



# Keeping Backyard Chickens

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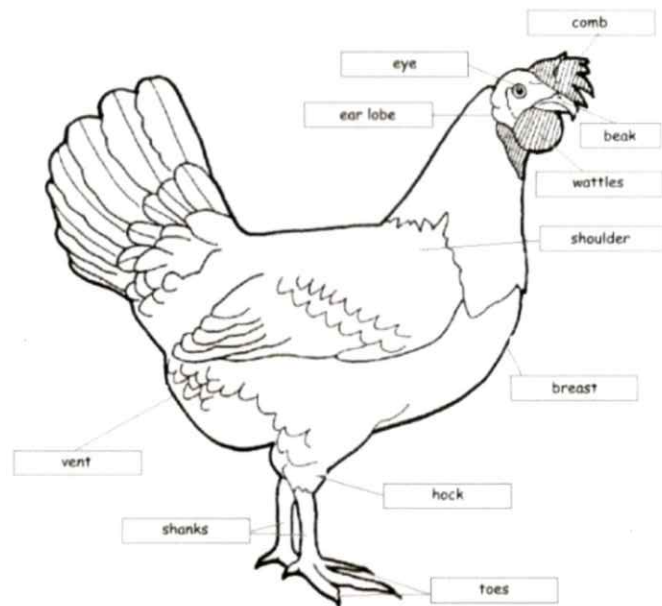
**Town of Barnstable  
Agricultural Commission**

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## Introduction

We are fortunate to live in a town where individuals are allowed to keep backyard chickens and roosters. With chicken keeping comes responsibility. The Barnstable Agricultural Commission serves as a liaison with the Town of Barnstable to determine regulations regarding farming and livestock. With the fresh local food movement sweeping the country, we understand that people would like to know where their food comes from. Backyard chicken keeping can provide you with fresh eggs and even meat. It can also provide you with hours of enjoyment and entertainment as you watch your flock interact. Backyard chicken keeping is for the entire family. Everyone can play a role and have responsibilities. This booklet should serve as a quick reference for anyone who is interested in raising their own flock. It should answer basic chicken keeping questions and serve as a starting point for your own adventures with backyard chickens.

## Parts of the Chicken



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## Creating Your Flock

There are a few things that you need to ask yourself before you start.

1. Do I want roosters?
2. Do I want baby chicks or full grown egg laying hens?
3. How many chickens do I want?
4. What type of climate do I live in?
5. What do I want from my chickens ? Pets, meat, eggs, or a combination?

There are many ways to get chickens. Many hatcheries have mail order services. The United States Postal service has been delivering live baby chicks in the mail since the early 1900s! Depending on where you live, you can order day old baby chicks on-line from hatcheries. Chick quantities depend on how fast they can deliver your chicks.

Chicks will huddle to keep warm. The greater the number of chicks, the longer they can maintain their heat. Thus if you are far from a large city, you may need to order a larger number of chicks. Once hatched, baby chicks can survive 3 days without food and water because they ingest part of the egg prior to hatching.

Once the baby chicks hatch, they start their journey. You can choose to have your birds sexed in order to start with all females. **YOU DO NOT NEED A ROOSTER TO GET EGGS.** All pullets, female chickens under one year of age, are born with about 4000 eggs. Pullets start to lay eggs as early as 20 weeks to about one year. Some breeds are better at laying eggs than others. Examples of friendly, docile breeds that are cold hardy and good egg layers are Australorps, Buff Orpingtons and the Silkie Bantams. Note: Silkie Bantams lay smaller eggs. Two of their eggs are equal to one standard breed's egg.

Some hatcheries allow you to pay extra to get all pullets. A terrific tool to help select your breed is available at [www.mypetchicken.com](http://www.mypetchicken.com). You can also purchase baby chicks

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Another option is to purchase older pullets that are already laying. Yes, you do get instant gratification. If not stressed, the pullets will lay eggs immediately. However, you must be careful because it is difficult to determine the age of the chicken and its overall health. By researching the internet, you should be able to find a reputable local farm or vendor that sells egg-laying pullets.

Meat Chickens include fast growing Cornish x Rocks and roasters. They produce mostly white meat and golden yellow skin. Ideal for the table, they mature at 8 weeks.

## Preparations

A visit to your local feed store is in order. We are very lucky to have stores that carry all types of livestock products. They also carry organic chicken feed. Organic feed contains pure ingredients. These feeds do not contain medications, heavy metals, animal by-products or preservatives. There is also a variety of non-organic feed on the market. We would suggest that you start reading the labels. There are good feeds out there that are non-organic. However, some non-organic feeds contain antibiotics, arsenic, ground-up dead chickens, animal by-products, chicken litter and feather meal.

