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Keeping Chickens

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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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**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) – 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. 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.

Kim is also a garden writer and has numerous articles in print and online. You can read her work at www.life123.com or www.squidoo.com/gardeninggranny or her blog at 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 – 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 (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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Kimberly Willis: I would like to acknowledge all the help that Jennifer Connolly has given me with my first Dummies book as well as acknowledge all the hard work that Christy Pingleton has done on this book. I would also like to acknowledge the fun chicken website, www.backyardchickens.com, which gave me much insight on the concerns new chicken owners have.

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, and the thousands of friendly BYC community members.

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Introduction

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

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 . . .

The 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.

Chapter 1

Enjoying Chicken-Keepering

In This Chapter

- ▶ Looking at the law and chicken-keeping
 - ▶ Considering the commitments you need to make
 - ▶ Counting the costs
 - ▶ Being mindful of your neighbours
-

We'll come straight out with it – we love chickens and we hope that you're reading this book because you love chickens, too; because, as a chicken-keeper, you'll have their welfare at the forefront of your mind. We discuss a very basic issue in this chapter – one that you need to consider before you do anything else. Should you even keep chickens? Chickens make colourful, moving lawn ornaments and they can even provide you with your breakfast. But they do take some attention and expense, and you need specific knowledge to care for them properly.

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

Dealing with the Legal Issues

Various rules have been put in place over the years to combat the problems associated with chicken-keeping. In this section, we look at those rules – and how to overcome them responsibly.



Plenty of small home-owned flocks are happily clucking and scratching around gardens all over the country. All the legal stuff you have to think about before kick-starting a chicken-keeping hobby can sound a bit daunting, but don't let it put you off if you're keen. 'Forewarned is forearmed', and knowing about the potential problems of a crowing cockerel, for example, may just save you from experiencing the hassle first hand.

Knowing what info you need

To know whether you can legally keep chickens, first you need to know what can stop you from doing so. Therefore, before you go to the expense of setting up your chicken-keeping operation or get the kids too excited about the new hobby, check the following:

- ✔ **Covenants written into your house deeds.** About 100 years' ago people kept chickens in urban backyards as commonly as in farmyards. In fact, chickens became so common that they began to pose problems in densely populated areas when people didn't look after them properly, which caused bad smells and attracted vermin.

To combat these problems, rules against chicken-keeping were written into some house deeds as new dwellings were being built around the turn of the last century. Although this situation is thankfully quite rare nowadays, you need to check that your house deeds don't contain such rules. If you live in a terraced row or a street of similar houses, the chances are that all the houses are bound by the same rules.

If you bought your house before you got interested in chicken-keeping, rules concerning chicken-keeping may not be something that you checked. Anything that says keeping poultry isn't allowed on your property should be written into the deeds quite clearly, and so now is the time to read them thoroughly.

Restrictions in house deeds may often be outdated, for the current era in which people keep chickens for pleasure rather than for bulking out a meagre diet, and rules may be relaxed in your area or people may be unaware they exist. If your chicken-keeping creates any problems for other people, however, those rules can be used against you.

- ✔ **Local council by-laws.** Consult with your local council to check that no by-laws exist that prevent anyone in your area from keeping livestock at their property.
- ✔ **Tenancy agreements.** If you rent, your landlord may have written a 'no pets' clause into your tenancy terms. If so, check whether this covers chickens too – it may be that 'outdoor' pets aren't viewed as a problem.
- ✔ **The law.** Laws exist that govern what you're allowed to build (relevant if you're thinking of going for a solidly constructed chicken palace). Other relevant laws concern pollution of ground water from poor storage of manure (the Environment Agency police this area — see its website at www.environment-agency.gov.uk for more information) and obligate you to treat animals well. They also restrict who you can and can't sell chicken-related produce to. Rules also exist that concern noise levels – the Environmental Health Department of your local council has a duty to investigate any noise pollution complaints. Remember that cockerels can be very loud!

