



## 4. Eggs

Chickens will begin to lay almost daily at between 16 and 24 weeks and continue at that rate for about 18 months. At that age egg production will decline slowly until they reach about three years old.

If the eggs aren't collected daily or if a hen manages to hide her eggs, she will sit on them overnight and become broody. Remove the hen from the area and break up the nest and in a day or two she will lose the urge to hatch her infertile eggs.

Collect the eggs every day to ensure that they stay clean and fresh. Unless particularly dirty, don't wash eggs prior to storing in the fridge as they will not stay fresh as long. Use a pencil to write on the

date that the eggs were collected and use them within 4 or 5 weeks. To check if an egg is fresh, fill a bowl with water and place the egg in. If it floats, do not use it. The freshest eggs will sit horizontally on the base of the bowl



## 5. Catching & Holding Chickens

Most chickens hate being caught but if started whilst they are young, they will get used to it. The main thing to remember is to do everything slowly and gently. To get close to the chicken carry a food bucket to entice the whole flock towards you. Walk slowly towards the chicken that you want to pick up and herd it slowly into a tight corner. Place one hand on its back to stop it flying up and the other underneath to gently hold the legs together. Never grab them by their legs as their feet are very delicate.

To hold the chicken, rest the weight of the bird on your arm and tuck the head under your

armpit which will help to calm the bird and prevent its wings from flapping. Hold the legs underneath firmly with your fingers.

When children are handling young birds, sit them down first and have them hold it firmly in their hands. Never let them squeeze the birds as you can be easily hurt.



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KEEPING  
CHICKENS

# Keeping Backyard Chickens

Chickens are a great addition to the garden. One chicken costs less than a dozen eggs and they continue to be inexpensive pets that pull their weight around the house as well.



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To keep your own flock of chickens healthy and pest free, quarantine new chickens until after they are fully vaccinated for viral diseases and treated for pests.

Chickens that are allowed to free range around the garden will control insects and weeds, fertilise the garden and produce eggs. They eat food scraps and loosen the soil while scratching around the garden bed although they are best kept out of the vegie patch and garden beds with very young plants.

For backyards the best type of chickens are the big docile layers which often don't mind being handled and will happily free range for a few hours before ambling back in to their pen to be secured safely for the night.

Bantams are terrific fun and whilst they will produce some eggs, they are not as productive as their larger cousins.

To start, buy four or five vaccinated hens that are just at the point of laying (between 16 and 24 weeks) from a reliable source. Avoid getting roosters as many shires in the metropolitan area prohibit them. Roosters are not needed for hens to produce eggs. Check with your local Council for the chicken keeping guidelines within your area.

### Foxes

Even in the suburbs, foxes are big killers of chickens. They will prowl at night so chickens should always be locked in a secure pen before the sun goes down. However, foxes will also attack during daylight so never allow chickens to free range unattended during the day.

A chicken house should have a fox proof door, roof and floor. If the sides are not attached to a concrete floor, they should be dug at least 50cm into the soil and an apron of netting angled outwards for 50cm at the base attached around the entire fence. This will prevent the foxes from climbing over the top or digging underneath the fence.



## 1. Food

A balanced diet is essential for the health of chickens as well as to give them the energy they need to produce bright yellow eggs daily. Commercial poultry mixes are nutritionally balanced to provide the ideal amount of energy, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Pellets are recommended for mature birds as there is less wastage and they can consume what they need quickly. Juvenile birds need crumbles as they have difficulty swallowing pellets.

Chickens love pecking at almost all household food scraps but only feed what they can consume in a short period of time. Any scraps that the chooks don't consume will attract vermin such as rats and mice. Avoid giving them tomato skins, orange or banana peels, rhubarb leaves, raw potato peel or tea leaves.

Poultry also need access to shell grit to help them grind their food in their crop and to provide extra calcium to assist in the laying of well-formed eggs. Give them



plenty of fresh water in shallow trays or automatic water dispensers.

Believe it or not, chickens have a pecking order so choose a feeder carefully. Round feeders allow dominant chickens to be on one side whilst a weaker chicken eats from the other.

Automatic feeders that can hang by a chain from the roof are particularly good as they only need to be filled as necessary but also keep the rats and mice out of the food.

## 2. Housing

Chickens need a well drained and well ventilated run with an undercover area to protect them from the weather and for them to roost in. Place the chicken house facing east so that the back is towards the westerly, rain-bearing winter winds.

Chickens do not have a cooling mechanism so suffer from the heat very quickly. Always ensure they have cool water in summer, plenty of shade and a well ventilated chicken house.

Nesting boxes that are at least 35cm by 35cm, need to be off the ground and should be really dark for hens to lay in.



Fill the boxes with fresh straw and replace it often to keep the eggs clean and discourage the hens from defecating in it.

Although chickens spend a lot of time on the ground, at night they prefer to roost on perches up off the floor. Perches need to be at least 3cm wide. If they are too thin the chickens have difficulty perching on them overnight and can cramp their feet in the process.

A concrete floor falling slightly to an agricultural drain will keep the pen well drained and dry, it also allows the area to be cleaned and hosed out easily and stops

foxes from digging under the fence. Dirt floors with an 8cm layer of sawdust can also be used. Over several months a thick layer of litter will result that can be removed and composted for the garden. Avoid using this on the garden immediately however as it is likely to burn the plants and harbor diseases.

Mobile chicken pens are terrific for keeping just a few chickens who are allowed to free roam throughout the day. Mobile chicken pens can be moved to different areas of the garden allowing the chickens to peck at the weeds, seeds and insects in the soil and be placed in sun or shelter as required.

## 3. Veterinary Care

Most illnesses and stresses in chickens can be traced back to inappropriate or inadequate feed, water or shelter so good diet and hygiene are essential. Routine waste removal is essential to minimise the risk of diseases and fly problems. Coccidiosis is the most prevalent disease in backyard chickens and is greatly increased if the enclosure stays wet and dirty.

Mites are difficult to see as they hide in the crevices near the perches but come out at night to feed on the chicken's skin. Deter them by painting the perches with a mix of lime and water every month and spraying the perches and walls with Coopex. Regular use of a poultry lice control or dust will help to remove lice parasites which infest birds around the vent and neck.

If the legs of the chickens become dry and the scales are enlarged and start to lift, the

problem is almost definitely Scaly Leg Mite which burrow under the skin. Treat these with olive oil or petroleum jelly rubbed into the leg or even try a spray-on oil which can be easier to apply.

Stickfast fleas are typically a problem in summer and autumn and hundreds can infest a bird around the comb and eyes. Treat with a registered product and repeat treatment of the environment also. Pet cats and dogs can also be affected by these so being thorough is essential.

Isolate any birds that have open wounds or illnesses in a separate area as much for its own protection as the other birds. Chickens can be cannibalistic and will peck at sick birds causing worse injuries.