



quail



what are they?

Quail is a collective name for several species of birds with similar appearance and behaviours. Quail are medium-sized (though tiny from the poultry-keeper's perspective) birds that are shy and ground dwelling. They eat insects, seeds and other plants. They live in pairs, small family groups or larger groups depending on season and circumstances.

Domestic quail generally come from 2 families: The 'Old World' quail (*Phasianidae*) and the 'New World' quail (*Odontophoridae*). Old World quail, originating mostly in east Asia, include the species most commonly kept for meat and egg production – such as the *Coturnix* and some ornamental species like the Chinese painted quail. New World species, from N. and S. America, include those traditionally kept as game birds such as the bobwhite. These are also kept for meat and, to a lesser extent, eggs.

The *Coturnix* quail (*Coturnix japonica*) is the most commonly kept quail. It's often called the Japanese quail. Originally domesticated in the 11th or 12th century as a song bird, it's been bred for eggs since the 1900s. There are now distinct breeds of this species, e.g. the Japanese, English white and Italian. These vary a little in size, so some may be more suitable for meat, but in general they vary only in appearance.

what are the benefits?

If you don't have space for chickens but you want meat and eggs from your garden, quail might be for you. *Coturnix* quail are easy to manage and require less space than other poultry. They're fast-growing, sexually mature at c. 8 weeks, can produce up to 300 eggs per year, and have an excellent feed-to-egg conversion ratio.

Quails' eggs are around one fifth the size of a chicken's egg and taste similar. They're used in salads but can be used any way a hen's egg can. If you get a glut, they're great for pickling.

If you can sell your quail eggs and meat directly to restaurants you should get a good price. The novelty value can make them easier to market to individual consumers as well. Selling hatching eggs or adult birds can provide an additional income, especially if you keep some of the more ornamental breeds, although they're less productive.

Quail are undeniably cute and, if raised from hatching, can be very tame. Their small size means there's no issue with aggression towards small children as there can be with the males of larger poultry, and their calls are pleasant and unlikely to annoy the neighbours.



Bobwhite quail are often raised as game birds. They can be kept for meat and will produce a few eggs a week as well.

what can I do?

Getting your quail: the easiest quail is the *Coturnix*. They are the most productive, least flighty and hardiest species. There are 'Jumbo' breeds for meat. You can hatch your own birds with an incubator, a heat lamp and an indoor space for the chicks. For tame birds, hatch your own. Otherwise buy 8-week-old quail, ready to live in their adult enclosure. You may be able to find a local breeder locally, or you can order hatching eggs online. Quail can be kept in large mixed groups, but have at least 2 females to every male to prevent aggression and over-mating.

Housing: quail are susceptible to attack from cats, rats and foxes. They can fly away if startled and won't return. Their daytime accommodation needs to be cat-proof and covered, and night-time accommodation, rat-proof. This could mean a mesh base on their run or being shut up at night. Quail are often kept in rabbit hutches. These can make good night-time accommodation and shelters; quail don't need nest boxes or perches. A larger run should be provided. They will fly directly upwards when startled and, in an enclosed space, will hit their heads and can injure themselves, so runs should have high roofs and netting below to soften any impact. Accommodation needs to be well ventilated; quail droppings produce a lot of ammonia. Quail need protection from the cold in winter. Put their house in a sheltered spot, cover it in an old blanket on cold nights and provide plenty of bedding.

Provide things to hide behind and under such as rocks, branches, logs or old plant pots. They should also have areas to dust bathe. Houses should be at ground level or raised slightly with a shallow ramp. Give them space and interest in to prevent them from becoming bored and stressed.

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Feeding: specialist feeds are available for adult breeding / laying quail (18-20% protein). Introduce gradually from 8 weeks. If specialist chick crumbs (up to 5 weeks) or grower pellets (5-10 weeks or until slaughter for meat birds) aren't available, unmedicated turkey feeds provide the right amount of protein. Quail need greens; ideally they need space to forage for insects, seeds and plants, but prevent them flying away and protect them from predators. You can mix your own feed using meal worms, seeds and grains. Do your research and be aware of protein levels. Quail can be fed *ad lib* and should always have access to fresh water, grit and, if laying, a source of calcium - cuttlefish rather than oyster shell as this can help stop their beaks and nails over-growing.

Breeding: broodiness has been bred out and they won't sit on eggs, or even lay in the same place. Encourage them by providing cover and nesting materials. When quail occasionally do incubate eggs they often won't look after the chicks and you have to take over. The small egg size means they can't easily be hatched under a broody hen.

Most incubators can be used to hatch quail eggs (sometimes you'll need an additional tray due to the small size). The incubation period for *Coturnix* is 18 days, a few days shorter or longer for other species. Quail aren't aggressive towards each other as newly-hatched chickens can be. Feeding them boiled quail egg yolk can help them recover from hatching more quickly.

Health: a dust bath will help control external parasites like lice / mites. Provide a box of dry soil / sand, or a covered area so they can dig their own. Adding diatomaceous earth can help. If they do get lice / mites, add lice powder to the dust bath; it's less stressful than applying it directly. Mites live in the house and attack birds at night.



Japanese Coturnix quail.



Quail eggs: left - Coturnix, middle - Bobwhite and the smallest is a Chinese painted egg.

Regularly clean the house with a pressure washer, special detergent and/or steam cleaner. Then dust with diatomaceous earth or mite powder (there are organic products). Treat for worms twice a year. To avoid chemical wormers, perform a faecal egg count on droppings to check if they need to be wormed. See our website for more details.

Meat production & slaughter: quail can be slaughtered after a season laying. They can be hard to pluck so are often skinned. However, they can be plucked with care and practice.

It's legal to slaughter quail for consumption by your family if done humanely. Quail are easy to dispatch due to their size but first get the help of an experienced person or attend a course on humane slaughter. See the Humane Slaughter Association for more information. Plucking and butchering are not difficult and there are online articles and videos. Smallholders supplying birds to local markets can slaughter and process on farm, but must register with their local authority. To produce meat for sale and slaughter or butcher birds yourself, follow hygiene regulations and have your premises inspected by Environmental Health regularly. Contact the FSA for more information.

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

resources

- lowimpact.org/quail for info, courses, links, books, including:
- Sarah Barratt, *Practical Quail Keeping*
- Katie Thear, *Keeping Quail*
- RSPCA, *Quail: Good Practice for Housing/Care*
- selfsufficientme.com/poultry/quail – series of useful articles and videos
- poultrykeeper.com/general-quail - more articles

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