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Getting Started in Chicken Keeping

A comprehensive guide to keeping chickens



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Getting Started in Chicken Keeping

Introduction

Welcome to *Getting Started in Chicken Keeping*. We hope you'll find this short guide useful as well as informative and that it will give you a good start in chicken keeping. Keeping chickens is great fun as well as rewarding – welcome to the club!

Keeping Chickens - What you need to consider

Keeping chickens in your back garden has suddenly become more and more popular. Concerns about battery farming and wanting to know where your food is coming from, and Jamie Oliver's campaign to raise awareness on animal welfare have fuelled the desire for many of us to ask the question - is keeping chickens for us?

Here are a few things you may wish to consider before you get started in keeping chickens.

Your Garden

Although keeping chickens can be good for your garden (they eat bugs and slugs, they scratch and turn over the soil, they are a source of rich manure), they can also destroy it if allowed to roam freely. Chickens scratch around in search for those juicy insects and bugs – and they don't care if it's where you have planted your prize Hosta or your vegetable seedlings. They are also partial to a bit of greenery – including grass. Therefore you will have to consider fencing a bit of garden off for them, or having a moveable chicken run.

As to the amount of space needed for a run there is no set rule for this, however a minimum of 2m² should be considered for 4 chickens.

If you are going to let your chickens roam free, then you need to make sure that they cannot escape (and ruin your neighbours borders) and that predators cannot get in. So you may need to put up some more fencing.

Finally, if you have a pond you need to make sure it has shallow edges and that the chicken will easily be able to get out if she falls in – chickens cannot swim!

Other pets

Although cats may be partial to a bit of cooked chicken for dinner, they are not partial to live, unprepared chicken. Therefore, if you're keeping chickens then cats are unlikely to bother them, in fact they tend to ignore each other. Cats prefer to sit and bask in the sun, while chickens prefer to scratch around in the shade of a bush.

Dogs could be a problem – but it depends on the dog, their training, their breed and their nature. You will know (hopefully) if your dog is likely to chase and kill the chickens. Most dogs, once they are introduced to the chickens and perhaps after the initial barking, will settle down and live quite happily beside the chickens. In some ways dogs can be an asset in deterring predators or warning of their presence.

Neighbours and the law

There is no UK Law about keeping chickens or cockerels in a residential area, unless it is a commercial enterprise. However, there may be local bye-laws about keeping livestock, or there may

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be restrictive covenants on your house or land which govern the keeping of livestock. There is also the laws relating to "Nuisance" - whether from noise or otherwise, which you may need to consider should you want to keep a cockerel.

Commitment

Although keeping chickens isn't time consuming as with any pets they do demand some commitment from you.

Firstly you need to consider what you will do if you go away on holiday etc. Hopefully a friendly neighbour will be happy to look after your chickens in return for some eggs.

Secondly you will need to be prepared to get up in the morning and let them out of their coop, and lock up once it is dark – come rain or shine, summer or winter.

Finally you need to be prepared to clean out the coop about once a week. This basically means sweeping out all the wood shavings and "pooh" and scattering a nice new layer on the floor of the hen house and nesting box. Every so often you should consider scattering red mite powder around the coop to ensure against an epidemic!

The Pros & Cons

We thought it would be useful to list the pros as well as the cons of keeping chickens. Make sure you read this before you go out and buy your chickens!

Pros

They make good pets!

One thing that hens are definitely not is boring – in fact they can be as rewarding as any other domestic pet. For a start each have their very definite and individual character and personality. You'll get the brave one, the bossy one, the greedy one the clumsy one, the clown, the "mother" hen etc. One thing all hens have in common is that they are VERY inquisitive. Whatever you do in the garden they will be there having a good nose!

Compared with dogs – they do not need as much attention – you can leave them all day and they will not make you feel guilty when you get home. And they don't need exercising – they do that all by themselves.

Compared to cats – they won't ruin your furniture with their claws or sit on the very spot that you are trying to work.

Compared to small animals you don't have to feel guilty about keeping them in cages because you know you can let them wander around the garden and they will always come back to you ... they know what side of the bread is buttered.

They are also much cheaper to feed and care for than most pets! AND they reward you with a tasty egg nearly every day.

