



Keeping Chickens – the basics

Welcome to our guide on keeping chickens which will give you some great hints and tips to get you on your way.

The main reason most people want to keep chickens is to so they can have natural eating eggs and fertile eggs (so the kids can see the chicks hatch!). They also want the added bonus of very friendly chickens who the family like!

The information in this guide is intentionally quite basic as chicken keeping is very much about learning as you go. However, if you follow the basics as a rule of thumb they will help ensure good bird health and allow you to enjoy the chicken keeper's journey.

The first thing to bear in mind is that keeping chickens is amazingly easy. As long as you choose the right equipment for them then your life will be easy and theirs will be healthy.

The second thing to remember is that you only need a few things so don't get confused by the vast choice out there. All you need is:

- A chicken house/coop
- Some chickens
- A drinker, feeder and grit hopper
- Feed
- Some red mite and hygiene spray
- Some protection such as an electric fence or mesh run

Our mini guide looks at these areas for you; Breed Choice, Chicken Coops/Houses, General Equipment, Protection and of course Poultry Health.

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tel: 01360 440611

info@poultrysuppliesdirect.co.uk



Breed Choice

There are many, many breeds of chicken to choose from so we have focused on the most popular. In general we find the larger the breed the calmer the bird and the smaller the breed the more flighty, so as a rule of thumb we recommend bigger birds as they make great pets for families with children.

The easiest choice of breeds to go for are:

Light Sussex - A hardy bird which is pretty much a must start bird for the novice. When we say hardy we mean, when the floods, wind, snow, ice comes then we know this is one chicken that does not require a daily health check. So for the novice keeper, just feed and water them. Ensure house is kept clean and they seem to love everything.

Now being hardy is great but Light Sussex's are much more than this, they are beautiful to look at and a very confident bird, normally first out of the house in the morning clucking away. Of course they are the old faithful in the egg laying department laying about 210 good sized cream eggs per year. So hardy, friendly, pretty and a good layer. Perfect!

Orpington (All Colours) - Again a hardy and super friendly creature and another great starter bird. A real treat as a family member (as it will soon become one! Can be susceptible to the sniffles in wet weather but on average lays about 150-180 light cream eggs a year but what it lacks in numbers it makes up in being super friendly. Very striking bird but oh so laid back. Buffs Orpington are the most popular.

Welsumer – There are predominantly two types of Welsumer; Standard and Silver Duckwing. Both lay beautiful eggs! The standard Cockerel is a real stunner! They are good layers, producing on average 200 terracotta red eggs per year. Welsumer's have also proved to be very hardy birds which is great of health issues. Hand feeding and patience should result in very friendly birds but we recommend putting in 10 minutes a day to get these results as it is well worth it, without it these great birds can get a little flighty.

Cream Legbar - Beautiful bird and stunning blue eggs! That's right it lays blue, not green tinted, beautiful blue eggs. Very good layers at 200 eggs a year but are somewhat nervous birds and prone to be a bit flighty. However, this can easily be overcome with hand feeding a few times a week. Ideally raise the house for these birds as they are prone to the sniffles.

French Maran - Definitely a recent favourite! Feathery legs and the darkest brown eggs in the UK! Good layers 190-210 eggs a year. The eggs are indeed wonderful but although super popular we are not too sure why. They are so nervous and seem susceptible to almost every bug going. If you have time to spare then go for them for the egg colour will not be matched but we believe their character results in more health issues.

Silkies (All Colours) - You either love or hate them but they are different and great broodies! Silkies are friendly, beautiful, hardy and lay well. People seem to be more and more fans of these birds each year!

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Chicken Coops

We offer a full range of chicken coops which are all made from FSC approved timber and which are with practicality and ease of use in mind.

The first thing to bear in mind with coops and houses is **never buy one with a felt roof** as they create the perfect breeding ground for mites that can seriously weaken if not kill birds. On the same basis never add hay or straw into the house as these are normally riddled with mites and lice.

Chicken coops do not need to be huge, in fact huge houses or converted sheds for a few chickens can cause serious cold issues in the winter. A chicken house needs to be big enough to allow chickens to move freely and stand apart on hot summer nights and small enough that they can all perch together tight on cold winter nights without too much cold air space. (A cockerel takes the space of two hens)

Ventilation in a house is vital to allow fresh air and dispersal of the ammonia vapours from their droppings, ideally this ventilation should be well above the chicken's heads and not directly in their faces as they are roosting.

Cleaning is a boring, horrible and in bad weather soul destroying work so make sure your coop/house is easy to clean. All our houses have easy clean floors.

In terms of runs for the birds you have two choices; mesh runs or electric netting. We recommend electric netting, as will your birds, as it allows much more freedom for the birds and the house does not need to be moved so often. However, the choice is yours and mesh runs are fine too !

Chicken equipment

Now this bit can be a bit confusing as there is almost an endless list of things that you "might" need. However, in real terms all you need to get started is:

- a chicken drinker
- a chicken feeder
- a grit hopper

Chicken feeders are simple but with 2 types – indoors and outdoors. We recommend outdoor feeders as they make life so easy. A chicken can eat 150g of feed per day so this may help you decide your feeder size.

There are numerous types of chicken drinkers and the vast majority of these are fine. Remember, never give birds water in the coop, simply put the drinker outside as they don't mind the rain !

As for grit hoppers now these should be in the house or very near it, so screwing them on the house should be fine but screw into a main beam not just the cladding. There are two types of grit, mixed poultry grit and oyster shell grit. Both are fine.

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Poultry health

Poultry are strong resilient birds and are very rarely ill. However, you are likely to encounter parasites (directly or indirectly) and dirty house problems. The good news is that it is easy to reduce the chance of any problems, simply by following some simple steps.

As a rule of thumb worm the birds 3-6 monthly and clean the house once a week. Then use red mite powder and parasite powder in the house and 90% of your potential health issues should never appear.

Protection

A good, sturdy poultry house/coop will go some way to keeping your birds safe and sound.

However, you don't want your birds staying inside all day so you have two choices:

- free range them
- provide a mesh run with your house
- free range them within an electric fencing set up

Everyone would like to free range their birds but that is simply not a reality unless they are protected in some way; sooner or later (usually sooner) the fox will pay a visit and you will lose some birds.

Using a mesh run, which may be part of the house/coop, is a good protection system and allows the birds a reasonably amount of space. However, the use of poultry electric netting is probably the best way of protecting your chickens and of giving them a large amount of space. Moreover, the poultry electric netting is easy to use about so you can move the birds around every few weeks to save the ground.

Chicken Feed

The main cost of raising chicken is the cost of their feed. There are several good quality commercial preparations available which will be all you need to start with. Remember, inadequate nutrition can result in losing the birds themselves.

Birds can also be allowed to feed on greens and fresh grass cuttings within the fence, as long as there are no chemicals used. Fresh table scraps such as stale bread and leafy vegetables can be given which will provide a variety to their feeds as well as keep the costs down. Make sure not to over feed them on these scraps or feed anything that is spoiled.

Water is most important and a constant supply of fresh clean water is essential for healthy poultry and water consumption will increase a lot in hot weather.

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