Every manufacturer will recommend on the label how long to keep your chickens on a particular type of feed. From chick starter, they will progress to a grower feed, then a layer or broiler feed, depending on your final intentions. Once you decide on the feed, the rest is pretty straight forward.

At the store, you will need to purchase a chick starter feed, a chick feeder, chick waterer, pine shavings, chick grit, a thermometer and a heat lamp with a 250 watt heat bulb. We recommend purchasing one waterer and one feeder per 6-7 chicks. The rest you can devise from household items and create your brooder.



## Creating a Brooder

As the arrival of your chicks quickly approaches, you will need to create a brooder. This will be their home for about the next 6 weeks. For their first week of life, the chicks will need the brooder temperature to be about 95 degrees F. This is maintained by your heat lamp. As each week passes, the temperature is lowered by 5 degrees until you reach the outdoor equivalent or they are fully feathered. You will find as the temperature requirements of your flock change, you will need to adjust the wattage of your heat lamp. At first you might start out using the 250 watt bulb purchased at the feed store. At six weeks, you may only be using a 60 watt regular light bulb from your home.

Some people create brooders in their bathtubs, living space, or sheds. Remember that chickens are messy, sometimes stinky and produce dust in this stage. A garage can act as a nice place to make your brooder. Your brooder can also be a large cardboard box, a wooden box, or a galvanized metal tub. The goals of your brooder include keeping the chicks warm, providing fresh air, protecting them from predators like household cats and keeping them free from drafts. These all must be taken into consideration.

Line the bottom of your brooder with large thick pieces of cardboard cut to size. Upon the cardboard, spread newspaper. Next add some fresh pine shavings about 2 inches thick. The day before your chicks arrive, fill the feeder and place it inside the brooder. The feeder should be filled with a combination of about 25% chick grit and 75% feed. Remember that the feed will need to be refreshed daily as the chicks poop everywhere. This is a good time to start practicing good chicken keeping hygiene. It is also good to get in the habit of washing your hands and children's hands after they have visited with the chickens or tended to their needs.

Next fill the waterer and place it on a level spot. As the chicks get older they will explore. They will spill the water and put pine shavings in the waterer. Thus it will need frequent checking. It is recommended that you check on your chicks about 5 times per day. You never know what they will get themselves into!

As the chicks grow larger, place the waterer up on two bricks placed side by side. This will help to keep the water clean and less likely to spill. The waterer should be cleaned daily with white vinegar. Keep in mind that you may need to change the water a few times a day based on its cleanliness. It is very important to have clean water. Dirty water can make your chicks sick.

Next, test your heat lamp. Place a thermometer directly below the center of the heat lamp in the pine shavings. Hang the heat lamp about 18 inches above the pine shavings. **DO NOT** rely on the clip to hang the lamp. It must be secured in a different fashion to prevent fires. This lamp gets HOT!! Monitor the lamp for about 10 minutes and check the temperature. If it is 95 degrees F, perfect. If not, adjust it higher to make it cooler and lower to make it warmer. At this point, you are all set. Now it is just a waiting game until your chicks arrive.

## Arrival of the Chicks

The post office will call you immediately once your chicks have arrived. If your chicks arrive in the middle of the night, be prepared to go and get them right away. Be prepared to be awake for a little while because you will need to tend to them immediately when you get home. When you get home if you have children, do not open the box in front of them. Rarely, a chick will perish in transit. Be sure to call the hatchery and just let them know after you have addressed the live chicks' needs.

Plug in your heat lamp. Next, take each chick out individually. First inspect the vent area. The vent is located on the underside of the chicken (see diagram on page 1). If it is crusted over with poop, you will need to remove it. This is called pasty butt. Silkies are extremely prone to this. If the crust is left, the chick will die. You will need to check all chicks for pasty butts everyday. To treat pasty butt, you will need to soak a paper towel in warm water. Gently moisten the poop. Do not pull as you will remove the chick's skin.



Gently work the water into the poop by rubbing it between 2 fingers. Try to remove as much as you can so that the hole where they poop/pee, otherwise known as the vent, is exposed. After you remove the poop, coat the vent area with Neosporin. You may need to repeat this over the next few weeks. Immediately after dealing with the pasty butt, teach your chick how to eat and drink. Remember, they will imprint on you as their Mother Hen. Dip the chick's beak into the water. Make sure the chick drinks. The chick will tilt its head up. After the chick has taken a drink, dip the chick's beak into the food. Then release the chick and repeat with each additional chick in your new flock. You can also try tapping on the food dish like a mother hen would do to let her babies know where the food is located. Watch the chicks drink and eat. Watch their behavior as well. Do some seem weaker? Do some seem tired? These are the ones that will require close monitoring for the next 48 hours. It is possible some may still perish. After they eat and drink they will nap like newborn babies. Usually, they will nap together like a patchwork quilt.