If your flock consists of 50 or more chickens, you're obliged to register with the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and to bring to its attention any unusual deaths or diseases in wild birds near your chicken-keeping venture. If your chickens have a disease problem, your veterinary surgeon informs DEFRA if he thinks that the problem is significant. (Chapter 11 deals with 'notifiable diseases'.)

Finding the info

House deeds are usually held for surety against a mortgage by the solicitor or bank that arranged your mortgage for you. The information is available, but you may have to give the office where the deeds are held some notice if you want to study them or copy some of the details. For a fee, and if your property is registered, you may be able to find the information you need at www.landregisteronline.gov.uk.



If you're unlucky enough to find restrictions in your house deeds, you can look at getting the rules changed – if you've come to an agreement with neighbours, and particularly if someone else living in your street already has chickens. Check to see if you can get a free half-hour consultation with a solicitor to find out whether making the change is worthwhile and possible, being an outdated situation. Someone else living nearby may already have done so, which can help your case along.

For checking the rules regarding ground water, rivers and streams, the Environment Agency is the place to go. Environmental Health Officers have a few roles, too – food safety, pest and vermin control as well as noise pollution all come under their jurisdiction. You can contact these people through your local county council, where you can also check for any applicable by-laws that may affect you and contact the Planning Officers if you need to talk through any building regulations. Take advantage of their knowledge – they can be very helpful.

If your flock gets to a size where you need to register it with DEFRA, you can do so via its telephone helpline (0845 33 55 77) or website (www.defra.gov.uk). We don't advise rushing into keeping 50 birds straight away, but it doesn't take much to reach that number after you start to breed chicks.

Looking ahead to restrictions that may affect you later on

Most people start their flock with egg-layers and then progress to growing some chicks of their own to replace elderly laying hens or because they want to see a few cute fluffy chicks running around the place. Baby chicks soon turn into adults and then start laying themselves or become noisy cockerels,

which poses a new challenge to the home flock owner. (Chapters 12 and 14 look at breeding chickens and rearing chicks.)

If you have as many as ten hens laying well, you may be getting five dozen eggs a week – far more than most households can eat! You may decide to sell some eggs to help towards the cost of keeping your chickens, but you need to be aware of the laws that come into play as soon as you start to sell any number of eggs to a third party. These laws affect to whom you may sell and what you can legally call your eggs. We explain these laws in Chapter 15.

Dealing with your extra cockerels before they start to crow in chorus and keep the neighbourhood awake means that you must find out the correct and legal methods of dispatching them and dealing with any waste, and be familiar with the rules about eating the meat from these birds. Chapter 17 looks at this area.



Don't let rules and regulations put you off keeping chickens for pleasure, but bear in mind the way this hobby can escalate, which brings these rules into play. That way, when you're ready to increase your flock size, you're also ready to undertake the legal responsibilities that go with 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 consider the *minimum* time, space and money commitments you need to put into keeping 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, getting housing set up for your birds takes some time, particularly if you're building a chicken house. Give yourself plenty of time to finish before you acquire the birds. You have to judge how much time that's going to be 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 chicken housing.)

Count on a minimum of 15 minutes every morning and evening to care for chickens in a small flock, if you don't spend a lot of time just observing their antics – they can be incredible time-wasters. Even if you install automatic feeders and drinkers (see Chapter 8), as a good chicken-keeper you need to check on your flock twice a day. If you have laying hens, collect eggs once a day, which doesn't take long.

Try to attend to your chickens' needs before they go to bed for the night and after they're 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. Chickens find it very stressful if you turn on lights to do chores after they're sleeping.

In addition to your daily tasks, you need to allocate additional time once a week for basic cleaning chores. If you have just a few chickens, this can be less than an hour. Cleaning includes such things as removing manure, adding clean litter, scrubbing water containers and refilling feed bins. Depending on your chicken-keeping methods, you may need to put in additional time every few months for more intensive cleaning chores.



