



Suffolk County Farm and Education Center Responsible Chicken Ownership

There has been a resurgence of interest in raising backyard chickens on Long Island. Chickens are raised for a variety of different reasons, including as pets, for their eggs, for their meat, and for pest/weed control. While chickens can be very enjoyable to keep in your backyard, as with any animal, it is important that you understand the responsibilities- and costs- associated with owning them. I hope that this article will help you prepare to raise backyard chickens.

Before you begin your chicken owning journey, it is essential that you check your town regulations- both the livestock regulations and the noise restrictions. Some towns do not allow chicken ownership at all; others restrict the number or type of birds you can have, and some towns have restrictions regarding the coops, or chicken houses, that you will need.

A group of chickens is known as a flock. Baby chickens are called chicks. Females under one year of age are called pullets, while adult female chickens are called hens. Males under one year of age are known as cockerels, and a rooster is an adult male chicken. Please note that a rooster's job is to protect his hens, which can make them a less than ideal addition to a backyard chicken flock. Roosters are not allowed in many towns and can be very hard to rehome; please make sure to take this into consideration when planning your flock. You do not need a rooster to get eggs, hens will lay them without a rooster around.

Speaking of eggs, just because you have chickens in the backyard does not mean that you are guaranteed to receive eggs every day. A pullet will not lay eggs until she has fully matured at approximately 4-6 month of age, depending on the breed. Mature pullets and hens will lay one egg every 24-48 hours while they are young. As hens age, they will slow down and eventually stop their egg production. Egg production usually stops at 5-6 years of age, but chickens can live to be 10 years old. Hens will not lay eggs in the wintertime due to decreased amounts of sunlight, although you can put lights in your coop to prevent this from happening. Hens also do not lay eggs when they are molting (or losing) and subsequently re-growing their feathers. So even though you have chickens in the backyard, you still might need to buy eggs at some point.

There are many decisions that need to be made prior to obtaining chickens. Do you want to start by raising chicks, or do you want to start with laying pullets and hens? Chicks will also require separate feed, housing, and equipment than older birds. Which breed of chicken best fits your needs? Some breeds are better egg layers than others, and they will all have different temperaments and physical characteristics.

Don't forget about the chicken coop for the birds to live in. There are many different coop designs to choose from, and you can build one yourself or purchase one. You will need to decide if you are going to allow your birds to free range (roam your backyard), or if you are going to build them a large run, or outdoor space, attached to the coop. Chickens need to be fed and watered daily, and will likely require medications and veterinary care at some point in their lives. Make sure that you find a veterinarian who will treat chickens before you need one. These are all costs that must be considered before getting chickens. Also, we strongly recommend having a plan for what you will do with your hens once they stop laying- many people keep them as pets, but that isn't possible for everybody.

The Suffolk County Farm and Education Center cannot take in any unwanted roosters or hens, and we are not veterinarians who can answer chicken health questions, but we are always here to help you succeed in owning your backyard flock. Please feel free to reach out to me at kp99@cornell.edu if you would like to discuss raising backyard chickens. We also have an entire Raising Backyard Chickens virtual presentation which goes into detail on the information mentioned in this article. Please email ccefarmgroups@cornell.edu if you are interested in taking this class.

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