



Purchasing Chicks for Backyard Flocks – Frequently Asked Questions

Ashley Wright



If you're considering backyard or hobby poultry-keeping, it's natural to have a lot of questions about purchasing and raising chicks to be healthy, productive hens. This guide will answer some of the most frequent questions that arise before you buy your first chicks and covers some essential information about general chicken raising needs, acquiring chicks and some key terminology.

Am I allowed to have chickens on my property?

Before you build a coop and purchase your chicks, first ensure chickens are allowed on your property. Some cities, counties, and homeowner's associations (HOAs) may restrict your ability to keep chickens or limit the number you're allowed to have. They may also have rules on the setback and design of your coop or may allow you to have hens but no roosters. The best place to start is with your zoning requirements. First, determine if your property is located within city/town limits, or in the unincorporated county to know which zoning code will apply. Then, visit the webpage

for your county or city zoning code (a quick online search for "your city/county zoning code" usually finds the right place quickly). You'll be able to look up your property's specific zoning code by address or parcel number, then use the zoning codes to determine the rules around keeping chickens that will apply to you. If you have an HOA, their rules may be more strict than your zoning code, contact your HOA for that information.

Where should I purchase chicks?

Local feed/farm supply stores. Chicks can easily be purchased locally, especially in the spring. Most local feed stores that sell chicks buy from one of several large, nationwide hatcheries. The benefit to a local store is you can easily see the health of the chicks you are purchasing; they are unlikely to have been exposed to adult birds where they could become ill, and you get to pick out specifically which chicks you want. However, not all employees at farm stores are chick savvy, and many breeds look identical at the chick stage. Mix-ups are widespread and it's not uncommon to



get home with a different breed of chick than you intended. Some breeds are extremely popular and sell out quickly or for a higher price than directly from the hatchery.

Reputable breeder. If you are looking for hard-to-find specialty breeds, you may consider buying from a local breeder. Be sure to ask about their biosecurity/health management protocols and if they participate in the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP). Ask to see how their flock is housed and look for birds that are healthy, alert, and kept in facilities that are well cared for.

Directly from the hatchery. If you intend to buy a large number of chicks, you can order directly from a hatchery. Because chicks don't require any food or water for the first three days after hatching, they can be sent overnight through the United States Postal Service. You will need to be available to pick up the chicks from your local post office as soon as they arrive; the post office will call you as soon as they receive the box. Most hatcheries have an order minimum and/or may charge an extra fee for small orders. For example, one of the largest chick hatcheries in the country has a 3-chick order minimum, but they highly recommend orders of at least 15 chicks. They charge a \$20 small order fee for orders of 14 or fewer chicks. There may also be restrictions on shipping during certain times of the year when it's too hot or too cold to safely ship chicks.

How do I make sure I buy healthy birds?

Regardless of which purchasing option you choose, be sure to research the health of the birds and flock you are purchasing from. All birds on location should appear healthy and alert with appropriate housing, food, and water. Do not purchase from an operation that currently has sick birds. Reputable hatcheries participate in the voluntary [National Poultry Improvement Plan](#) which includes routine testing to ensure their flocks are free from diseases such as Pullorum and Fowl Typhoid, two forms of Salmonella infection that can easily infect and wipe out

a flock. If you're purchasing directly from a hatchery or breeder, ask them about their NPIP participation. If you're purchasing from a feed store, ask them where they source their chicks. Most of the large hatcheries that ship around the nation participate in NPIP. If possible, purchase chicks that have been vaccinated for Marek's disease and coccidiosis.

What is the difference between Pullets and Straight Run chicks?

Regardless of where you purchase your chicks, one of the most important pieces of information to know is if you are purchasing chicks as "straight run" or "pullets". Young, female chickens are called pullets, and batches of chicks sold as pullets have been sexed and sorted at the hatchery. This is ideal for laying flocks where you primarily want hens and few or no roosters. The process of determining sex in young chicks is challenging, so mistakes do happen, and most batches of pullets are around 95% female. If chicks are a "sex linked" breed (such as Black Stars, ISA browns, etc.), the sexing process is much easier and more reliable: female and male chicks will be hatched with distinctly different coloring, and you can expect 99% accuracy. Straight run chicks have not been sexed, they will be a relatively even mix of hens and roosters.

What breeds of chicken should I get?

The answer to that question will depend on the goals of your flock. The exact number of distinct chicken breeds has not been established, but it's probably in the hundreds. Each breed will differ in appearance and production. Breeds have been developed to produce large numbers of eggs, different colors of eggs, for meat production, or for their appearance. Some breeds do one of these things exceptionally well, and others are reasonably good at some combination of these traits. First decide what are the goals of your flock. Do you want to produce eggs for your family? Will you be harvesting birds for meat to fill your freezer? Will your flock just be backyard pets for fun with egg production as a side benefit? Do you want to show your chickens? This determination along with local availability can guide your breed selection.

Laying Breeds - These breeds have been selected over time or hybridized to lay many, high-quality eggs (200-320) per year. Suitable for most backyard layer flocks. Some examples include ISA browns, Golden Comets, and Leghorns.

Dual Purpose Breeds - These breeds have been bred for both egg laying capacity (150-280 eggs/year) and meat production potential and are suitable for most backyard layer flocks. Most heritage breeds fall into this category, and it includes Rhode Island Reds, Barred Rocks, Australorps, Orpingtons, Wyandotte, Speckled Sussex, Marans, and many others.