You will frequently want to check on the temperature. If the chicks are too hot, they will stay away from the lamp hugging the edges of the brooder. If they are cold, they will huddle under the heat lamp. If they are just right, they will explore and spread out. Listen carefully to your baby chicks. You might hear a pleasure trill! It is the utmost sign of chicken contentment. It is the purr of a chicken and it is the most adorable thing you will ever hear.

## The First Six Weeks

We think that you will be utterly amazed at the pace in which these adorable little chickens grow! Don't blink because you will miss it! Take the time to enjoy them. They should start to develop a pecking order. Every flock has one. By watching your flock, you will be able to determine several things such as; Who eats first? Who eats last? Who seems like an outsider?

Who sleeps next to who? Who plays together? Who is the smartest one? Who is the fastest? Your answers will help to determine their pecking order. The idea of a pecking order is hardwired into every chicken from days when they had to survive in the wild. Each chicken will have a role. These roles are fought for or settled on depending on how the chickens jockey for position. There is not much you can do to change it. Once a true order is established, it should not change. The only exception to this is if you add or subtract anyone from the flock. Of note, roosters are not part of the pecking order. Roosters are separate from the hens in this manner. If you have more than one rooster, there will be an alpha rooster and the other will be submissive to him. They may fight now and then and sometimes it is deadly. The rooster's role is to be a protector of the flock and to fertilize eggs. If a predator attacks, it is the rooster that will sacrifice himself for the sake of the girls.

If you have a warm sunny day and temperatures outside are not too far off from the brooder's temperature, feel free to let the chicks go into a small enclosure outside. Try putting your chicks in the run. We suggest starting with small increments of 15 minutes. As they get closer to six weeks of age, they can spend a couple of hours outside depending on the temperature. When they do go outside, be sure to provide them with shade, food and water at all times.

It is also a great idea to introduce some toys for your chicks. Growing larger in a tiny space like the brooder can create chicken boredom. Cardboard paper towel rolls can be a favorite. They will peek through the tubes at each other and try to roost upon them. At about 2 weeks, they will also begin to practice roosting. Chickens should sleep on roosts. It helps keep them clean and provides them with a feeling of safety. Try placing some sort of skinny stick just wide enough for the chicks' tiny feet in the brooder. This provides exercise and roosting practice for these little chicks.

## Egg Laying

At about 20 weeks of age, your chickens will start to lay their first eggs. Your final coop will need to have at least one nesting box per four hens. The nesting box should be a place that is kept clean, darker and quiet. Hens will lay one egg approximately every 26 hours. Egg production can be stimulated with a light. Hens need about 12 hours of daylight in order to lay. Some chickens will lay in the Winter and some will not. However, most hens will lay during the Spring, Summer and Fall. You will find that your hens are most productive during their first 2 years of life. However, most hens will continue to lay at some interval during their entire life. Take care to harvest your eggs at least 2 times per day. Chickens can become cannibalistic and can eat their eggs if they are so tempted. Another reason to remove eggs is to prevent broody hens.

When a hen goes broody, she wants to have babies. The hen will sit on the nest with or without eggs for days. She will typically only leave the nest once in a 24 hours period to eat, drink and poop. Broody hens may or may not lay eggs during this time. There are ways to treat broody hens. However, if nature is left to take its course, it should not last longer than 21 days if there are no eggs to sit upon. If you are not intending to have chicks, remove any eggs from under your broody hen. You should also keep water and food close to her so that she is encouraged to eat and drink while broody. Broody periods can be stressful to the hen and you will often witness weight loss and feather plucking.

Freshly laid eggs should be refrigerated promptly. Never eat any cracked or open eggs. The eggs are laid with a protective antimicrobial membrane. This membrane keeps moisture in the eggs and harmful organisms out. Egg washing is not recommended.

## The Coop and Run

The final coop and run should provide shelter from the elements and predators and provide a place for your flock to roost. Chickens that do not free range will need at least 10 square feet per chicken. It should include one nesting box per four hens and roosts. There should also be place for food and water. It should have doors for easy cleaning and exit/entry for the hens. There should be ventilation at all times. In addition to weekly cleanings, the coop should be deep cleaned at least every 6 months. Pine shavings are the recommended bedding. They provide insulation, absorb moisture and are inexpensive. Coop building plans are available on the internet as well as pre-assembled kits.