They can become a hobby

If you really get into your hens you can consider breeding them. There are over 160 breeds of chickens and bantams and you can buy fertilised eggs direct from breeders or from the internet. You

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will need an incubator – or even better a broody hen – to hatch them. If you really get into breeding you could even consider showing them – you never know, you may breed that prize bird!

A money saving enterprise?

Unless you go into keeping chickens in a big way it is unlikely that you will make much money. The Poultry industry in the UK is very economical and efficient so the cost of supermarket eggs is very competitive – even the free range eggs. However if you keep three or four hens over a couple of years then you are likely to at least cover your costs. See our section on Costs for more information.

Peace of mind

As you “go to work (or school) on an egg” each morning you can have the peace of mind that no hen has been treated inhumanely to provide you with your breakfast.

Better eggs

Ask anyone and they will tell you that eggs from truly free range hens are far superior in taste to supermarket eggs. Research has shown that free range eggs contain higher amounts of nutrients including folic acid, vitamin B12 and Vitamin A than battery farm eggs. And you can be confident that there will be no traces of chemicals in the eggs because you have controlled what your hens have been fed. Supermarket free range eggs do not mean they are organic – and to keep chickens on a large scale which produce lots of eggs its likely that they will have been fed on food containing additives (ie: chemicals) to keep them free from disease and be more productive. In some cases traces of these chemicals have been found in eggs.

Cons

If you love your garden - don't keep chickens

They love to scratch around and before you know it they will have scattered dirt and stones onto your neat lawn, dug up and eaten those newly planted seedlings, knocked over your pots on your patio and reduced your lawn to mud. If you want a bit of garden that you can sit out in and enjoy, then you need to be able to fence an area off for the chickens or have a large run that you can move around. HOWEVER – chickens are an excellent organic alternative to slug pellets and pesticides. They do love those grubs and insects – so if you can control their access to your precious plants they may help to keep those pests at bay. And of course they provide an excellent source of organic manure to add to your compost bin.

Could tie you down

Like any animal they can be a tie if you want to go away. However if you have a friendly neighbour who is willing to go and let them out each day and feed them, in return for those lovely eggs, then this should not be a problem.

You may lose them to predators – commonly to Mr Fox

You will need to take measures to protect them during the day and night.

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Neighbours may object

Your neighbours may object because of the noise (if you keep a cockerel) or because they fear other pests. Chickens can be a little smelly too. A few eggs here and there should keep them sweet though!

Cleaning

You will need to clean out the coop regularly if you want to avoid smells and disease. Although frankly this is not an onerous task.

Costs of Keeping Chickens

Unless you go into keeping chickens on a large scale you are not going to make your fortune! However the fact that you will be having delicious and free eggs will more than compensate for the set up costs and the ongoing cost of food and bedding.

Below are the costs for keeping 3 or 4 ordinary chickens which should yield on average about 1½ to 2 dozen eggs per week (probably enough to feed an average family).

One Off Costs

Chicken coop – you can get a good wooden coop with run for about £250 which should last at least 5 years.

You will also need feeders for water and corn which should cost no more than £20 altogether.

An ordinary chicken will cost you no more than £10 (you will pay more for rarer breeds – and while they may look prettier, they do not lay as many eggs). A hybrid chicken should lay about 300 eggs a year for about 2½ to 3 years.

On-going Costs

The biggest outgoing is food. A bag of course mash is about £6.75 for 20kg and this should last about a month. If your chickens are kept in a small pen and do not forage around the garden you should add grit and oyster shell to their diet. A 1kg bag will cost about £1.50.

You will also need wood shavings for the nesting box and floor of coop (makes cleaning easier). A large bail of wood shavings costs about £8.00 and will last you a good 2 or 3 months.

Total Cost / Week

For 4 chickens the total cost over 3 years would be approx :-

Chicken coop - £250

Feeding equipment - £20

4 Chickens - £40

TOTAL - £310

This equates to just under £2 per week over 3 years.

Food will cost about £7.25 per month or £1.70 per week.

Wood shavings will cost about £8.00 every quarter or 62p per week.

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Total cost per week is therefore £4.32 per week.

For this you will get on average about 1½ to 2 dozen eggs per week.

1½ to 2 dozen large free range eggs in the supermarket would cost £4.50 to £6.00.

SO – this means your chickens will easily pay for themselves!

