

Chickens In The Backyard

Beginner's Guide to Raising Chickens



Mario Leal

<http://beselfsufficient.net>

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By Mario Leal of
BeSelfSufficient.net

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About the Author

Mario Leal is an avid gardener and believes in being self sufficient. His website (beselfsufficient.net) is a great resource for learning about self sufficiency through gardening and raising small animals with the land you have around your house. Mario lives in Austin, TX with his wife and son.

You can contact him at <http://beselfsufficient.net>.

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Part 1: Tips and Strategies for Raising Chickens

If you're thinking about raising chickens, you're in for a treat. Having a flock of chickens in your back yard will definitely help you live more self-sufficiently. Before you send out an order form for a big box of chicks, though, there are a few tips and strategies to keep in mind when starting out with chickens.

- **Understanding your city's ordinances:** Before you do anything else, find out what the rules are in your area for keeping a flock of chicken. You may end up not having any restrictions at all, or it may turn out that there are rules about where you can build your coop, how big it can be, and what size your flock can grow to. Different areas have different rules, so check in with your town office to find out what guidelines apply to you.
- **Knowing what breed you would like to raise:** There are dozens of different breeds of chickens, and each have their own unique attributes. Take some time to think about why you're raising a flock in the first place, and use that information to choose a breed. For example, if you're looking to have a steady supply of eggs, choose a good egg-laying breed like Leghorns or Rhode Island Reds.
- **Choosing your coop layout:** Your chickens will need shelter and space to move around in. This shelter (called a coop) can be created from an already existing structure or can be made from scratch. Make sure you have plenty of space for each chicken (4-5 square feet per chicken in the coop, 4 square feet per chicken outside), with some additional room left over in case you want to increase the size of your flock.
- **Deciding between an egg or a chick:** You can start your flock out with chicks that have already been hatched or you can incubate a group of eggs. Hatching chicks from eggs takes extra time and equipment, but if this isn't a problem you may enjoy seeing your chicks' first moments of life. However, chicks bought hatched are usually vaccinated against a number of diseases. There is no right or wrong answer to this question, so go with what works best for you.

This tips and strategies will help you to get off on the right foot, but when it comes to raising chickens they're just the beginning.

Part 2: Breeding and Raising a Chicken Flock

Breeding and raising a flock of chickens isn't a complicated process. You don't need to worry about taking care of a huge flock at first. In fact, it might be a good idea to start out with just a half dozen chickens until you get a hang of things. Don't get the wrong idea, though – even a small flock can be a handful! Keep the following in mind when you're raising your first flock.

It's a good idea to start out with young chicks rather than older hens. Chickens tend to group together into flocks when they're young, so combining older chickens from different flocks can be stressful on the birds (and you!). Instead, order fertilized eggs or newly hatched chicks. From here on out we'll assume that you have a collection of new chicks.

Baby chicks are very small, so it's hard for them to stay warm. They'll be shipped to you together in a box so they can keep each other nice and toasty. When they're still small (under 60 days old) you shouldn't keep them in a coop. Instead, create a home for them in a cardboard box or small animal cage. Keep this home (called a brooder) in a warm location. To give your chicks additional heat, keep a 100 watt bulb shining into the corner of the brooder.

While your chicks are in their brooder it's important to spend time with them. Handling them gently when they're young will help them be comfortable around people later on in life. It's also important to give them time outside in a safe area. This will give them a chance to run around and explore. Keep them in an enclosed area, though, since you'll have to catch them when it's time to go back inside!

When your chicks have reached about 60 days old, it's time to move them into the coop. Make sure that your coop is well made and can keep predators out, because your chickens won't have much ability to defend themselves.

As your chickens grow together in their flock, they'll become very close. A pecking order will establish, with one hen or rooster being the dominant one. This chicken will tell the others when it's time to eat and will dole out food. Pecking orders are a natural part of raising a flock, but they can be troublesome

when introducing a new chicken. It's likely that your established flock will reject any new chickens that are dropped into their coop, so it's important to gradually add the new chicken in. You may want to build a second smaller coop next to your main one. This way you can place new chickens in a place where your flock can see them but aren't able to bully them. They'll get used to each other and after a few weeks you'll be able to add the new chicken into the regular coop.

