

A HOW-TO GUIDE

Raising Happy & Healthy Chickens



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INTRODUCTION

Hello, I'm Faith and I'm a chicken-lover!

After many years of chronic health conditions I finally recovered from them all and decided that living in 'normal' society wasn't for me anymore. I realised, that to be happy and healthy human-beings we need to live simpler, seasonal and more traditional lives once more.

So, over 6 years ago I sold up everything I owned in the UK and moved to rural central Portugal. Since then I have been living off-grid, from the land and sustainably as much as possible.

Having chickens has been a big part of this adventure. They are the perfect food and fertilizer producers, no off-gridder should be without them! ;O)



It took a lot of researching and experimenting to get to this point with the chickens. As, this can be very time consuming, I thought I'd put all my learnings in one place so you can benefit from them too!

Faith Canter

CHAPTER I

Why get chickens?

- Chickens are always pleased to see you
- They give us nutrient dense food, which is also local and seasonal
- If your chickens are free-range and as natural as possible then your eggs will be the most delicious eggs you ever had and also the most nutrient dense ones too
- Their produce is cruelty free
- They are super easy to look after
- They each have their own little character, they can be hilarious and also complete idiots!
- They eat up almost all your food waste
- They produce amazing fertilizer.
- They eat bugs, including mosquitos
- They keep the lawn/weeds short
- They are pets with a purpose
- They are therapy pets too
- Chickens are fun!

What's not to love?



It may seem a little scary or overwhelming to think about having your own chickens, but they are easy to raise and it's also easy to tell if they are not happy or healthy because they stop laying!

Now, there will be times in the year they won't lay as much. For instance, if you have really hot summers or really cold winters the amount of eggs you get in those time will be a lot less.

Also, as chickens age they will produce less eggs.

But, outside of these times if you notice a large drop in egg production then it's a sure sign something is wrong. So this is a great way to see that you need to step in and help them out. Usually if this is the case it's only one of a few things that could be bothering them (which we'll discuss later on), so it's usually an easy to fix.

CHAPTER II

The Coop...

You can make coops easily for your chickens out of what you have laying around from other DIY jobs. But, there are a few things to consider first...

Think about cleaning the coop.

When the man of the house built this coop on the righthand side he made sure it was the right height for a wheelbarrow at the back door, so that everything could be easily scrapped out the back and straight into it (I strongly urge you to consider this as it makes cleaning so quick and easy).

The floor is a big piece of thick plastic sheeting so it's easy to clean.

The walls are all recycles wood, but one side is some old plastic coated insulation (which helps with the hot summers and cold winters here).

The nest boxes can be opened from the outside as not to disturb the chickens too much and for easy cleaning/scrapping too. There are windows (with chicken wire covering them) underneath the overhang of the roof on both sides, so that there is plenty of ventilation in the summer. In the winter the window on the side that gets very windy gets covered up with some insulation, as cold drafts upset the chickens.

There are lots of different roosting sticks at different heights inside the coop so that the chickens (based on who's top-dog) can choose which one they sit/sleep on.

So, to recap, consider the following...

Cleaning, Ventilation (summer), Drafts (winter), Nesting boxes, High Roosts



CHAPTER III

The Food...



Grains & pellets

Most agricultural shops sell mixed bags of grains, pellets etc or just pellets by themselves. Either are good, but just remember that chickens are not vegetarians and as such need plenty of protein so consider this when purchasing or growing food for them. It's recommend that they have around 100 – 150g of this sort of feed per day per chicken. But, this also depends on what else you are feeding them and if they are free-range (ie: feeding themselves too). What I will say is that if you are going to feed them this sort of food then I highly recommend that you ferment it first to increase it's nutritional content, make the food go further and to give them some probiotics too. I'll talk about this more later on.



Food & Garden Scraps

Chickens will eat most things from the kitchen or garden. They love greens but they also love fruit (not citrus) and peppers, chilli's (they cannot feel heat, but gain the benefits from it still), raw or cooked foods. There are a few things they won't eat, like raw onions, potatoes and mushrooms, but they'll just eat around these, you don't have to worry about separating them. They particularly cooked rice, pasta, fish, meat and yogurt (if the yogurt is going off it's even better for them).