Equipment

Getting hold of the chicken equipment is the biggest start up cost once you've decided to keep chickens. After that they are very cheap to keep. Even the initial start up costs can be kept down if money is tight. You can often “make do”.

Chicken Equipment - Essential items

A coop with a nesting box and perch

This is probably going to be your most expensive item unless you need to invest in lots of fencing. There are lots of different chicken coops on the market which are designed for different numbers of chickens and for different size gardens etc. Some are more elegant than others – but remember, the chickens just want a cosy place to roost and to lay their eggs. If you can't spend too much on your chicken equipment and you have some carpentry skills you can adapt an old shed, or even build your own coop.

Feeding equipment

You will need a feeder for corn and a drinks dispenser for water. While you could use old bowls etc, chickens are very good at making a mess and tipping things everywhere. Commercial feeders are designed to dispense food and water to the chickens without them making a mess and wasting the food.

Chicken Equipment - May need

Fencing

If you are going to let your chickens roam free rather than in a restrained coop then you will need to make sure your garden, or part of it, is well fenced off. This is so the chickens do not wander, and predators cannot get in. Those old foxes are pretty devious – if you have the money to spare you may like to consider investing in some electric fencing.

Chicken Equipment - Nice to have

Bin for food

You will need to store the food somewhere – preferably in a sealed, water proofed container which is rodent proof.

Automatic door opener

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If you would prefer not to have to get up at dawn to let your chickens out, or wander down the end of the garden on a cold, winter's night then an automatic door opener could be the answer! These work on timers or light sensors and can be rigged up to open most doors.

Chicken Equipment - Extras

Cleaning equipment

Spade, dustpan and brush, broom etc

Incubator and hatchers

If you decide to go into hatching your own chicks then there is a load of other equipment that you may need. However, if you have a broody hen then she is by far the best and most successful incubator AND she will look after the chicks afterwards. She doesn't even have to sit on her own eggs.

Egg boxes

It's always handy to keep your old egg boxes in case you want to give away or sell your eggs.

Types of Chicken Coops

Your chicken coop needs to be secure from predators, waterproof and well ventilated. It needs perches for roosting and a nest box for egg laying, and should be easy to maintain and clean. As a rule there needs to be 23 cm of perch space inside the chicken coop for each bird and one nest box per 4 birds.

Of all the different shapes and sizes, there are basically 3 types of chicken coops to choose from – Ark, Coop & Run and Eglu.

Ark Chicken Coop



The ark is usually the cheaper option as far as chicken coops are concerned and has the advantage of being easy to move around. This means you can move the chickens before they destroy your grass. You also know where they are. Ideal for just 1 or 2 chickens and for a small garden, although you can get some bigger ark coops too. On the down side they can be a bit tight for chickens to move around.

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Static or Semi-Static Chicken Coop & Run

These are generally bigger than arks and so can house more chickens. They also have give chickens somewhere to perch – which the arks don't generally include and are probably easier to clean out. There is more room for the chickens to exercise, and usually such coops come with the facility to have a run extension. However because they are bigger and heavier they are more difficult to move round the garden.

Chicken Coops - Eglu



These are different, stylish and easy to maintain. However they are very expensive in comparison to the traditional wooden chicken coops.

Other essential items to consider

Perch

In the wild chickens would fly up in a tree and roost as soon as it gets dusk which would keep them safe from predators. It is therefore desirable that a chicken coop does include a perch where they can sleep at night, although not all chickens will use them.

Nesting box

A nesting box should be about 30 cm² and should be placed in the darkest, cosiest corner of the chicken coop so the hens will feel their eggs are safe. Please note though that chickens can be a law unto themselves – and just because you have provided a cosy, secluded, dry, comfortable nesting box for them to lay in, they still may decide under their favourite bush is a better place!

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Where to buy your Chickens

Of course, once you've got all the above essential and optional items, you will of course need some chickens!

There are hundreds of poultry breeders in the UK with chickens for sale and there is bound to be one not too far from you. You could try an internet search (just type in **chickens for sale in xxxxxx** – where xxxxxx is where you live) or the yellow pages. Even better if you know someone who already keeps chickens, ask if they can recommend someone to you. You could also try the notice boards at your local pet shops/suppliers.

If using a farm, always give them a ring before you turn up to check that they have the breed of chicken you wish to buy in stock.

