



ANIMAL ANTICS

Note for Pet Owners:

Pet Patrol 365 provides this information for educational purposes only. You should seek the advice of your veterinarian if your pet is ill, as only they can correctly advise on the diagnosis and the recommended treatment for your pet.

Ever Thought of Keeping Chickens?

There are plenty of reasons to get started. Besides a regular flow of freshly laid, healthy eggs, keeping chickens is also a step towards greater food self-sufficiency. It can also cut your weekly shopping bill, reduce your food miles and guarantee good animal welfare standards.

What you need:

Space. The size of your chicken house will depend on the number of hens you intend keeping. To keep four chickens you need a minimum internal space of 4 x 4ft, but the more outside space, the better. A 10 x 10ft plot is plenty, but a smaller run will do provided you can regularly move the hens on to clean grass.

A chicken coop. Make sure you buy a good quality chicken coop otherwise foxes will get in. But this needn't mean spending a fortune. A 6 x 4ft shed from any DIY store makes a nice henhouse you can stand up in and is large enough for six chickens. Then you just need to add roosting bars, an external nestbox and a small doorway.

Bedding. For the bedding use straw, wood chips or wood shavings and coarse sawdust in the nestboxes.

Drinker and food bowl. A plastic hopper feeder that can hang inside the house or run and a plastic drinker.

Food. Make sure your chickens always have fresh water. Feed your chickens layer's pellets so they get everything they need to keep them healthy. You can also supplement their diet with veg scraps - they'll eat almost anything, provided it does not contain meat.

Breeds of Chicken

Good starter birds are often hybrids as they will produce lots of eggs every year and tend to cost less than pure breed, which are harder to come by and are less resistant to infection. You could consider adopting ex-battery hens, as they tend to be killed after the first year of life when their productivity declines (Battery Hen Welfare Trust, 01769 580310, <http://www.bhwt.org.uk/>).

Egg laying

Each chicken will usually produce around 4-6 eggs a week. Although they will lay their eggs out in the open, you'll have more success if you provide chickens with a dark, enclosed nesting area. A crate filled with straw will suffice. All chickens lay fewer eggs during the winter months because there is less sunlight.

Benefits

You will know where your eggs have come from and will get free range & hormone free eggs regularly. Keeping chickens is also good for the garden as they are a natural form of weed and pest control - chickens eat insects and bugs, and keep the lawn well trimmed. Chicken droppings make for great compost - it's richer in nitrogen and phosphates than horse manure.

Drawbacks

Chickens can cause a lot of damage to your garden and vegetable beds must be kept out of bounds. They are constantly searching for food and scratch up any surface they are on. You might want to keep your chickens in a fenced area so they don't wreck the grass, or you can put some bark chippings down instead.

Other things to remember

Before you decide to keep chickens check with your local authority that you are allowed to do so. Most people can, but it's best to be sure. Consider your neighbours too - it's always a good idea to speak to them first. Rats aren't a problem so long as food isn't left lying around, so if you are vigilant and don't leave out scraps you should be OK. It is important to regularly clean out the coop and bedding from under the perches to avoid the spread of disease.

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