Growing their Food

We grow sunflowers, sweetcorn, amaranth, courgette and the tall hedge cabbages specially for the chickens. I let the sunflower heads dry out and feed them to them in the winter only. Sunflower seeds warm chickens up, so because it's so hot here in the summer they don't get them then. Sweetcorn they will gladly eat, once you have removed it from the cob and they love all parts of the hedge cabbage and amaranth (I pull the whole plant once it's flowering/flowered and throw it on the ground for them). With other cabbages they prefer the younger leaves instead of the older outer leaves.



CHAPTER III CONTINUED

Raising Worms

A great way to give them regular protein is to raise your own worms.

There are two ways of doing this. You can buy some meal worms and then start a meal worm farm, or you can catch flies – see next section.

Meal worms take a bit of work to get going but once you get going its totally worth it.

- I keep my worms in a large plastic set of draws (making sure there is enough air able to circulate). I have two draws for worms (about 1 inch deep maximum of worms). Then one draw is for beetles and the other for the bran (hopefully) rich in eggs. When I started with worms I was told to put mesh under the beetles and the eggs will fall through – this is not true, the eggs are sticky and stay put right where they are so it's easier to remove the beetles from eggs rather than the other way around.
- Worms like to live in old bran/meal etc, so friends (and the local health food shop) give me their old flours and I sprinkle this in with them once a week.
- They get water from vegetables slices, like carrot, potato and courgette, so I put one of these in (chopped up) once a week also.
- They prefer the dark and for it not to be too cold.
- I keep some of the worms back from becoming chicken feed and these turn into larvae and then to beetles.
- Once they have changed into beetles I put them into a separate draw and, feed and water them the same as the worms.
- Everyone 10/14 days I pick the beetles out and put them into a third draw and what's left behind should be bran full of eggs (if you leave the beetles in this they eat the eggs). Every 10/14 days I add more eggy-bran to the same draw.
- After several weeks you might start to see the bran moving slightly, this is the eggs hatching and a new lot of meal worms growing.
- Worms do much better in the spring, when things are warming up, but not too warm. If you want worms more regularly throughout the year you will need to mimic spring temperatures a bit (and maybe bring them inside).
- Then the cycle starts again. Each beetle can lay thousands of eggs.



CHAPTER III CONTINUED

Catching Flies

Another way of feeding your chickens for free is to catch flies.

You take a large plastic box and put another box inside of it on a slant with a long hole cut in the bottom of it on the end that is higher up in the air. You fill this box with food waste and put the lid of the main box on top but with a stick wedging one end open. Then you wait. House flies etc will come in and lay eggs in the food waste. After some time they will hatch and start to crawl up to the light and fall through the hole and into the main box. Then you feed these to your chickens.

Fermenting their Food

I ferment all grains, pellets etc my chickens consume.

I have 3 buckets that are on a 3 day cycle and I put their food for each day in those buckets and then double the amount of water, put the lid on and leave for 3 days. The food ferments in this time and thus becomes probiotic, more nutrient dense (as it's easier for them to get the nutrients from it) and the food also goes further. Sometimes in hot weather there will be mould growing on top, that's fine, through it to the chickens still, they don't care!

Calcium

It's important your chickens get enough calcium and if they don't you'll start to see soft egg shells or just less eggs in general. Most pellets you buy have added calcium in them, but a sure-fire way to get more calcium into your chickens is to crush up the egg shells really small and fed them back to them. They must be very small though as you don't want them to realise they are eating their own egg shells otherwise they will start to eat the eggs before you get to them otherwise and once that starts it's almost impossible to stop them!

NOTE: Chickens should be fed on the ground, not in a fancy feeder. They need the grit/sand from the ground to break down their food as they don't have teeth.



CHAPTER IV

Disease & Illness

How to have healthy chickens

It's actually really quite easy to have healthy chickens and without any sorts of medications or trips to the vets.