You will need a pet carrier to contain the chickens in transit. A cat box or dog cage would be perfect. A card board box would be fine too – as long as it is strong and has a lid. Chickens are usually good travellers as long as you take all sensible precautions. Choose a local supplier, make sure your chicken(s) cannot escape in the car and on hot days make sure windows are open etc.

Which Breed of Chicken?

Firstly you don't need a cockerel in order for your hens to lay eggs. As with most birds the cockerel does often have more beautiful plumage than the hen – however what he has in looks he loses in the nuisance factor. He will crow at some unearthly time in the morning and some may be quite vicious. So unless you intend to breed and hatch chicks (see the section on Hatching Eggs), don't bother with a cockerel!

There are about 160 chicken breeds. Hybrids (a cross between two breeds) tend to be more productive than thorough bred. Breeds are divided into light or heavy breeds. Light breeds include Anconas, Leghorns and Welsummers. They tend to be good egg layers and are less likely to go broody, however they can be flighty. Heavy breeds include Marans, Orpingtons, Sussexes, Wyandottes, and Rhode Island Reds. These breeds are slightly less productive as they were bred for eating, however they have a very good temperament and therefore make good pets for children.

Bantams have become increasingly popular chicken breeds and in particular as pets as well as for show purposes because they are smaller and have more varied and exotic colours and feather patterns than other chickens. For each of the chicken breeds there tends to be a bantam version. Because they are smaller they are suitable for smaller gardens as they do not need as much space as other breeds. Bantam hens are also used as laying hens, although Bantam eggs are only about one-half to one-third the size of a regular hen egg.

For a list of the more popular breeds, along with pictures and how many eggs they lay, visit our website at www.chickencoops.org.uk/chicken-breeds.

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Feeding your Chickens

The type of chicken feed you give to your hens will depend on size - a normal sized hen will need about 110g to 170g of grain a day & bantams will need about 50 to 85g a day. However if your hen is really free range and is allowed to wander free around your garden supplementing its diet with juicy grubs, insects and vegetation, 100g or less will suffice.

You can also supplement their diet with left over food – they have a hankering for carbs such as rice, pasta, bread and potatoes. They will also eat vegetables, fruit, seeds, hard cheese, meat etc. However avoid salty food, banana skins, uncooked potato peelings, chocolate and fish bones in your chicken feed. Like children they can be faddy eaters though – so try experimenting with different leftovers.

Grain & Corn

Chickens need a good balanced "Layers Mash" or "Layers Pellet" which contains all the grains, vitamins, minerals and proteins a hen needs to maintain good health and performance and can be acquired from any animal feed store or online. Pellets are easy for chickens to eat, however they may get bored if they are in a confined area; whereas mash keeps them happy for hours. As a treat you may like to give your chickens some mixed corn which is best scattered around on the ground. This encourages them to scratch around and take in grit which they need for digestion (see Chicken Digestion section). Only use corn as a treat as they need to eat their mash or pellets to produce the maximum amount of eggs.

Grit & Oyster Shell

Chickens do not have teeth so they must have access to grit which the hen stores in the gizzard and uses to aid digestion (see Chicken Digestion section).

Hens producing eggs regularly need a source of calcium in their chicken feed. If you live in chalky or limestone areas then they may be able to pick up enough calcium from the soil. However if the shells on their eggs become very thin then you will need to supplement their diet with extra calcium.

Oyster Shell is a source of calcium which is dissolvable.

Grit and oyster shell can be bought as a mix or separately from any animal feed store. Scatter the mix on the floor for the hens to help themselves to.

Water

Fresh clean water is essential for your chickens and should ALWAYS be available. It is important to regularly check the water supply, particularly in hot weather to ensure it's not run dry, as well as freezing conditions to ensure the water isn't frozen.

Chicken Digestive system

Like a human a chicken breaks down its food by mechanical and chemical means. Unlike us the poor old hen does not have teeth; therefore, after it's been softened a bit by the digestive juices in its beak/mouth, it swallows the food whole without chewing.

