



# geese



Goose eggs next to a chicken's egg.

## what are they?

Geese are large waterfowl, domesticated around 4,000 years ago. They're kept for eggs, meat and down, and also as guard animals. Most domestic geese we keep in Europe are descended from the greylag goose (*Anser anser*), found throughout Europe, Asia and North Africa. Exceptions are the African and the Chinese goose, both descended from the swan goose of Mongolia and China.

Geese are gregarious birds naturally living in large flocks. They're intelligent and form strong bonds with flockmates. For this reason geese have a reputation for being aggressive. Ganders (male geese), in particular, can be very protective of their flockmates, especially when females are incubating eggs or when young goslings are present. Geese are herbivorous and their natural diet consists mainly of grasses.

## what are the benefits?

Geese aren't difficult to keep and if you have the space to provide plenty of grazing they'll need very little supplemental feeding. A goose can lay 50 beautiful 150g eggs per year, provide meat for the table plus lawn mowing and guard animal services. Geese are longer lived than other poultry, living for around 25 years.

Goose eggs can be used in same way as a hen's egg. They're 2-3 times larger; when baking use 1 goose egg in place of 2 large hen's eggs. Goose eggs have a proportionally larger yolk and have a stronger flavour. They also contain more protein, fat, calories, vitamins and minerals per gram than chickens' eggs.

Geese won't scratch up your garden like chickens, or turn it into a muddy mess like ducks. Their droppings don't smell and will wash away in the rain. Geese are hardy, suffer from few health problems and are well suited to the UK climate. They're good in orchards - they'll keep the undergrowth down and clear windfalls. Young trees do need protection against them, however.

## what can I do?

**Getting your geese:** there are 14 breeds commonly kept in the UK, each classed as light, medium or heavy. They vary in temperament, tendency to go broody (sit on and incubate eggs), noisiness and suitability as meat birds or layers. Many domestic geese are hybrids, which means unpredictable characteristics - but a wider gene pool can mean a healthier and productive life.

You can buy goslings, though they'd need a heat lamp or plate until they're at least 5 weeks old. You could also buy older juvenile geese, or geese a year or 2 old that will already be laying; or buy retired breeding stock. These geese will still have many more years to live and will still be fertile enough for you to start your own flock.

If you cannot find the breed you want, buying fertile eggs is also an option. Incubating and hatching eggs is not hard to do with a little research. You will need to buy an incubator and a heat lamp. You will also need an indoor space for the goslings until they are ready to go outside, although this could be a draught-proof shed. If you have previously hatched chicks, bear in mind you will need more space for both the eggs and the goslings. Hand-rearing goslings can help ensure you have friendly geese and reduce problems with aggression; this may be particularly important if you have small children.

Introducing new geese to a flock can be difficult so, if possible, buy all your geese at once. It is usually possible to keep more than one gander in a flock. If you keep more than 3 geese (or 5 of a light breed), and you want to breed them, you will likely need more than one gander to maintain fertility rates.



Embden geese are commonly kept for meat; and often hybridized with Toulouse geese.

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**Housing:** geese need shelter at night. A pair need at least 1.5m<sup>2</sup> of floor space; for a small flock a garden shed is ideal. Geese don't instinctively go into their house at night like chickens but they can be easily herded in. Provide 2ft square nest boxes filled with bedding and they're more likely to lay their eggs in the house. However, some geese still seem to prefer to make their own nests outside.

Domestic geese usually don't fly much, and it's more common in lighter breeds or younger birds. It's worth asking keepers if they have problems with geese flying, and what their fencing solutions are. They're unlikely to fly away if their needs are met. If you need to keep your geese contained, a 1m fence is usually sufficient. Even a lower barrier may provide enough deterrence.

Geese don't need a pond, but they'll appreciate a small pool such as a baby bath or child's sand pit.

**Feeding:** with good quality grass, geese won't need supplementary feed in spring and summer. 1/4 acre is usually enough for 2 geese. When extra feed is needed geese are usually given wheat, often in a bucket of water. Geese prefer short grass, so are sometimes grazed on a rotation with larger animals. If you don't have sufficient grass in spring or summer you can buy pellets - compound feed containing all the nutrients a laying goose needs. Provide grit, and laying geese with oyster shell. They must have plenty of clean drinking water at all times.

Geese enjoy vegetable scraps. However, bear in mind it is illegal to feed poultry vegetable scraps which have been processed through a kitchen.

**Health:** geese tend to be healthy and suffer from fewer problems than chickens. Gizzard worms are the most common problem. Worm goslings at 12 weeks. For adult geese, 6-monthly treatment is recommended, in autumn and spring. To avoid chemical wormers, and contributing to the problem of resistance to medications, perform a faecal egg count to check if they need to be wormed. Do it yourself if you have a microscope, or buy a kit and send off a sample. Minimise parasites with pasture rotation – periodically move your geese to fresh grazing. To minimise treatment, familiarise yourself with the symptoms of gizzard and gape worms. Geese rarely need treatment for external parasites if they're healthy and have access to clean water. Check your flock every day and find a good vet who can be contacted in an emergency.



*Chinese geese are prolific layers, are very noisy and are often kept as guard animals.*

**Meat & slaughter:** you can slaughter geese at home for consumption by you and your immediate family if it's done humanely. Geese are more difficult to dispatch than small poultry and there are more restrictions on the methods used, particularly for birds over 5kg. See the Humane Slaughter Association for more info. Geese are the hardest poultry to pluck. Do it straight after a moult when no pin feathers are present. This is usually around 9, 15 or 20 weeks. Slower growth after 17 weeks means that 15 weeks is often the preferred age for slaughter. To sell your meat you'll need to send your animals to a slaughterhouse. Then either take on the butchery yourself or pay extra for the slaughterhouse to do it. If you do it yourself, follow hygiene regulations and have your premises inspected by Environmental Health on a regular basis. Contact the Food Standards Agency for further information.

**Paperwork and regulations:** register with DEFRA and if you keep more than 50 birds (including other types of poultry). There are no regulations for fewer than 50 birds other than rules and regulations covering general animal welfare.

## resources

- see [lowimpact.org/geese](http://lowimpact.org/geese) for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Jeremy Hobson, *Backyard Ducks & Geese*
- Chris Ashton, *Domestic Geese*
- Michael Robers, *Ducks & Geese at Home*
- [domestic-waterfowl.co.uk](http://domestic-waterfowl.co.uk) – lots of info and links to specialist websites for each breed
- [gooseclub.org.uk](http://gooseclub.org.uk) – for goose enthusiasts
- [waterfowl.org.uk](http://waterfowl.org.uk) – Brit. Waterfowl Association

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