More chickens doesn't necessarily mean spending more daily time on them until you get to very large numbers – a pen full of 25 meat birds may only increase your caretaking time a few minutes in comparison to a pen of four laying hens – but the way in which you keep chickens can increase the time needed to care for them. For example, if you keep chickens for showing and you house them in individual cages, feeding and watering them takes at least five to ten minutes per cage.

Space

Each adult full-sized chicken needs an area of floor space of at least 0.3 square metres (3.2 square feet) for shelter – more if it's available – and another 0.3 square metres (3.2 square feet) at the very minimum as outside run space, if the chicken isn't going to be running loose much. So a chicken shelter for four hens, for example, needs to be about 0.6 metres wide by 1.3 metres long (2 by 4.25 feet) and the outside pen another 0.6 metres wide by 2 metres long (2 by 6.5 feet), so that your total space is 0.6 metres by 3.3 metres (2 by 11 feet) (which covers an area of about 2 metres/22 feet square – these dimensions don't have to be exact). For more chickens you need to provide more space, and you need a little additional space to store feed and maybe a place to store or compost the used litter and manure. Of course, the more space you can provide for your chickens, the better.

As far as height goes, the chicken coop doesn't have to be more than 1 metre (3.3 feet) high, but you may want something bigger than a coop to be tall enough for you to walk upright inside it.

Besides the actual size of the space, you need to think about location, location, location. You probably don't want your space in the front garden unless it's secluded or well fenced off from the street, and you probably want the chicken house to be as far from your neighbours as possible to lessen the chance that they may complain.

Money

Unless you plan on purchasing rare breeds that are in high demand, the cost of purchasing chickens doesn't break most budgets. Adult hens that are good layers cost around £10, and chicks of most breeds cost a couple of pounds each. The cost of adult fancy breeds kept as pets ranges from a few pounds to much, much more, depending on the breed. Sometimes you can even get free chickens if you find a commercial laying flock and accept second-year layers that someone's getting rid of. The Battery Hen Welfare Trust (www.bhwt.org.uk) organises 'ex-bats' for collection for a nominal fee and tries to fit you up with something in your area.

Housing costs are extremely variable, but 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, your housing start-up costs are going to be very low – maybe just £25 to get the basic equipment. If, however, you want to build a fancy chicken shed with a large outside run, your cost can run into hundreds of pounds. If you want to buy a pre-built structure for a handful of chickens, count on £100 plus.

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

You may incur a few other one-time costs for essential equipment such as feeders, drinkers and nest boxes. For four hens, clever shopping should get you these items for less than £40.

An ongoing cost of keeping chickens is buying in their feed. Commercial chicken feed is reasonably priced and generally comparable to common brands of dry dog and cat food, and the choice of feeds available is big. Because the chickens' health needs to be your first consideration, try to avoid getting poor grade feed. The lower the price, the more likely a feed is to include Genetically Modified (GM) soya and grain. You have to pay more to buy a higher grade food that avoids GM material. The quantity you buy in one go also affects the price.

The decisions you make about feed affect the quality of the food you get from your chickens. If they can't get out to range and forage for themselves with your system and they rely on the food you give them for their nutrients, going for the cheapest feeds can be a false economy – chickens can only make their meat and eggs with what you provide. If you have loads of space where the chickens can find free food they won't be eating as much of the feed you provide anyway.

How many chickens you have and how you keep them determine how much feed you use: count on about $\frac{1}{4}$ kilo ($\frac{1}{2}$ pound) of feed per adult, full-sized bird per day. We estimate the cost of feed for three to four layers to be around £10–12 per month, but feed costs do rise from time to time. If you can find a local source of grain or even grow part of your chickens' food yourself, you can keep the costs to a minimum.

Focusing Your Intentions: Specific Considerations

Dozens of reasons exist why you may want to keep chickens. Some people decide to take up chicken-keeping because they're nostalgic for the chickens they remember from childhood. Other people do it because they've heard that chickens control flies and ticks and turn the compost pile. Some children want to keep chickens for a school project or a Scout or Guide badge, or may reach an age where they demand pets and it seems logical to opt for a useful animal that doesn't live indoors. Some people want to produce their own quality eggs or organic meat, whereas others just want to provoke the neighbours!