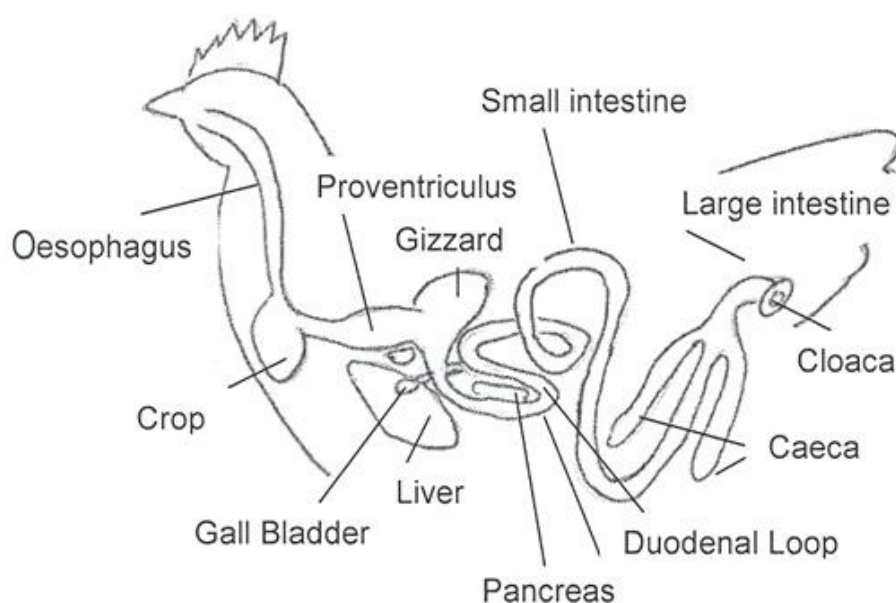
From the mouth the food travels down the oesophagus into the "crop". The crop is temporary storage pouch at the base of the neck where food is held until the gizzard (chickens equivalent of our

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stomach) is ready for it. When the crop is empty hunger messages are sent to the chicken's brain. When the crop is very full you can feel it if you massage the chicken's chest.

The food then passes through the proventriculus where it is mixed with some more digestive juices (enzymes and acids) and then it enters the gizzard. The gizzard acts like a food processor and grinds the food into a mash. There is grit in the gizzard that helps this process (which is why it is important that your chicken has access to grit). If the food isn't ground down properly at this stage because of lack of grit, this can lead to a problem known as "compacted crop" – which basically mean the digestive system gets blocked (painful).

The food then travels down the small intestine where more enzymes break down the food into its component parts (protein, fats etc) which get absorbed from the intestine and stored in various organs etc giving our chicken lots of energy for laying eggs and scratching around.



Hatching your own Eggs

Hatching eggs, in particular the hatching of chicken eggs can be a very exciting experience - especially if you have young children.

Advantages and disadvantages of hatching eggs

One way of extending your flock of chickens is to hatch your own eggs. Here are some things to think about.

Advantages

- It is very rewarding and exciting to wait and watch the eggs hatch and the chicks develop.
- It is a fun educational activity if you have young children.

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- If you have a broody hen it is a cheap way of extending your flock. If you do not have a cockerel to fertilise the eggs your hens lay you can buy ready fertilised eggs from most Poultry breeders. You can even order fertilised eggs online and get them sent in the post. Fertilised eggs cost about £1 to £3 per egg depending on the breed, although some breeders may be happy to give you some eggs. You will have to add about £6 postage for about 6 eggs if you order online.

Disadvantages

- If you do not have a broody hen then you will need to have an incubator to hatch the eggs and then a box with a heat lamp to rear them for the first 6 to 8 weeks. Incubators cost anything from about £70 upwards depending on size.
- You cannot guarantee the sex of the chickens. The likelihood is that half of the chicks will be male and half female, so you will have to be prepared to keep, find a home or kill the cockerels.
- You will have to wait for about 5 to 6 months (depending on breed) after the eggs have hatched for the hens to start laying eggs. Whereas if you buy hens instead you can buy them at point of lay.

Should I use a broody hen or an incubator to hatch the eggs?

If you have a broody hen then you are likely to be more successful at hatching the eggs and it's far easier than using an incubator. A broody hen has a maternal instinct and knows exactly what to do with her eggs. She keeps them at the right temperature and turns them a couple of times a day. However she can only sit on about 6 to 12 eggs at a time depending on her size, and you also have to wait for a hen to become broody. You will also have to provide a separate house and run for her to sit on her eggs and then raise her brood.

