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# Keeping Chickens

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### Learn to:

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- Breed and rear chickens
- Construct the perfect hen house
- Keep your chickens happy and healthy

### **Pammy Riggs**

*Poultry farmer, teacher and columnist*

### **Kimberly Willis**

*Poultry breeder and enthusiast*

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*Owner, BackYardChickens.com*



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*Keeping Chickens*

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***Keeping Chickens***

FOR

**DUMMIES®**

**by Pammy Riggs,  
Kimberly Willis and  
Rob Ludlow**

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# About the Authors

**Pammy Riggs** and her family moved away from mainstream life more than twenty years ago to create a different kind of reality, transforming a bare, wet Devon field into Providence Farm ([www.providencefarm.co.uk](http://www.providencefarm.co.uk)) – a thriving small organic farm and a cosy low-carbon home – planting woodland and reinstating wild meadows along the way.

In the warm light of this liberation of her life, Pammy now nurtures a burning desire to share her invaluable knowledge and vast experience. Pammy speaks and teaches at various educational institutions and has created a brand new home for her writing, courses and ideas for getting reconnected with a more natural and creative life at [www.rootedin.co.uk](http://www.rootedin.co.uk). Her passion is to empower us all to get out from behind our computers and desks and get our hands dirty in the rich soil of life.

**Kimberly Willis** lives with her husband, Steve, on a small farm in the thumb area of Michigan. When not writing, she works at the MSU Extension office in Lapeer County, Michigan, as a horticulturalist and doubles as the resident chicken expert. Kim has raised a number of breeds of chickens and other types of poultry for over 30 years. She has shown poultry locally. She is an advocate for eating locally and sells her fresh brown eggs to friends and family. She is a proud member of [www.backyardchickens.com](http://www.backyardchickens.com).

Kim is also a garden writer and has numerous articles in print and online. You can read her work at [www.life123.com](http://www.life123.com) or [www.squidoo.com/gardeninggranny](http://www.squidoo.com/gardeninggranny) or her blog at [www.gardeninggranny.blogspot.com](http://www.gardeninggranny.blogspot.com).

**Rob Ludlow**, his wife Emily, and their two beautiful daughters, Alana and April, are the perfect example of the suburban family with a small flock of backyard chickens. Like countless others, what started out as a fun hobby raising a few egg-laying hens has almost turned into an addiction.

Originally, Rob started posting his experiences with chickens on his hobby website – [www.Nifty-Stuff.com](http://www.Nifty-Stuff.com) – but after realising how much his obsession with chickens was growing, he decided to concentrate his efforts on a site devoted completely to the subject. Now, Rob owns and manages [www.backyardchickens.com](http://www.backyardchickens.com) (BYC), the largest and fastest-growing community of chicken enthusiasts in the world.

Rob hopes to work with BYC's tens of thousands of members to promote a change of the old concept, 'a chicken in every pot', to a new version, the BYC vision – 'a chicken in every yard'!





## *Dedications*

**Pammy Riggs:** To my darling Mum, Joy Seales, who gave me all that Scottish education and time mucking about in Scottish farmyards – valuable compost for a fruitful animal-filled life.

**Kimberly Willis:** I would like to dedicate this book to my husband, Steve, who took over the cooking and dishes so I could concentrate on my latest book.

**Rob Ludlow:** To the three most important girls in my life – Emily, Alana and April – who not only support but also contribute to my joy of raising backyard chickens.

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**Rob Ludlow:** Thanks to my brother Michael for getting me started with chickens, and to Mike Baker and Kristin DeMint for their help with the project. Especially huge thanks to the incredibly smart, patient and helpful staff at [www.backyardchickens.com](http://www.backyardchickens.com), and the thousands of friendly BYC community members.

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# Introduction

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All over the country, more and more people are discovering the joy of chickens. Some people are practical, wanting to explore producing their own food; some are nostalgic, longing for a taste of ‘the good life’; and other people are drawn in by the sight of some pretty chicks.

Chickens are a special part of the authors’ lives. Everyday we listen to the questions and concerns that people have about chickens, and we take great enjoyment in the chickens that we own, too. We’re thrilled that more and more people in towns, cities and villages across the country want to keep chickens, but that means the body of people who need information about chickens just keeps on growing. Because we can’t be there to answer questions in person, we decided it was time for a modern, comprehensive chicken book that provides quick answers to all your questions – and here it is!

## *About This Book*

This chicken book is different from some of the others out there – you can find the answers you’re looking for more easily here because of the way we’ve organised the book. Go ahead, flip through the book and see for yourself. Bold headings direct your eyes to the very sections you need, and you don’t have to read the whole book for a quick answer.

We’ve written this book to give you a broad overview of all aspects of keeping chickens, from laying hens to meat chickens. Today you may be interested in discovering how to care for some cute, fluffy chicks you fell in love with at a country fair, and you can find that information here. In five months or so, when they begin laying eggs, you 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 cockerels, well, we give you thorough instructions on how to turn them into a roast chicken dinner. So put this book on your bookshelf in a prominent place so that you can refer to it again and again.

We’re careful to use modern, scientifically correct information on chicken care and direct your attention to sources of additional information when necessary. But we also throw in lots of good, everyday, down-to-earth advice that can only come from owning and enjoying our own chickens.