As I said before, if your chickens stop laying (outside of the norm) or they don't seem themselves then this is a sure sign something is wrong. And, it's almost always one of the following...

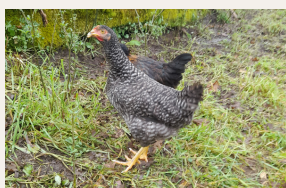
- Stress (from being bothered by humans or other animals), like an over friendly child, dog or cat. Watch and see what's happening and address this.
- Not enough calcium (see previous page)
- Not enough protein, especially in very hot climates like ours, when the ground is too hard in the summer to get to any bugs. Add in worms, meat, fish or more pellets to their diet.
- Problems laying. If it looks like they can't lay (egg-bound) an egg then try rubbing a little olive oil around the cloaca (the hole that everything comes out of) and this usually does the job.
- If it looks like they have mites, then add wood ash or diatomaceous earth to the coop before putting fresh bedding down and make sure there is somewhere they can have a sand bath (also with wood ash in it).
- If they are raising their wings and panting then this is them trying to cool down, so make sure they have plenty of shade and water.

- If you suspect parasites, which they often get, then you can add dried oregano and/or *diatomaceous* earth to their food for a few weeks &/or a few drops of raw apple cider vinegar in their water.
- Old yogurt is also helpful for this.
- There are also homeopathic remedies for parasites and shock (after an animal attack) that can be given to them directly in their mouths or in their water. So make sure to make friends with your local homeopath and get a little supply in-case.
- Apple cider vinegar is helpful to add to their water in the summer months especially, as it keeps the water fresher for longer and gives them some extra electrolytes and probiotics when it's very hot.



CHAPTER V

Chicks



Some things to consider about chicks...

- Chickens get quite protective when they get broody! They will go for you and other birds that come near them. So, if you want to let them sit on their eggs it's best to have a separate 'maternity ward' area. Either another smaller coop or a part of your original coop that you can section off.
- Also, once born the other chickens can and will attack the chicks if they are not separated.
- If you let the mother raise the chicks she will keep them warm, fed, protected and socialised so you don't need to mess about with heating pads/lights and such like. However if you hatch chicks in an incubator etc you have to do these things and also you will lose more of them as they are generally not as strong. You'll also have to wait until they are much older and bigger before adding them to your flock as they will get attacked more without Mum as protection.
- If you have a chicken sitting on eggs for much longer than the 21 days to take to hatch them, then they are usually not viable eggs and in this case you can remove them (with care) and put baby chicks you have got from elsewhere underneath her, she will think her eggs have hatched (they aren't always very bright). You have to be a little clever about this and make sure you pop them under from behind if possible, so it's more believable for them. Chicks pushed in she can see being pushed under her will likely get attacked as she'll know they are not hers.
- Two mothers sitting on eggs will fight over the babies if they are too close to each other, so consider this when making a maternity ward.
- If you leave a chicken sitting on eggs and they are not hatching and don't give them some chicks of their own they will sit there almost indefinitely and become quite ill. So, they either need to hatch their own eggs, believe they have hatched some or you will need to break their broodiness by keep taking the eggs away (which is kind of sad, but does work).
- Chicks need a more protein/nutrient dense food, it's usually a powdered mix. The mother will want to eat this too (which she kind of needs after all this time of sitting on eggs). But just to be aware of this when feeding them as mother is probably eating a lot of it.

CHAPTER VI

Other things to consider...

