



chickens



what are they?

The chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) is a domestic fowl, descended from the Red jungle fowl native to south-east Asia. Possibly domesticated as much as 8,000 years ago, it is one of the commonest and most widespread agricultural animals. Chickens are primarily kept for eggs and meat, they can also provide pest control and manure.

Chickens are gregarious animals and naturally live in flocks. Established flocks will have a strict dominance hierarchy or 'pecking order' with the more dominant individuals having first access to resources such as food and preferred nesting boxes. Chickens are omnivorous and when allowed to do so will forage for plants, insects and even small mammals to eat. A chicken will naturally live 5 to 10 years, though the productive life for laying and breeding hens is usually far shorter.

Since domestication a bewildering number of different breeds have been developed. Some of these are suited to producing eggs, other to producing meat and some are dual purpose. Breeds also vary in their temperament, ability to fly, hardiness, whole lifespan, productive lifespan and tendency to sit on and hatch clutches of eggs.

what are the benefits?

Chickens are adaptable and easy to keep. You can keep them in your garden and have fresh, ethically and sustainably produced eggs every day. On a larger scale chickens are a common starting point for the new smallholder. They are easy to raise and with sufficient space can forage for a large part of their food intake, helping clear land while they do so. They will also eat waste food (though there are some legalities you need to be aware of, see below).



Warren hens, originally bred for battery farms, seen here with a gravity-fed drinker; check it every day to make sure it's not empty.



Nesting box with a liftable lid for collecting eggs; the hen-house needs one nesting box for every four chickens.

In the garden you can use 'chicken tractors' to clear weeds and pests from the soil and you can use their manure for fertiliser. If you do most of your growing in the summer they can also be allowed to free range over winter, clearing your vegetable beds and eating slug eggs. On the smallholding, chickens can be kept with other animals where they will help reduce the levels of parasites on the pasture.

Chickens come in a fantastic range of shapes and sizes, they make funny, entertaining and pretty family pets as well as excellent sources of protein and fertilizer!

what can I do?

Getting started: if you have a local chicken keeper, pay them a visit and get a feel for handling chickens. You can choose a pure breed, named hybrid or 'mix and match' hybrid. The latter have less predictable characteristics but a wider gene pool can mean a healthy, productive life. You could give ex-battery / barn-kept hens a home. Chickens are gregarious. You need to keep at least 2 and they may be less stressed in a flock of 3 or 4. The simplest option is to buy 'point of lay' hens (about 20 weeks old). Expect to pay £15-20 for a good quality pure breed or named hybrid. Alternatively you can buy day-old chicks, which is cheaper, but, unless they are sexed, you need to consider how you will get rid of excess males. If you can't find the breed you want, buying fertile eggs is also an option. Incubating and hatching eggs is not hard with a little research. Unless you have a broody hen you'll need to buy an incubator and heat lamp. You'll need an indoor space for the chicks until they're ready to go outside – although this could be a draught-proof shed.

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Housing: chickens need a weatherproof house, c. 30x30cm per hen. It needs dark, private nest boxes (one per 3-4 birds), perches to roost on, a door for hens and a larger one for cleaning out. It must be secure from predators and shut up overnight. Line the floor with straw, newspaper or shavings, and nest boxes with straw or shavings. If your chickens can't free range you can keep them in a pen. Moving the pen reduces parasites and disease. A 4ft fence will contain chickens with clipped wings, but for fox protection it should be 6ft, dug into the ground at the base, or extending outward from the base for a couple of feet.

Feeding: buy mash or pellets from agricultural suppliers: chick crumbs for the first 5 wks, grower's mash or pellets until 18 wks, then layer's mash or pellets. 'Mixed corn' should only be fed in small amounts to laying hens; more in winter when they're not laying. Mix your own feed using grains, legumes, seeds, meal worms & vegetable scraps. This can reduce food miles and avoid ingredients you consider unsustainable (eg soya). Make sure the feed has appropriate levels of calories, protein and calcium. Provide calcium by feeding oyster shell. Mixing your own feed is good if your hens range freely and forage. With modern hybrids you may need compound feed to keep them healthy. It's now technically illegal to feed chickens kitchen scraps. You can legally feed raw vegetable scraps that haven't been processed in your kitchen. As these tend to have a low protein content they should be fed in moderation. Always make sure your hens have access to grit and to clean water.

Health: a dust bath helps control lice and mites. Provide a box of dry soil and sand, or a covered area where they can dig their own. Protect from rain so it can be used in all weathers. Diatomaceous earth in the dust bath helps protect from parasites. If your chickens suffer from lice or mites add lice powder to their dust bath - more effective than trying to apply it directly yourself. Red mite can live in the chicken house and attack the chickens at night. Regularly clean the chicken house with a pressure washer, detergent and/or a steam cleaner – especially cracks and crevices. Afterwards, dust the house with diatomaceous earth or mite powder (organic products are available). Plastic houses don't provide a hospitable habitat for mites. 'Worm' (treat for internal parasites) at least twice a year. To help control parasites, move the pen, pick up

droppings, add apple cider vinegar to the water, garlic to the feed and give a 'herbal' wormer. To avoid chemical wormers, perform a 'faecal egg count' regularly. Do this yourself if you have a microscope, or buy a kit and send off a sample. Then you only treat your hens when necessary and don't contribute to the problem of resistance to medications.

Slaughter: you can slaughter chickens at home for consumption yourself and your family provided it's done humanely. Get the help of an experienced person or attend a course on humane slaughter. Plucking and butchering are not difficult and there are many online articles and videos.

Paperwork and regulations: register with DEFRA and regulations apply if you keep more than 50 ducks / hens or a mix of both. If you keep fewer than 50 you can sell eggs without being registered. At a market you must display your name and address, a best-before date and advice to keep eggs chilled. You can't sell eggs through a shop, or grade them by size without registration.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/chickens for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Mark Diacono, *Chicken & Eggs*
- Jessi Bloom, *Free-range Chicken Gardens*
- David Squire, *Keeping Chickens*
- poultryclub.org: Poultry Club of GB
- bhwt.org.uk: adopt ex-battery hens
- poultrykeeper.com: useful articles
- keeping-chickens.me.uk/getting-started - good introduction



Black Rock hens scratching around outside their home-made hen-house.

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