

Adopting and caring for backyard chickens

Backyard chickens can be wonderful companions. Interest in keeping them has grown as part of the local, sustainable, and organic food movements.

The HSUS supports measures that reduce animal suffering, and every family that gets their eggs from backyard hens is likely reducing or eliminating their purchase of eggs laid by hens who were confined to crowded cages on factory farms.

Chicken care considerations

While chickens are energetic, inquisitive, and friendly animals who are a joy to watch, the decision to keep them should not be made lightly. Chickens require dedicated, consistent care and there are important considerations that should be made before acquiring a backyard flock.

Many municipalities prohibit residents from having backyard chickens. Be sure to contact local authorities (such as your local animal control or zoning/planning departments) to ensure such animals are legal before you bring any chickens home.

Cockerel conundrum

Within city limits, many municipalities that permit chickens nevertheless limit the number of chickens that one household can keep, and roosters are generally not permitted at all, as their crowing can disturb neighbors. This creates an ethical conundrum, because when chickens are purchased as young chicks it is not possible to always accurately determine their sex.

Chicks purchased through mail order or local farm supply outlets may be sold in groups separated by sex, but since gender determination is inexact, as the birds grow, families may find they have one or more male birds when they were expecting to have only females. Many young roosters are being relinquished to shelters and sanctuaries, organizations already overburdened with unwanted animals. Worse, these roosters may be simply abandoned or killed.

The adoption option.

For these reasons, The HSUS recommends that families consider adopting adult birds, when the gender of the animals is already known. Adult hens can usually be located through your local humane society or animal control. Chickens end up in traditional shelters more often than people realize, and adopting from a shelter is a great way to save a life. You might even ask to be put on a waiting list to be contacted about hens as they come into the shelter.

If your local shelter has no chickens available, look to adopt a "retired" hen from a factory farm who now lives at a rescue or sanctuary that adopts these birds out. While not as productive as they were in their prime, many of these chickens still lay multiple eggs per week. Most of these older hens would otherwise end up being killed on the farm or

sent to slaughter. You can find a list of adoption agencies near you by visiting www.sanctuaries.org or www.petfinder.org.

Alternatively, you may want to look at flyers posted in your local farm/feed stores, check your newspaper's classified ads, or even scan websites like craigslist.org to find chickens who need good homes.

Chicken care essentials

Once hens have been adopted, their care and housing are vital. In addition to regular daily attention, feed and clean water, and securing them in their shelter at night, the following care principles are also essential:

- ***Chickens are heat- and cold-sensitive:*** Like dogs and cats, chickens must have shelter to protect them from temperature extremes. Hens and roosters with large single combs are prone to frost-bite in cooler climates, and all chickens need shade during periods of heat. It is important that the shelter is both insulated and well-ventilated. Straw bedding will add comfort and warmth to a shelter's floor space, but it should be replaced regularly with new, clean straw.
- ***Predator protection is vital:*** Chickens require unfailingly secure shelter at night or they can easily fall prey to urban wildlife, such as raccoons and opossums. Dogs may also attack chickens. They must be completely enclosed in a safe henhouse, with four solid walls and a sturdy roof, every night. Predators can also dig under fences and walls, so this should be considered when planning the chickens' home. During the day, chickens should be kept in a fully-fenced enclosure or yard with proper protection from aerial, day-time predators and neighborhood dogs and, in the case of small bantams, large domestic free-roaming cats.
- ***Hens need an appropriate environment:*** Hens need an enclosed nesting space (a "nestbox") in which to lay their eggs. They also need an elevated roost on which to perch at night; this is where they prefer to sleep. Hens enjoy loose substrate, such as dirt, sand or peat, for dust-bathing, and they should also have free access to grass and other vegetation to engage in natural pecking, scratching, and foraging behavior. Often-used areas may become denuded, and it is important to provide plenty of space, giving them as much room as possible to express natural behavior outdoors. For both the health of the chickens and the food safety of the eggs, hen houses, coops and runs must be kept very clean at all times.
- ***Chickens will require veterinary care:*** While it may be tempting to think of a backyard flock as a source of inexpensive eggs, hens, like cats and dogs, require periodic veterinary care. Chickens can become ill or get injured, and examination and treatment by a veterinarian can easily cost over \$100 per visit. These expenses should be carefully considered before the decision is made to keep backyard chickens.
- ***Vacation help is a must:*** Since chickens require daily care, a designated care-taker must be arranged for vacations and other periods away from home. Someone must be present to feed and water the animals and to put the hens in their secure shelter every evening.

- ***Chicken nutrition is important:*** It is a common misperception that chickens can be fed on corn kernels or kitchen scraps alone. Chickens need a balanced diet such as one of the commercially available feeds that have been carefully formulated by nutritionists specifically for adult hens. The protein requirements of chickens change with the birds' age, so it's important to feed an age-appropriate diet. Laying hens also need access to a supplemental source of course calcium, such as limestone (available at livestock supply stores) if their feed ration does not already contain enough. In addition to calcium, hard insoluble granite grit should be fed, free choice, 2 or 3 days per month. Chickens enjoy fresh fruits, seeds and vegetables in addition to their regular feed, but certain plants can be toxic. Avoid raw green potato peels, dried or undercooked beans, and avocados. Chickens should receive fresh feed and water daily—discard any feed that is old, moldy or stale.
- ***Prevent disease:*** Chickens can carry and become ill from a variety of infectious diseases. It is important to keep the hens' environment clean with regular manure removal, and by washing the feed and water containers. You should also avoid mixing birds from different flocks. (Temporarily quarantine any new birds for two weeks and watch them closely for signs of illness or parasites before introducing them into an already established group). Don't share equipment with neighbors (each chicken house should have dedicated tools, wheelbarrows, buckets, etc.), because pathogenic organisms can travel on these items. Diseases can spread to chickens from pet birds and wild birds, so limit contact where possible.
- ***Give your birds plenty of attention:*** If you spend time watching and interacting with you chickens, you will find that each one has a unique personality, and they are friendly and curious when treated kindly. They display interesting behavior patterns, such as dustbathing and foraging, and have complex social interactions that are entertaining to observe. Enjoy their antics, and remember that your hens are completely dependent on you for responsible, committed care for their entire lifetime.