## Conventions Used in This Book

To help you find what you want quickly, we use a few conventions throughout the book. For example:

- ✔ All web addresses appear in `monofont` so that you can spot them easily. Because of the way the book is printed, some web addresses may break to the next line. We don't add any characters such as a hyphen if this happens, and so copy the address just as you see it.
- ✔ New terms appear in *italic* and are closely followed by easy-to-understand definitions.
- ✔ We use **bold** to highlight the keywords in lists.

## What You're Not to Read

Of course, we think each and every word that we've painstakingly written is effective and important, but because you don't have to read this book from cover to cover, rest assured that we tell you what type of info you can skip without guilt. Maybe we should say 'what you don't *need* to read' instead. Sometimes we have a little story we want to share, but it isn't really something you need to know. So we put it in a sidebar – those grey boxes filled with text. Feel free to skip any sidebar you want.

Sometimes we also have some more technical material for those of you who want a little more detail. These parts aren't crucial to your chicken-keeping experience, and are marked with a 'Technical Stuff' icon.

## Foolish Assumptions

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

- ✔ Although you've come across chickens before, you aren't an expert on chickens yet and need some very basic information.
- ✔ You want to find out more about keeping chickens or eating the chickens you do have.
- ✔ You like animals and want to treat them with kindness and have a good knowledge of their needs.
- ✔ You don't want to rear chickens on a huge scale like 500 laying hens or 2,500 broilers. We assume you want information on small home flocks.



- ✔ You have some very basic carpentry or craft skills. Although we do provide some basic guidance for building chicken housing in this book, we don't have enough room to instruct you on building skills. So if you don't have the skills, we give you permission to call on a friend who does.

## *How This Book Is Organised*

To access information easily and quickly, you need organisation that's logical and precise. So we break this book into parts and then chapters, which group together information on a particular aspect of chicken-keeping, say, looking after baby chicks. We then break chapters into sections, with bold headings that help you to find what you're looking for.

Here's just a tiny taste of the book's organisation.

### *Part I: Choosing Chickens*

These chapters explore your reasons for wanting to keep chickens, talk about basic chicken biology (Chapter 2) and give you some information on breeds of chickens (Chapter 3). This part also takes you through planning and purchasing your flock (Chapter 4).

### *Part II: Housing Your Flock*

This part covers basic chicken-keeping skills, whether you want eggs or meat. In Chapter 5 we talk about chicken housing that's used for various types of chickens, and in Chapter 6 we go a bit further, giving you suggestions for designing chicken housing yourself. In Chapter 7 we cover the basics of getting your chicken housing set up and keeping it in good working order.

### *Part III: Caring For Your Flock: General Management*

Obviously, caring for your chickens takes some time and effort, and this part covers the basics on care. Chapter 8 discusses something very important to the chickens – feeding. Yes, chickens eat anything, but you need to know the best way to feed your chickens.

Of course, food isn't the only thing that keeps your chickens healthy. You have to protect them from predators and pests (Chapter 9), plus you have to take an active role in preventive health (Chapter 10) and recognise and treat illness (Chapter 11).

## ***Part IV: Breeding: The Chicken and the Egg***

This part focuses on one thing: making more chickens. Chicken reproduction is a fascinating journey. In Chapter 12 we discuss mating, and in Chapter 13 we discuss incubating eggs, both artificially and nature's way. Of course, the chicken reproductive process doesn't stop just at the eggs . . . they do have to hatch. So, in Chapter 14 we cover how to care for those chicks when they do.

## ***Part V: Considering Special Management Issues***

The chapters in this part focus on the specialised things you need to know about keeping chickens for a particular purpose, such as to give you eggs or meat. In Chapter 15, we discuss managing laying hens so that they can produce good eggs for you consistently. Chapter 16 covers the finer points of growing chickens for meat and Chapter 17 looks at dispatching chickens and storing their meat.

## ***Part VI: The Part of Tens***

This last part, known in a *For Dummies* book as The Part of Tens, gives you some quick-reference reviews or information we didn't include elsewhere. In Chapter 18 we offer tips for raising healthy chickens, and in Chapter 19 we talk about some common chicken misconceptions – talk about foolish assumptions!

## ***Icons Used in This Book***

Icons are special symbols set in the margins near paragraphs of text in the book. They're meant to draw your attention. Some people use them as a way to access certain pieces of important information.



This book uses the following icons.

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



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



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



This icon provides some technical information that may or may not interest you. You can skip this paragraph if you want, without missing any essential information.

## Where to Go from Here

So, the time has come to get reading. Of course, eventually you want to read every scrap of this book, but you may need to know some things – 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 such as keeping 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, you may want to start with Chapter 14 to get more info on caring for those chicks.
- ✓ If you have some chickens and they aren't laying the eggs you expect, flip to Chapter 15.
- ✓ If you have chickens that look a bit peaky, check out Chapter 11 to work out and treat whatever your chickens may be suffering from.
- ✓ If someone gave you some cute fluffy chicks for Easter that turned into ten fighting and crowing cockerels by autumn, try Chapter 16, which discusses how to turn them into something more valuable and a lot less noisy – meat for the freezer.

# 6

## Keeping Chickens For Dummies

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# Part I

# Choosing Chickens



'So I said to the poultry egg dealer,  
I want chicks who can stand up to a really  
cold winter this year.'

## *In this part . . .*

**T**he chapters in this part focus on some basic chicken information, such as chicken biology and different breeds of chickens. We try to infuse you with our love of chickens but give you enough information to make sure that chicken-keeping really is for you. If you're new to chicken-raising, you may be anxious about buying chickens, and so in Chapter 4 we discuss what you need to know about acquiring chickens.