With a little care and guidance, your chickens will grow from cute little chicks into a working flock.

Part 3: Detailed Information on Chicken Care

When you've decided to bring a flock of chickens into your life there are many decisions you need to make. You'll be responsible for all of your chickens' needs, so things like food, shelter, and disease prevention are all going to come up. Don't let this worry you, though, because chickens are not complicated creatures. A good coop, a steady supply of food, and a few vaccinations will put you well on your way to a flock of contented chickens.

Shelter

When chickens are young (less than sixty days old) they should be kept in a small box called a brooder. Once they get older, though, they should be moved into a bigger home called a coop (My favorite designs are in the Resources section). A coop alone won't fill all your needs, though, since your chickens need space to move around outside as well. If you live in an area with a somewhat mild climate a good rule of thumb is to have two or three square feet per chicken inside the coop and an additional four to five square feet of space in a fenced-in area outside the coop. If you live in an area with snowy winters, though, you'll want to make your coop bigger since your chickens will be spending more time in it.

Inside your coop you will want to have some nest boxes for your chickens to lay eggs as well as some places for them to perch. You can cover the floor of the coop with straw or wood chips to make cleaning easier. There are many building plans for chicken coops available if you're handy with a hammer, or you can also buy them pre-made. Whatever you choose, make sure your coop is made of high quality materials that will keep your chickens in and predators out.

Food

Just like you, your chicken needs food and water to survive. You should always have a source of clean water available to your flock. Food should also be available to your chickens. Depending on their age, chickens need different kinds of feeds. Generally, when your chicks are younger they need feed with a higher amount of protein than when they get older. Birds that are being raised for slaughter will need more protein than their egg laying counterparts. You can

find chicken feed at feed stores or other agricultural outlets. You can put feed out at regularly scheduled times, or you can have some out all day in a buffet-like style. Do whatever works best for you and your flock.

Chickens can't live on feed alone, though! This is where the outside area of your coop comes in handy. When your chickens are allowed to roam outside they'll be able to peck and scratch for fresh greens. These greens will keep them healthy (and give your wallet a bit of a break too). If you live in a place that has cold winters you can also put some alfalfa sprouts in the coop on a regular basis.

Disease Prevention

Because your birds are living close together in a confined space, disease can spread rapidly. It's important to take measures against disease to protect your flock from being wiped out. If you bought your chicks from a hatchery it's likely they've been vaccinated against some of the more common diseases. If you're raising chicks from eggs (or if you know yours haven't been vaccinated) it may be worth it to bring them to a vet to get vaccinated.

Lice and fleas can also affect flocks of chickens. This is another case where prevention is your best course of action. Keep an eye out for any signs of little bugs on your chickens' bodies or in their nest boxes. If you find any do a thorough cleaning. If the problem persists, talk to your vet about other solutions.

No matter what the disease, cleanliness is a necessary course of action. Clean your coops regularly and you'll find that you won't have as many problems.

There's a lot to be responsible for when taking on a flock of chickens, but in the end it's all worth it. Chickens can give you eggs, meat, and even companionship if you take care of them well, making them worth all the work you have to put in.

Part 4: General Slaughtering Information

While some of us might find the topic a difficult one to think about, slaughtering chickens is an affordable way to feed your family. It used to be commonplace to raise, slaughter, and eat chickens at home, and it's a practice that you can engage in to become more self-sufficient. You can enjoy your meal that much more knowing that the chicken you're eating lived a good life (instead of being kept in a cage all his life like the chickens you'll find at the grocery store). Read on for a little more information about slaughtering chickens.

You've probably heard stories about chickens running around with their heads cut off. You may also be familiar with the old method of beheading a chicken with an axe and a tree stump. For backyard chicken raisers these methods may seem a little over the top. They actually aren't necessary and are in fact somewhat unsafe. If you plan on slaughtering a chicken yourself, the method that will be easiest for the chicken (and likely for you too) is to calm him by holding him upside down then stabbing him through the brain. This may sound violent, but it's painless for the bird.