The main advantages of using an incubator are that you can incubate and potentially hatch more eggs at one time, and you are not limited to waiting for a hen to go broody. However you have to get the temperature and humidity in the incubator right and you need to turn the eggs twice a day (unless your incubator is very high tech and does this for you)!

Hatching eggs using a broody hen

You will know when your hen has gone broody. She will sit "flattened out" in the nest box in a trance like state, will stop laying and will object to being moved. She will have a bare patch of skin on her underside that will feel very warm. Some chickens will go broody much easier than others – many breeds – especially hybrids – have been bred to lay optimum numbers of eggs and rarely go broody. Good "broody" hens are Silkies, Pekin Bantams, and Orpingtons.

Ideally you need to prepare a separate area for you broody hen to incubate the eggs that is clean, safe, dark, draft-free, and away from the rest of the flock. The hen needs to be able to leave the nest to eat, drink etc. It should also be large enough for the hen to look after the chicks for a month or so after hatching.

Your hen will sit on any eggs – they do not have to be her own. Good broody hens can hatch duck, goose and other poultry eggs quite successfully.

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Make sure you leave her with plenty of food and water – and the rest is up to her! Its best to leave her be and handle her and the eggs as little as possible if at all. She knows what to do!

Hatching eggs using an incubator

There are many types of incubators on the market which vary mainly according to how many eggs they will hold and whether they turn the eggs or not. As with anything, you pay for what you get. The incubator should control the temperature and relative humidity within the necessary limits to hatch chicks. You should follow the instructions that come with the incubator carefully.

Hatching time!

Chicken eggs will hatch after 21 days natural or artificial incubation. If you listen carefully you will be able to hear the chicks chirping from inside the egg. The first you will see is a tiny little hole in the egg where the chick has pecked through (called the pip). If you are using a broody hen she will cluck to her chicks to encourage them to break out of their shells. The whole hatching process may take several hours, and the chick will stop to rest, and absorb the yolk from the egg and the portions of the membrane containing a blood supply. The chick will soon use its beak to make the hole larger and will slowly turn its body around, cutting the egg. This will create an opening large enough to allow the chick to emerge from the egg. It will crawl out slowly and usually lie on its side completely wet. It will take a while for the chick to dry out. If you are using a hen to hatch the eggs she will continue to lay on top of the chicks to keep them warm and protect them. Incubator chicks can stay in the incubator for a day or two and then they need to be moved to a separate area and kept warm under a heat lamp or similar.

Rearing chicks

If you used a broody hen to hatch the eggs, then all you will need to do is to provide her with chick crumbs, food for herself, water and shelter against wind, rain, and sun. A small arc type coop is ideal for this as it also provides a protected run for mother and chicks. Water needs to be in a container that the chicks cannot drown in. They can be transferred to a larger house and/or run when they are about eight weeks.

Incubated chicks need a heat lamp to keep them warm, preferably one with a ceramic bulb so that they have heat and not light. The heat lamp should be placed in a draught-free place and at one end of the box or area your chicks are to be kept in so they can move away from the lamp if necessary to regulate their own temperature. The chicks can be transferred from the incubator when they have dried and fluffed up. They need to be provided with a container with chick food that cannot easily be tipped over, and a container with water that they cannot drown in.

Sexing your chicks

It is not easy to sex chickens and you may not confidently be able to sex your chicks until they are 12 weeks old or more. Commercial hatcheries use cross breeding to be able to determine the sex at a day old as the males and females will be different colours – however for pure breeds this is not possible.

One method that has been suggested is to observe the chicks' behaviour when startled. Startle the chicks by waving a soft object over their heads and watch their reactions. The cockerels will

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instinctively stand erect with their heads upright and will emit a peculiar warning chirruping sound. The hens will tend to crouch down low and remain silent.

When a bit older the following clues may be used to determine sex. Cockerels will be larger than hens and their combs tend to be larger and pinkish compared to the hens smaller and more yellowish combs. Cockerels tend to “strut their stuff” and therefore stand up erect and alert whereas hens tend to hold themselves lower to the floor. Cockerels legs are longer and sturdier than hens, while a hen chick’s feathers tend to be more advanced than a cockerel chick.

Of course when your chick starts crowing you will know for definite!

Conclusion

We do hope that you have found this guide useful.

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