## Predator Proofing

Cape Cod is home to many critters that can harm or kill your flock. It has fox, coyotes, fisher cats, raccoons, weasels, rats, snakes and hawks. It is important that you institute some precautions to ensure the safety of your flock. You will suffer a loss at some point if you choose to let your flock free range. Steps that you can take to help ensure the flock's safety include:

1. Use predator proof locks on all your coop's and run's doors.
2. Use only ½ inch hardware cloth on your coop and run. Do not use chicken wire.
3. Bury the hardware cloth 18 inches around the perimeter of your run and coop, bending the bottom portion of the buried wire out a couple of inches. This will help deter digging predators.



## Predator Proofing (cont.)

4. Remember to lock up your flock every night in the coop.
5. Install motion activated lighting near your coop.

## Vector Control

With chicken feed, scratch, fresh water and various treats that you will be feeding your flock, it is important to take preventative steps in preventing mice, rats, squirrels and chipmunks from benefitting from your flock's feed supply. These vectors can introduce diseases to your flock. Proactive steps must be taken to prevent their presence and prevent their populations from increasing. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Store all food in metal lidded garbage cans.
2. Sweep up any spilled food/scratch.
3. Keep all chicken food and water inside the coop, not in the run.
4. Remove the water and any uneaten treats from the run in the evening.

If you find that you do have a vector problem, please do not try to handle the situation on your own. There are serious potential consequences to you if the problem is not handled safely and correctly. If you eat your chickens and their eggs, your personal health could be affected.

## Being a Respectful Rooster Owner

If you decide to keep a rooster in your flock, you should understand that it does require a bit more diligence on the part of the rooster owner.

Roosters are noisy and do not crow only during the daylight hours. Roosters will crow at any time of the day, even in the middle of the night. They crow for several reasons, not only due to light exposure. They crow to assert their territory, ward off danger and to alert the flock.

When keeping a rooster, you need to be respectful of your neighbor's rights. Like barking dogs, rooster can become annoying to those within earshot. We recommend following these recommendations to ensure that you are not only in compliance with Barnstable's rooster law but also being a courteous neighbor.

1. Keep your rooster in a locked enclosure that is weatherproof but allows for proper ventilation needs between the hours of 7pm-7am.
2. If your rooster crows for more than 5 minutes consistently, investigate the cause.
3. Provide distractions to help with crowing, such as treats and scratch.
4. Discuss the rooster with your neighbors. Consider sharing your eggs with them. A dozen eggs can create an amicable relationship with your neighbors.
5. Welcome neighbors to stop in and visit your flock. The chickens might enjoy your neighbors bringing them treats like celery and lettuce.
6. Re-home aggressive roosters. Adopt a zero tolerance policy for your family's safety.

## Re-homing Roosters

At about 20 weeks of age, you should know if you have a rooster. Many towns have regulations about roosters. Please be sure that you are in compliance. If you feel that you need to re-home your rooster, please contact your town's Agricultural Commission for assistance. Please do not abandon your animal.

## Illness

If you notice that you have an ill chicken, separate it from the rest of the flock. If you so wish, you may cull it or seek additional veterinarian care. At the time of print, these veterinarians on Cape Cod treat chickens.

### **Brewster Veterinary Hospital**

Dr. Louise Morgan  
56 Underpass Rd, Brewster, MA  
508-896-2540

### **Cape Animal Referral and Emergency Center**

Dr. Corey Blake  
79 Theophilus Smith Rd, South Dennis, MA  
508-398-7575

## Resources

### Internet:

[www.mypetchicken.com](http://www.mypetchicken.com)  
[www.backyardchickens.com](http://www.backyardchickens.com)  
[www.atlantachickenwhisperer.blogspot.com](http://www.atlantachickenwhisperer.blogspot.com)  
[www.tillysnest.com](http://www.tillysnest.com)  
[www.mcmurrayhatchery.com](http://www.mcmurrayhatchery.com)  
[www.ideal-poultry.com](http://www.ideal-poultry.com)  
[www.mass.gov/agr/programs/bmp/docs/livestock.pdf](http://www.mass.gov/agr/programs/bmp/docs/livestock.pdf)

### Books:

*Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens*-Gail Damerow

*Chickens in Your Backyard: A Beginners Guide*-Rick Luttmann

*Raising Chickens for Dummies*-Kimberly Willis and Rob Ludlow

*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Raising Chickens*-Jerome D. Belinger

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