirements

Chickens can take as much time and money as you care to spend, but you need to recognize the *minimum* time, space, and money commitments required to keep chickens. In the next sections, we give you an idea of what those minimums are.

Time

When we speak about time here, we're referring to the daily caretaking chores. Naturally, setting up housing for your birds takes some time. If you're building a chicken coop, give yourself plenty of time to finish before you acquire the birds. You will have to judge how much time that entails, depending on the scope of the project, your building skills, and how much time each day you can devote to it. See Chapter 6 for more on constructing your own coop.

Count on a minimum of 15 minutes in the morning and the evening to care for chickens in a small flock, if you don't spend a lot of time just observing their antics. Even if you install automatic feeders and waterers (see Chapter 8), a good chicken-keeper should check on the flock twice a day. If you have laying hens, collect the eggs once a day, which shouldn't take long.

Try to attend to your chickens' needs before they go to bed for the night and after they are up in the morning. Ideally, chickens need 14 hours of light and 10 hours of darkness. In the winter, you can adjust artificial lighting so that it accommodates your schedule. Turning on lights to do chores after chickens are sleeping is very stressful for them.

You will need additional time once a week for basic cleaning chores. If you have just a few chickens, this may be less than an hour. The routine will include such chores as removing manure, adding clean litter, scrubbing water containers, and refilling feed bins. Depending on your chicken-keeping methods, you may need additional time every few months for more intensive cleaning chores.



REMEMBER

More chickens doesn't necessarily mean more daily time spent on them until you get to very large numbers. A pen full of 25 meat birds may increase your caretaking time only a few minutes versus a pen of 4 laying hens. But how you keep chickens can increase the time needed to care for them. If you keep chickens for showing and you house them in individual cages, feeding and watering them will take at least five to ten minutes per cage.

Space

Each adult full-size chicken needs at least 2 square feet of floor space for shelter and another 3 square feet in outside run space if it isn't going to be running loose much. So a chicken shelter for four hens needs to be about 2 feet by 4 feet, and the outside pen needs to be another 2 feet by 6 feet, to make your total space used 2 feet by 10 feet (these dimensions don't have to be exact). For more chickens, you need more space, and you need a little space to store feed and maybe a place to store the used litter and manure. Of course, more space for the chickens is always better.

As far as height goes, the chicken coop doesn't have to be more than 3 feet high. But you may want your coop to be tall enough that you can walk upright inside it.

Besides the actual size of the space, you need to think about location, location, location. You probably want your space somewhere other than the front yard, and you probably want the chicken coop to be as far from your neighbors as possible, to lessen the chance that they complain.

Money

Unless you plan on purchasing rare breeds that are in high demand, the cost of purchasing chickens won't break most budgets. Adult hens that are good layers cost less than \$10. Chicks of most breeds cost a few dollars each. The cost of adult fancy breeds kept for pets ranges from a few dollars to much, much more, depending on the breed. Sometimes you can even get free chickens!

Housing costs are extremely variable, but they are one-time costs. If you have a corner of a barn or an old shed to convert to housing and your chickens will be free-ranging most of the time, then your housing start-up costs will be very

low — maybe less than \$50. If you want to build a fancy chicken shed with a large outside run, your cost could be hundreds of dollars. If you want to buy a prebuilt structure for a few chickens, count on a couple hundred dollars.

The best way to plan housing costs is to first decide what your budget can afford. Next, look through Chapters 5 and 6 of this book to learn about types of housing. Then comparison-shop to see what building supplies would cost for your chosen housing (or prebuilt structures) and see how it fits your budget. Don't forget to factor in shipping costs for prebuilt units.

You may have a few other one-time costs for coop furnishings, including feeders, waterers, and nest boxes. For four hens, clever shopping should get you these items for less than \$50.

Commercial chicken feed is reasonably priced, generally comparable to common brands of dry dog and cat food. How many chickens you have determines how much you use: Count on about a third to a half pound of feed per adult, full-sized bird per day. We estimate the cost of feed for three to four layers to be less than \$20 per month.

Focusing Your Intentions: Specific Considerations

You may be nostalgic for the chickens scratching around in Grandma's yard. You may have heard that chickens control flies and ticks and turn the compost pile. You may have children who want to raise chickens for a 4-H project. Maybe you want to produce your own quality eggs or organic meat. Maybe you just want to provoke the neighbors. People raise chickens for dozens of reasons. But if you aren't sure, it helps to decide in advance just why you want to keep chickens.

Egg layers, meat birds, and pet/show chickens take slightly different housing and care requirements. Having a purpose in mind as you select breeds and develop housing will keep you from making expensive mistakes and will make your chicken-keeping experience more enjoyable.

It's okay to keep chickens for several different purposes — some for eggs and others as show birds, for example — but thinking about your intentions in advance makes good sense.

Want eggs (and, therefore, layers)?

While we're at it, let's define *egg* here. The word *egg* can refer to the female reproductive cell, a tiny bit of genetic material barely visible to the naked eye. In this chapter, *egg* refers to the large, stored food supply around a bit of female genetic material. Because eggs are deposited and detached from the mother while an embryo develops, they're not able to obtain food from her body through veins in the uterus. Their food supply must be enclosed with them as they leave the mother's body.

The egg that we enjoy with breakfast was meant to be food for a developing chick. Luckily for us, a hen continues to deposit eggs regardless of whether they have been fertilized to begin an embryo.

If you want layers, you need housing that includes nest boxes for them to lay their eggs in and a way to easily collect those eggs. Layers appreciate some outdoor space; if you have room for them to do a little roaming around the yard, your eggs will have darker yolks and you will need less feed.

Thinking about home-grown meat?

Don't expect to save lots of money raising your own chickens for meat unless you regularly pay a premium price for organic, free-range chickens at the store. Most homeowners raising chickens for home use wind up paying as much per pound as they would buying chicken on sale at the local big-chain store. But that's not why you want to raise them.

You want to raise your own chickens because you can control what they eat and how they are treated. You want to take responsibility for the way some of your food is produced and take pride in knowing how to do it.

It isn't going to be easy, especially at first. But it isn't so hard that you can't master it. For most people, the hardest part is the butchering, but the good news is that, in almost every area of the country, you can find folks who will do that job for you for a fee.

You can raise chickens that taste just like the chickens you buy in the store, but if you intend to raise free-range or pastured meat chickens, expect to get used to a new flavor. These ways of raising chickens produce a meat that has more muscle or dark meat and a different flavor. For most people, it's a *better* flavor, but it may take some getting used to.

Average people who have a little space and enough time can successfully raise all the chicken they want to eat in a year. And with modern meat-type chickens, you