When your chicken is held upside down for half a minute or longer, it signals his brain that it's time to go to sleep. To get him in this position, catch him calmly (no running around the coop and yelling), then hold him to the ground with one hand around his legs. Then, quickly and carefully flip him so he's upside down. He may not like this, so be sure to stay out of the way of his wings if he flaps around. After a very short amount of time, though, he will calm down and lie relaxed in this state. You can then tie a rope around his legs and hang him upside down.

After he is hung upside down, take a thin, long, sharp knife and open his mouth. The knife should be pressed through the roof of his mouth into his head and then twisted. You'll feel the bird shudder once, and then relax. This method painlessly destroys his brain – he won't feel anything. You can then cut off his head and let the blood drain out.

Once your chicken has been slaughtered it's ready to be butchered. This can be a slightly complicated process, so it's best to follow a tutorial or receive guidance from someone who has done it before. There are a number of illustrated tutorials on the internet that clearly map out the steps to be taken in this process.

If you're not sure if you want to slaughter your own chickens, there are likely slaughterhouses in your area that will take on the task for you. This will cost a bit of money, but that might be a worthwhile exchange for you.

Whether you slaughter your chicken yourself or have someone else do it is completely up to you. Either way, you'll end up with a meal that will nourish yourself and your family. This chicken will be healthier than anything you'll find in a grocery store, and you won't have to wonder about where the meat came from. Best of all, you'll be making a big step towards become more self-sufficient.

Part 5: Working With Fresh Eggs

One of the best things about keeping chickens is the supply of fresh, nutritious eggs they can provide for you and your family. It's exciting to check their nests and find that morning's breakfast waiting for you. Dealing with freshly laid eggs is a little different than taking home a carton from the grocery store, though. Keep the following tips in mind when working with fresh eggs to make sure you get the most out of them:

- Know how much you're getting: An average laying hen will lay about five eggs a week. If you have a flock of ten laying hens, that will give you fifty eggs a week. If you think you'll use that many, great! If that sounds like a little too much, you may want to find a way to sell or give away some of the extra.
- Pick your eggs up early: In order to have the healthiest (and cleanest) eggs, make sure to be quick about picking them up. If you let your eggs sit in the hen house overnight your hens may relieve themselves on the eggs or sleep on top of them! Getting them out of the nest quickly will keep them clean and in good shape.
- Clean your eggs: Picking your eggs up early and keeping a clean coop will help keep your eggs in good shape, but chances are you'll still have to clean them before you eat or sell them. Don't go dunking your eggs in cold water, though, since this can actually cause bacteria to enter the egg through the shell. Instead, try to rub off any dirt or excrement with a piece of sand paper or a rough sponge. If a dry clean isn't going to cut through the mess, you *can* use water, but be careful. Don't let your eggs sit submerged in a bowl. Instead, run warm water over them and scrub gently. The water should be slightly warmer than the egg to prevent bacteria from spreading. Dry your eggs with a paper towel and be sure to sanitize your cleaning equipment when you're done.
- Be aware of shelf life: Eggs in grocery stores can sit around for months before people buy them. While they're still okay to eat after this much

time, you'll end up missing out on a lot of the nutrients they can give. That's why having fresh eggs is so nice – they're healthier and tastier than any other kind. However, you won't get much out of them if they spoil before you use them! Always keep your eggs refrigerated for the longest shelf life. If you like to eat your eggs poached or scrambled, try to use them within a week or two. After that, you can keep them for up to six months, but they're best boiled at this point.

You really can't beat a meal made out of freshly laid eggs. These eggs are healthy and delicious, but that's not all. You'll also be able to eat with the satisfaction of knowing that you're enjoying a meal that you helped to create.

Part 6: Resources

Don't forget to visit my website often:

BeSelfSufficient.net

Chicken Coop Plans

These links represent my favorite chicken coop designs:

[Chicken Coop Guides](#)

[Build A Chicken Coop](#)

[Easy DIY Chicken Coop Plans](#)

Raising Chickens

Here are some books which have really helped me while raising chickens:

[Chickens In Your Backyard](#)

[Chickens 4 Wealth](#)

[Incredible Chickens](#)