If you're not exactly sure why chicken-keeping appeals to you, think about what you want to get out of it in advance and decide whether keeping chickens really suits your temperament and lifestyle. Impulse chicken-buying isn't a good idea, and so a little forethought is the way to tackle the decision. If chicken-keeping turns out not to be your bag, you may waste a lot of time and money and have some unhappy chickens on your hands. For that reason, in this section we show you all the options before you take that final step into what we think is a great, fun hobby for all the family.

Egg layers, meat birds and pet/show chickens have slightly different housing and care requirements. Having a purpose in mind as you select breeds (see Chapter 3) and develop your housing keeps you from making expensive mistakes and ensures that your chicken-keeping experience is more enjoyable.

Keeping chickens for several different purposes is fine – some for eggs and others as show birds for example – but thinking about your intentions in advance makes good sense.

Producing eggs (and, therefore, keeping layers)

The word 'egg' can refer to the female reproductive cell, a tiny bit of genetic material barely visible to the naked eye, but in this chapter *egg* refers to

the large, stored food supply around a bit of female genetic material that's wrapped inside a hard shell. Because the mother deposits and detaches eggs as an embryo develops, embryos aren't 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. (Chapter 13 looks at incubating eggs and hatching chicks in detail.)

The egg that people enjoy with their breakfasts was really meant to be food for a developing chick. Luckily for us, though, hens continue to deposit eggs regardless of whether or not they've been fertilised to begin an embryo, and so you don't need to have a cockerel in your flock. In fact, if you keep chickens in your garden in a built-up area, you're better off not keeping a cockerel. We explain why in the earlier section 'Dealing with the Legal Issues'.

If you want *layers* (in other words, hens that you keep for laying eggs), you need housing that includes nest boxes for them to lay their eggs in and a way for you to easily collect those eggs. Layers are adult birds (they have to be mature to lay eggs) that appreciate some outdoor space, and if you have room for them to do a little roaming around the garden, your eggs have darker yolks from all the goodies they find on their scavenging adventures, and you need to provide less feed for them. (You can read more about caring for layers and collecting eggs in Chapter 15.)

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 a butcher's shop or farmers' market. Most homeowners raising chickens for home use end up paying as much per kilo/pound as they would buying chicken on sale at the local supermarket, perhaps more if you buy the cheapest chickens in store. But that's not why you may want to rear them.

People want to raise their own chickens for meat because they can control what food the birds eat, how they're treated during their relatively short lives and how they're ultimately dispatched. They want to take responsibility for the way some of their food is produced and pride in knowing how to do it. Many people are also concerned about the inhumane conditions commercial meat chickens are reared in and the way people's food is handled before it reaches them. Specifically, some people want to slaughter chickens in ways that conform to kosher or halal (religious) laws. For these reasons, many people are now rearing their own or buying locally grown, humanely raised chickens and getting used to a 'new' taste in chicken.

Knowing the practicalities of home-grown meat

Raising chickens for meat isn't easy, especially at first, but it isn't so hard that you can't master it. For most people the hardest part is the killing, and so the good news is that small-scale poultry abattoirs can do that job for you,

for a fee. These abattoirs aren't always easy to find, however, and so you need to understand what skills are needed and the various regulations surrounding killing poultry for meat in case you don't manage to locate one near you and you have to do it yourself.

The good news is that average keepers 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 can be eating home-grown chicken 14 weeks after you get the chicks, or even sooner. So, unlike raising a beef animal or pigs, you can grow your own meat in less than four months.

The major differences between how you rear your own meat birds and how they're 'factory farmed' lie in the numbers of birds in one place, the amount of space the birds have while growing, their access to the outdoors and what they're fed. You can ensure that your birds have a diet based on plant protein if you like, or organic grains or pasture. Most home-grown chickens are also slaughtered under more humane and cleaner conditions than commercial chickens.