Exhibition/Ornamental Breeds - These breeds have been bred for a specific trait other than egg or meat production, such as feather types/patterns, top knots, small size, etc. They are often desirable for showing or just enjoyable additions to a flock. These breeds are suitable for most backyard flocks, although egg production may not be as high as other breeds. These include Frizzles, Silkies, Polish, and several varieties of bantam breeds.

Cornish Cross - This breed is specifically for meat production and reaches harvest size very quickly. Their lifespan is relatively short, they are prone to health problems if not managed correctly, and they rarely lay eggs. Not suitable for backyard layer flocks, they are best for meat production only.

Do I have to have a rooster?

If your goal is just to produce eggs for your family, you do not need to have a rooster. Hens will lay eggs continuously throughout the spring, summer, and early fall. A rooster is only necessary if you intend to hatch your own chicks or just enjoy the beauty of their unique and showy feather patterns and coloring. They may also act as a protector, alerting hens to dangers such as predators and even acting to defend their flock if threatened. If you do decide to keep a rooster, keep in mind that you shouldn't have more than one rooster for every ten hens, and if you have standard size roosters you will need to keep any smaller (bantam) sized hens separated. Also, be sure to check your zoning restrictions. Some local ordinances allow for backyard hens but specifically do not allow roosters.

How many chickens should I get?

How many chickens you should get will depend on a few factors: How many hens you have zoning and/or space for, how many eggs you will need for your family, and how many birds you are prepared to care for. Chickens are flock animals; they need to be housed in groups. They also develop a social hierarchy, and more dominant hens can bully less dominant ones. Because of this, three chickens are the absolute minimum recommended flock size, but flocks of 6 or more allow for a better distribution within the pecking order. This can help ensure one less dominant hen doesn't take the brunt of abuse from two other very aggressive hens. For egg production, the general guideline is three hens for every two family members. Six hens should be able to provide enough eggs for an average family of four. If you are an avid baker or intend to give eggs away to other family members, plan on more hens. Remember, as hens age beyond two to three years, their egg production will begin to decline. If you intend to keep your older hens beyond their productive lifespan, leave yourself space to grow your flock and add more young birds in future years to maintain egg production. Be sure to also check your zoning or homeowner's association requirements, some areas limit the number of chickens you can have based on the size of your property or your zoning code.



Housing (brooding) chicks

Chicks will need to be housed in a brooder space for the first 6-8 weeks. Specialty chick brooders can be purchased, or they can be constructed from a variety of materials or repurposed items. Successful chick brooders have been made from bird cages, dog crates, play pens, plastic totes, livestock tubs, large cardboard boxes, or any material or item that does the following: keeps the chicks contained (remember, they will begin to jump/partially fly in just a couple short weeks), keeps predators (including household pets) out, and allows for a heat source, food, and water to be supplied. They also need to block drafts, especially if the brooder will not be kept indoors, and a solid floor with bedding (typically shavings) is generally best. Consider flammability and ventilation, especially if you will be using a heat lamp (strongly discouraged) over a brooder plate or heat panel which are much safer.

What should I feed chicks?

Chicks need to be fed a commercially available feed called "chick starter" or "chick starter/grower". This feed has been specially formulated to ensure they get the right nutrition in a form they can easily consume and digest. Chick start comes in a medicated or unmedicated form. Medicated chick start contains amprolium, which can prevent chicks from getting coccidiosis. Young chicks who were not vaccinated for coccidiosis are very susceptible to infection and death from this protozoan. If you choose to feed unmedicated feed to unvaccinated chicks, you must be extra diligent about brooder cleanliness to prevent a coccidiosis outbreak which can be fatal to young birds. Feed should be provided free choice in a feeder or container that minimizes waste and soiling. Very young chicks are somewhat unstable for the first few days, they may fall into and drown in a surprisingly small container of water. Use a chick specific waterer which has a narrower drinking trough or teach them to use a nipple drinker (both available at most feed/farm stores or online) to provide water free choice. Treats (such as mealworms) or other food items should not be fed until the chicks are at least

several weeks old and in very small amounts only. If you are feeding anything other than chick starter feed, chicks should be provided with grit in a separate container from their regular feed. Grit is composed of small stones needed to prime the gizzard, a key part of the chicken's digestive tract.

When can my chicks be moved from the brooder to the hen house?

Generally, chicks can be moved out to the henhouse once they are fully feathered: the soft downy feathers they hatch with have been replaced completely by their first set of adult feathers. This is usually around 6-8 weeks of age. At this point, they can handle most normal weather patterns and will no longer need supplemental heating, provided your local temperatures are above 50 degrees Fahrenheit. If overnight temperatures are still quite low, you may still be able to move them out and continue to provide supplemental heat until temperatures rise. You will need to keep chicks separated from any older birds already in the coop until they are close in size to the existing flock.

How long before my chicks will begin laying eggs?

This will vary depending on breed, but most chicks will begin laying eggs between 18-22 weeks of age. They should remain on a chick start or pullet grower ration until they begin laying eggs. At that point, they can be safely switched over to a layer feed. Layer feeds have extra calcium to help with eggshell quality and prevent hens from using their own calcium stores for egg production. However, switching young birds too early (before they need the extra calcium for laying eggs) can cause issues with kidney function.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
Cooperative Extension

AUTHORS

ASHLEY WRIGHT
Area Associate Agent, Livestock

CONTACT

ASHLEY WRIGHT
awright134@arizona.edu

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