

# Providing a Good Home for Chickens

## Interests, Needs and Activities

Chickens are lively sociable birds whose ancestry goes back tens of thousands of years to the jungles of Southeast Asia where their junglefowl relatives roam free to this day. Chickens are ground-dwelling birds who like to roost off the ground at night. Natural group composition includes a dominant rooster, one or more hens, one or more subordinate roosters, and young birds. Though chickens can distinguish from 80 to 200 individual members of their species, they prefer living in small ranging flocks of no more than about 20.

Chickens are physically active birds who spend much of their day foraging for food--scratching and pecking vigorously with their claws and beaks in search of seeds, seedlings, fruits, berries, insects and worms. They also eat lots of green plants, rich in calcium and vitamins. In nature chickens start foraging before dawn. Perched in the trees, and sensitive to infrared light, they see morning light almost an hour before we do. Roosters crow at dawn and during the day to make announcements ("Here's food!"), sound warnings ("Hawk!"), and keep track of each other ("My group's here; where's yours?"). At midday chickens like to return to their resting place to preen, sunbathe, and dustbathe. Preening and dustbathing keep their skin and feathers clean and water resistant by getting rid of built-up oil and distributing fresh oil from the preen gland located at the base of their tail. Chickens require full-spectrum natural sunlight for vitamin D and overall health. (They should never be forced to live under continuous or fluorescent lighting, which harms their

immune system, color perception, and ability to transport calcium through cell membranes.) They also need ready access to cool shady places to avoid overheating. Above 80 degrees F, chickens develop heat stress which can kill them. Below 20 degrees F, their combs and wattles can develop painful frostbite.

In the late afternoon, chickens like to forage before going to roost. Though they have excellent color vision, chickens do not see well at night making them vulnerable to predators. Weasels, foxes, raccoons, possums, owls, hawks, dogs, and sometimes cats prey on chickens. At night they should sleep in a predator-proof coop with elevated solid--not swinging--perches such as tree limbs and sturdy branches big enough in circumference for a good grip and far enough from the wall so they don't bump into it. (As "broiler" chickens mature they usually become too heavy to perch and must be able to sleep comfortably on the ground inside the coop.) Droppings below the perches must be removed every day (a putty knife works well for this), or a manure pit must be installed and cleaned out regularly, to avoid disease and the toxic ammonia fumes from accumulated droppings that can cause respiratory illness and blindness in chickens.

## Fresh Food and Water

Chickens must always have plenty of fresh clean water. Their foraging areas should be free of applied chemicals and their food must be fresh. Store their food in clean, dry, rodent-proof metal containers. Moldy food poisons chickens and should never be fed to them. Premixed nutritionally-balanced food is available in bulk (e.g. 20 lbs or 50 lbs). However, premixed rations often contain animal byproducts, which should be avoided in favor of all-vegetarian ingredients, since animal byproducts can include Salmonella and other pathogens that make chickens sick. Be sure to read the ingredients listed on the tag. Chickens have gizzards instead of teeth to grind their food. To grind, gizzards employ grit -- pebbles and other hard indigestible objects chickens pick up while foraging. An indoor chicken should always have some grit available. Chickens *love* fresh treats. (Contrary to what you may have heard, chickens do not like garbage.)



photo by Jeri Metz

UPC chickens Charity, Bantu, Clarence, and Glynnis



Offer them cooked spaghetti with tomato sauce, steamed brown rice, grapes, fresh greens, chopped cooked potatoes, whole grain bread, raw tomatoes, tofu, and their own eggs hard-boiled including the shells. Eggshells have calcium and other minerals for chickens. Do not feed chickens uncooked soybeans or uncooked rice. Chickens love black oil seeds including striped sunflower seeds, which they will eat shell and all, but don't overdose them on these seeds. Chickens should be free to eat all the bugs and worms they can find outdoors.

## Clean, Comfortable, Predator-Proof Housing

The purpose of a coop is to provide shelter from direct snow, ice, rain, direct wind, and predators. It should be roomy (at least 8 to 10 square feet per bird), well-insulated, and well-ventilated. Cold winter nights can be warmed and frozen drinking water prevented by installing one or two electric heat lamps above the perching area and by spreading a thick layer of wood chips and hay or straw over the dirt floor. Chicken-wire walls should be covered with plastic or other insulation during the winter in cold latitudes. The weather-proof roof should slope so as not to collect water and be made of a material that does not collect and hold heat. Roof and sides enclosed with galvanized mesh or chicken wire should go down at least 2 feet in the ground. Dig a trench around the coop and put the wire 2 feet in the trench. Refill the trench with soil to keep out burrowing predators. Or rest a pressure-treated wood frame on a ground-level base of 2 concrete blocks (16-inch depth) below the frame. The coop should be sunny and airy (but not drafty) and have cozy dim areas where the hens can quietly lay their eggs. Hens prefer a nesting place or nest box in the southeast corner of the coop. Four hens can comfortably share a nest.

It is difficult to predator-proof a large yard other than by checking on your chickens frequently. If you hear a clamor, run outside as fast as you can. An outdoor daytime pen should be surrounded by a 6 to 8 foot

fence to keep the bantams from flying over it. Also, you can easily cover, say, an 18 ft X 22 ft yard with hard-wire cloth made of half-inch squares, to keep predators from flying in, reaching in, or climbing into the fenced chicken yard.



## Coop doors and ramps

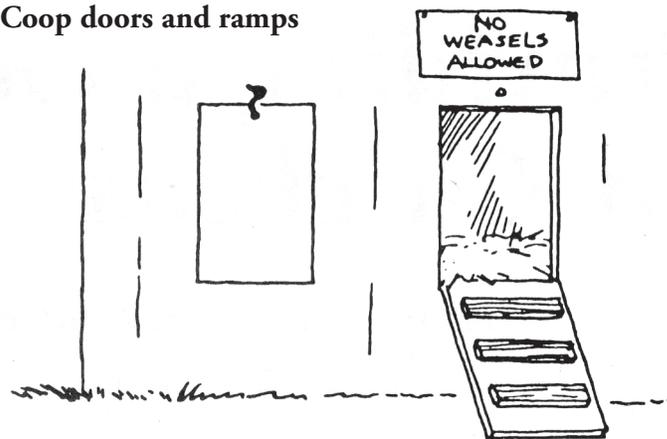


illustration by Sidney Quinn

## Tender loving care

Though chickens are naturally hardy, and can live up to 16 years, they can develop respiratory infections and other ailments that demand the same high-quality veterinary care that you give to your companion dog or cat. The heavy "broiler" chickens are prone to heart and lung problems and to heat stress, crippling, and early death as a result of artificial manipulation for rapid and excessive weight gain. The so-called "egg-type" hens are susceptible to problems associated with laying, including oviduct tumors. When your chickens know that you love and respect them, they will want to be with you as well as enjoying themselves on their own. They'll sit on the porch in the evening and they'll contentedly preen themselves standing next to you, sure signs that they feel at home.

## Further Information

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- Chicken Run Rescue, [www.brittonclouse.com/chickenrunrescue](http://www.brittonclouse.com/chickenrunrescue).
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- Karen Davis, PhD, President, *Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs*, Book Publishing Co., 2009. [www.upc-online.org/merchandise/book.html](http://www.upc-online.org/merchandise/book.html).