If you want to rear meat birds, here's what you need to think about:

✔ **Emotional challenges.** If you're the type of person who gets emotionally attached to animals you care for, or you have children who are very emotional about animals, think carefully before you purchase meat birds. Although traditional meat breeds can end up all right as pets, you really shouldn't leave the broiler-strain birds beyond the ideal dispatching time because their health suffers as a result.



We like our birds and we don't like to kill things, but we love eating our own organically and humanely raised meat. To get around the emotional issues we use a small-scale poultry slaughterhouse (called an *abattoir*). Abattoirs come in a few different categories based mostly on their size and *throughput* – that is, the number of birds being killed there each year. To stay within the ethics of raising your own chickens, and if you want help with the job of dispatching and preparing your birds, you have to seek out a small-scale abattoir. The bigger poultry abattoirs don't want your birds in their systems, which are so vast and mechanised that you can't be sure of getting your own bird back at the end anyway. If you can find a good, small, poultry abattoir near you, treasure it, and do your best to be punctual and pay straight away. It adds to the cost of the final product but it isn't much, and the price is well worth it if you prefer not to do the job yourself.



That being said, we do know how to kill and *eviscerate* (the posh word for gutting, dressing or preparing) a bird, and we advise everyone who raises meat birds to find out how to do it. A day may come when you need the skill, and knowing about the process makes you aware of all the factors that go into producing meat, including the fact that a life was sacrificed so that you can eat meat. You appreciate the final product and all the skills it takes to produce it even more. In Chapter 17 we

discuss dispatching and dressing. Read the chapter, and then think about whether you can do what's necessary if you have to. Whatever type of bird you choose to keep – a meat bird, a layer, a show bird or a pet – a time may come when you need to dispatch one humanely. This skill goes with the chicken-keeping territory.

- ✓ **Space.** You need enough space to raise at least 10 to 25 birds to make meat production worthwhile. If you live in an urban area with room for only a few chickens, producing meat probably isn't for you. Even in slightly roomier suburban areas you need to consider your situation carefully before rearing meat birds. In these areas you may find rearing meat birds in confinement easier than letting chickens free-range or pasture, but you're unlikely to want to do that.

If you live in a rural area, however, feel you have plenty of room and think that you can do your own slaughtering, you can go ahead and raise your own meat chickens, or at least give it a go to find out whether it's for you. Start with a small batch and see how you do. You can find excellent poultry 'dispatch and dressing courses' run by smallholder associations around the country that equip you with the right skills for the job. Search around online for one.



Don't think that growing your own meat chickens saves you any money. It almost never does. In fact, the fewer birds you rear, the more costly each one becomes. Economy of scale – for example, being able to buy and use 1,000 kilos (2,200 pounds) of feed instead of two 25-kilo (55-pound) sacks – helps costs, but most people can't do that. You grow your own meat for the satisfaction, flavour and to take responsibility for the chicken meat you want to eat.

Getting used to a different taste

Be prepared for a big difference in taste between eating your own reared meat birds and buying 'factory farmed' chickens from the supermarket. You can rear chickens that taste just like the chickens you buy in the supermarket by keeping the meat birds confined, but most home flock owners want to keep free-range or pastured meat chickens.

If you're not used to eating chicken meat from free-range birds, expect to get used to a new flavour – one that your great grandparents would have recognised. Raising chickens on a diet that includes grass and other foraged food produces a firmer meat that has more muscle or dark meat and a different, more 'chickeny' flavour. For most people, the flavour's better. A difference also exists in the texture of the meat from birds that have freedom to walk, run and flap. Supermarket chicken meat, unless it's labelled 'free-range' or 'organic', comes from birds that have had no chance to exercise and run around; they're killed at a very young age and the processing sometimes includes adding water to the meat, which then takes on a bland taste and spongy feel. Home-reared chicken is very different, and you may take some time to get used to it.