

Intro to Backyard Chickens



*To have chickens or not to have chickens,
that is the question! SLC 11/18/2014*



The Law

The City of Walla Walla allows residential owners to keep up to 50 chickens per family. The coop must be 50 feet from any property line and enclosed by a fence. See handout for more detailed language.

- The requirement to be 50' from the property line may be a challenge for many who have standard city lots.
- I have been advised that the law is not enforced unless there is a complaint.
- In any case, unless you live far from neighbors, it is a good idea to speak with them about your plans.



Why keep chickens?

- Eggs
- Meat
- Pet
- Breed/Show
- Other



Eggs

- Benefits of eggs
 - “Farm” vs. Commercially produced (<http://www.motherearthnews.com/print.aspx?id={9D99238C-1E50-47CF-A29B-B6399A74C68B}#axzz3JRg7MrAF>)
- Do you need chickens to have good eggs?
 - Alternate sources of farm eggs
 - Cost considerations
 - Farm vs. organic
 - Consistency in quantities harvested
 - Year round production?
- How many chickens will I need?
 - 1-2 chickens per egg eating person in the household
 - Can I wait 5 months for my first eggs?
 - What if I have more than we can eat?
 - What will I do with a rooster (or more)?
 - What is my exit strategy?



Meat

- Birth to Processing: 6-10 weeks, depending on breed
- Typically raised in spring and early summer – heat can be a problem due to weight.
- Processing – can you do it? Who will?
- Freezer space – do you have it?
- Cost – see handout
- Benefits of home grown chicken meat?
 - Less fat (20%)
 - Fewer calories (28%)
 - No antibiotics
 - Better flavor



Pets

Personality and beauty, low maintenance and beneficial for their eggs, keeping the yard free of pests, adding natural fertilizer, scratching in the mulch pile, and more... Beyond producers, chickens can make great pets!

Check out: www.mypetchicken.com

Resources for which breeds are suited as pets, how-to, plans, advice, supplies, recipes, and even gifts.



Considerations before taking the plunge:

- Chickens need care year round. They need to be “put to bed” at night, and let out in the morning. While not difficult, consider who will do this task? Who will do it while you are away?
- When being handled by children, supervision is required. Chickens have sharp beaks and toe nails. Hands should be washed after handling chickens.
- What impact will acquiring chickens have on your other pets? Will they need to be confined?
- How does your garden grow? Chickens love the garden, even fenced, chickens can get in and wreak havoc on your crop.
- Are you prepared financially? Ensure time to prepare, and plenty of time to acquire supplies BEFORE getting chicks.



Needs

Chickens don't need anything fancy, but rely on you to provide them with:

- Shelter, clean and free from leaks, drafts, and pests.
 - Safe from predators, especially at night
 - Adequate roosting space
 - Nesting boxes for laying hens
 - In cold temps, below 10-15 degrees, supplemental heat
- Food and lots of clean, fresh water at all times.
 - Clean and dry
- Additional Care
 - Dust bath
 - Vet care, if needed
 - Supplements, if needed

Chickens are social animals and will thrive if there are more than one. Most resources suggest a minimum of three.



Starting Out

- The chicks will start their first several weeks in a brooder with temperatures in the 80's to 90's. Generally kept in the house or in a garage.
- You will need a sturdy box or enclosure
 - Sturdy enough to hold or support a heat lamp
 - Sturdy enough to keep pets and kids safe
 - Able to be covered
 - Big enough for quickly growing chicks
 - Easy to clean
- By 4-6 weeks of age, the chicks will be feathered out and can go into a bigger enclosure or to their coop, depending on the time of year, size of coop, are they joining other chickens, etc



The Coop (and run)

- Size: 2-4 square feet of inside space per chicken > bigger is better!
- Roost: 8-10 inches per chicken, 2X4 on edge works well or even tree branches about 1.5" in diameter. Birds will like roosts a few inches to a few feet off of the floor.
- Nesting boxes: 12 or 14 inches square is ideal. Best when off of the ground.
- Pop hole: 12 inches square and can be securely closed at night.
- Run space: Secure fenced area of about ten square feet per bird.
- Mobile coops are a good option for many



More Coop and Run

- If the (stationary) coop can have a south facing window, that is a plus.
- If a stationary coop can have a moveable run, the grass will have a chance to recover between rotations.
- Coops need good ventilation, but should not be drafty. Vent holes should be protected with wire netting.
- Run material should be heavier than chicken wire.
- There should be a covered area (besides the coop) for chickens in the run, and shade available during the summer.
- Food and water should be in the run, not the coop.



Coop Maintenance

- Most resources recommend using pine shavings as litter in the coop. Cedar shavings are not recommended.
- Wood pellets, chopped straw, and other absorbent, pest resistant materials can be used.
- The deep litter method adds 1-2 inches of litter weekly over a base of 3-4 inches. A thorough clean of emptying and starting a new base can be done every 3-6 months, depending on the number of birds, time of year, etc.
- A 6 to 8 inch wide board can be placed below the roost to collect the majority of droppings. This can be scraped off into the compost pile and reduces the need to replace litter as often.
- Every spring, clean out the entire coop, removing all litter, nesting boxes, etc. and disinfect all surfaces with a vinegar or bleach solution. Ensure to do this while it's nice enough for the birds to be outside while the coop airs out and the surfaces dry off.



Feed and Supplies

Chickens are omnivores that generally enjoy a variety of food and treats.

- It's recommended that a commercial feed be the basis for a healthy diet. Offer free choice in a feeder that keeps the food dry and clean.
 - Offer scratch (cracked corn and grains) as a supplement (10% or less of diet), to encourage scratching and foraging. Good for chickens confined to a run or as a treat.
 - Leftovers are a favorite! Chickens will eat most anything. Do not feed them spoiled food, potato peels, avocados, and limit citrus. No uncooked beans or rice.
 - Treats such as mealworms are commercially available if you want to really spoil your chickens.

It is critical that chickens always have a fresh supply of water available.

- There are many options for waterers:
 - Double walled fount
 - Bucket with nipples
 - PVC with nipples attached to a water supply



Beyond the Basics

- Chickens need grit to digest their food. Usually found in the soil, but if confined to a run, can offer free choice in a dish or feeder.
- Calcium can be offered as a free choice supplement, but is generally found in layer feed.
- Diatomaceous Earth can be placed in a pan for dust baths, and/or fed (one pound to 50 pounds of feed) to chickens to aid in the control of lice, fleas, and other biting pests. If feeding, ensure it is food grade.
- Consult a veterinarian before offering any other additional supplements or medicines.



Wrap up

- There are a billion resources out there. Find one you like and stick with it. Try to find regionally specific information.
- Talk to the feed and farm stores. Talk to producers and people who have chickens in the area.
- Talk to poultry judges at the fairs
- **Don't be afraid**
- Trust your instincts

You may find that doing your own thing is the best thing for you. Chickens are quite forgiving and you will soon recognize if something is amiss! And if you want to knit a sweater for your chicken, then do it!



Resources

- ❑ www.backyardchickens.com:

Tons of information and resources for choosing, learning about, troubleshooting, and getting advice, on backyard chicken keeping.

- ❑ www.mypetchicken.com:

More resources with focus on keeping chickens as pets.

- ❑ Chicken keeping books from the Library
- ❑ Book: A Chicken in Every Yard: The Urban Farm Store's Guide to Chicken Keeping - available at Amazon and on Kindle
- ❑ Pinterest, Sketchup (for designing your coop), Blogs (I like The Chicken Chick at www.the-chicken-chick.com)

