

Fact Sheet and Recommended Best Management Practices for Recreational Chicken Keeping

Lifespan

- Chickens can live up to 14 years or longer. An egg laying hen starts at 4-6 months and peaks at 18 months and then declines with age. Chickens require daily care.

Cost

- Start up: \$2,000-3,000 for coop, tools, cleaning equipment, maintenance, heating/cooling systems, dishes, food storage, scale, nets/fencing, security, lighting, permits, etc. This does not include the per bird cost.
- Annual: \$300 per bird for food, bedding, nutrients, hygiene, permits, utilities.
- Vet care (per bird per service): \$100 plus additional as needed for illness or injury.

Time

- Daily (average of one half to one hour per day minimum for a few birds): clean up droppings, clean dishes, provide medication/check health, feeding, supervise free time out of the pen, egg collection, secure the chickens every night.
Chickens need to be tended to twice daily. You will have to make arrangement to have someone care for your chickens in your absence.
- Weekly (average one hour minimum): maintain pen, add litter/straw to coop, parasite control, physical exam, grooming, spending time with the chickens.
- Other recurrent tasks (2 hours minimum, 4-6 times per year): thoroughly clean the coop and pen, winterize the coop and pen, travel time to purchase food supplies, coop/pen construction/repair.

Regulations

- Can you have chickens on your property? Check with town/county as well as your Homeowners Association and even your neighbors before investing in the chickens and equipment.
- You are legally required to register your birds (no matter how many) with DATCP and renew every three (3) years (this registration is free). DATCP can alert you to disease issues that affect both you and your poultry.

Public health risks

- Keeping chickens has some inherent health risks. The birds often carry harmful germs such as salmonella that can pose a risk of illness, especially to children, from handling the birds or anything in the areas where the birds live and roam. Know how to properly handle the birds for their health and yours.
- If you are planning to eat the meat and/or eggs yourself, read up on poultry processing recommendations first.

Light

- Egg layers need a light source – either natural light or full spectrum incandescent lights in order to lay eggs. In the colder months, egg production decreases if light is not provided.

Noise

- Chickens also should have darkness (at night) to help keep them quiet.
- Insulation should be used on the coop to help muffle noise and to keep the chickens warm in the colder months.
- Fenced pens also help with noise as does providing landscaping of the pens and yards.

Nutrition

- Chickens require good nutrition. Provide grit and nutrients.

Sanitation/odor/pests

- Chickens attract predators and pests. Insects carry disease so the environment should be kept clean and free from insect producing debris on a daily basis.
- Birds should be fenced for their own protection from people, predators, as well as from migratory waterfowl and game birds that carry their own germs and diseases (in the form of bacteria, viruses and parasites). Escaped animals can be a nuisance.
- Limit human interaction with chickens as animal waste can compromise shoes/clothing, lawn and garden equipment, tools, egg cartons, etc. Do not share items with other homeowners.

- Daily clean up and disinfecting is essential and helps with other unsanitary, aesthetic, or nuisance concerns, including pollution/contamination of soil and water. It is recommended coops be cleaned/disinfected daily and debris/litter, nesting material, dirt, feathers, and other materials cleaned up and managed so as not to decay. Wet litter shall be removed daily. A more thorough cleaning of the coop should be done every 2 weeks and thoroughly disinfect the coop and furnishings annually.
- Areas inside the coops should be kept dry and ventilated with fans if necessary in the warmer months.
- In winter, coops should also be draft free and heat may need to be provided.
- Coops should be free of weeds/grass around it.
- Clean food and water should be provided daily. Food and water containers should be cleaned daily.
- Limit the use of chemicals which may harm the environment for the chickens.
- Keep new chickens separate from existing chickens for a period of time (quarantine). Also keep chicks separate from older birds.
- Dead birds should be removed promptly either by burial, incineration or landfill – check local regulations for acceptable disposal methods.

Manure management

- One chicken can produce 75 lbs. of manure annually.
- Keep waste disposal containers sealed yet aerated so as to not attract vermin.
- If the manure is composted and used on site, the critical safety factor is a 120 day interval between the time the material is added to the compost pile or garden and the time the vegetables are harvested and consumed to allow sufficient time for the natural death of any harmful bacteria. Compost in an area inaccessible to the chickens for at least one year.

Coop/nest boxes/roosts

- For egg layers, 1 to 3 nest boxes minimum are needed per 3 hens (one foot square and one foot high). 2-4 inches of bedding (clean, absorbent, dry and relatively dust free shavings, straw, litter or grass) is recommended. Chickens prefer the SE corner of the coop.
- For egg layers, securely mounted roosts should also be provided no more than 1-3 feet from the floor, 18 inches from the back wall, 8-16 inches of space per bird, 1 ½ inches in diameter, branches are best.
- The coop should provide shade, direct sunlight, good drainage, ventilation, and protection from wind.
- Three square feet of space minimum per chicken is recommended, so if you have four chickens, a twelve (12) sq. ft. minimum coop is recommended. Building materials should also be a consideration for aesthetic reasons.
- Openings should be screened to exclude flies, wild birds and predators.
- Coops help keep predators at bay and also provide protection from the weather. South facing is best.
- The chicken coop door should be secured at night.
- The floors should be concrete so they are easy to wash.
- Smoke alarms are recommended if the coop is heated/cooled.

Pens

- Pens to provide secure access to safe exercise, sunlight, earth and vegetation and should be accessible to unsupervised chickens at all times (except at night).
- Fenced pens should be a minimum of 42 inches in height and shall be covered to prevent the bird's escape and prevent entry by intruders/predators. Reinforce the bottom with small mesh metal wire to prevent predators from tunneling under the fence. Ten square feet per bird is recommended.
- Pens should have some shade, a windbreak, a dustbath (use sand indoors in winter – place in a large low sided container like a kiddie pool), and enrichment furnishings (bushes, branches, stumps, platforms/ramps, etc.)
- Plant kale or other safe edible vegetation around the outside of the pen for foraging. Do not use plants that are toxic to chickens.

Exercise yard, if possible

- This can be a fenced back yard that provides safe exercise, sunlight, earth and vegetation when chickens are supervised. 175 square feet for five chickens is recommended. If no exercise yard is available, then chickens should have 16 square feet per bird in the pen.