- A Rooster is their protector, not just their impregnator. The rooster will often sacrifice himself to save the flock, so they are a good idea to have around, if there are predators in your areas. But, to many roosters will also cause problems and they will for sure fight if there is not enough ladies to go around.
- Don't get a rooster if you have less than six hens. There needs to be enough ladies to deal with his 'love' otherwise he becomes bothersome for the ladies that are there.
- The rooster is head of the flock, but their is usually a hen that's in charge too.
- They don't like and are not very nice to new members, so introduce them at night straight into the coop if you can and I would always introduce more than one at a time so that they older chickens spread there displeasure between them until they are settled in.
- If you introduce new members at night straight into the coop they will also know that's where they go to sleep the following night. Otherwise you may have to go and find where they have decided to roost.
- If you let your chickens free-range like we do then you may have to go searching for the next new and favourite egg laying spot every so often. So, we restrict their wanderings until after lunch so that more of the eggs are laid in the nesting boxes, then after that they can go where they want.
- You never need to buy straw for chicken bedding. You can use dried or fresh cut grass, weeds, ferns, woodchips or sawdust. I get sawdust for free from the local wood mill. Some places, if you are not buying something from them at the same time will often charge a small fee for a large bag of sawdust, but many won't as they just want to get rid of it.
- If you pick up some chickens from a pet store, farmers market or similar sometimes you'll notice they don't look too great and may be full of parasites. In this case give them a dose or two of Cina (homeopathic remedy) straight into their mouth and/or in their water to nip it in the bud and prevent it from spreading through your flock. It won't do them any harm if they don't have parasites either.



CHAPTER VI CONTINUED

- If the coop is not clean then chickens will stop laying, especially if you have any chickens that have started sleeping and thus pooing in nesting boxes! Always make sure there are separate nesting areas to sleeping areas. Sometimes new chickens won't be used to roosts and you will need to pick them up and put them on them a couple of times before they 'get it'.
- When storing eggs, store them pointy side down, as they keep fresher for longer.
- Never wash eggs until just before you want to use them as they will keep WAY longer if you don't. Also, don't use soap on the eggs when you do wash them as you want to feed the shells back to the chickens later on.
- They are terrible food thieves, so don't leave your house door open or any bins or kitchen food easy to get hold of.
- Chicken poo is the best manure there is for onions and garlic!
- It's nice to let your chickens into your garden in the winter, they will turn the soil over, eat any remaining plants and fertilize/poo straight into the beds. They also love to turn over a compost heap or horse-poo pile for you.
- I add the 'dirty' bedding when I clean them out into the compost heap, it's full of loads of nutrients to keep the compost heap happy.
- I also put any dead birds into the bottom of the heap, where they can break down more easily and go on to feed the garden and future birds.
- Sometimes chickens purchased elsewhere will be scared of the sky!! I know this sounds strange, but it happens more often than you'd think. They will have spent their whole life in a barn/shed and not seen the sky. These chickens may stay in the coop for days after adding them. Usually I give them a day to settle in and then after that I pick them up and put them outside for the next couple of days. They'll usually then stand under a tree for a while, but will eventually realise it's OK to be outside.
- Once it gets dark chickens are seriously sedated, so this is the best time to move them if you are putting them in a new coop or gifting them to a friend.
- If you want omega-rich eggs then add a little flax or hemp seed to their food. Never more than 10% of their food though as that will make them poorly.
- Many people clip their wings, but it's really not necessary, they stay where the food (human) is! And, they need to be able to fly get away from potential predators.
- Chickens don't like the rain, so making sure there is a covered area for summer and for winter is really important.
- Chickens enjoy things to climb on and also swings to swing on!



CHAPTER VII

All wrapped up...

One final note, on predators...

Many animals would like to feast on your chickens. In my area it's dogs, cats, foxes, mongoose and birds of prey.

For this reason it can sometimes seem hard to let them free-range. But, they are their happiest and thus healthiest when they can. So, if you lose the odd one to a predator yet they live full and happy lives, that also leads to more nutrient dense eggs then for me that's worth it.

However, once a fox finds your chickens it's time to get the electric fence out because they will just keep on visiting otherwise. They can still be free-range, but within an electric fenced area (which you could move around).

Or, like my friend has, you could build a chicken tractor and move them around this way.



So, in summary...
Chickens are easy to look after, and funny too!

You know when something is wrong because they lay less
They produce nutrient dense food and nutrient dense poo
They don't take up very much of your time once you are all set-up
They do not need to be as expensive as many people say they are - in fact it can be the opposite!

If you have any chicken questions at all please feel free to get in touch.



Faith Canter