

The Essentialist

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Raising Chickens

by Catherine Haug

[NOTE: see Sources for full urls of articles provided here.]

ESP is planning a panel discussion on raising chickens (and other poultry) for our February gathering. To get you started, check out these articles:

- [Alternative Poultry Production Systems and Outdoor Access](#), from National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service
- [Raising Chickens at Home](#), from the Oil Drum. Includes Benefits and Tips for raising chickens without modern conveniences.
- [Picture Show: Urban Chickens](#), a photo collection of Urban Chickens from good.is, by Todd Parsons.



Hens & Compost

Why Chickens?

Chickens pay for themselves by providing eggs daily, and meat when it's time to say goodbye. They are very entertaining, love to be held and petted, and get along with dogs.

They are great for insect and weed control around the yard. They are natural omnivores, needing both plant and animal foods in their diet to be healthy and produce dark yellow-orange yolks. They love insects, maggots and seeds. Turn them loose on your compost, to find the seeds your composting process did not kill.

Their love for scratching and digging makes them ideal for tilling and turning soil (the chicken tractor).

For more, see:

- [Bird Hobbyist: Chickens as Pets](#), by Kathy Bernhardt
- [Small Farm Permaculture & Sustainable Living: Chickens as Pets](#)
- [My Pet Chicken.com](#)
- [Mother Earth News: Poultry Pest Patrol](#)
- [Alternative Poultry Production Systems & Outdoor Access](#) by Anne Fanatico
- [Birds for Natural Insect Control](#)
- [Purdue Extension: How Beneficial are Birds in Battles with Bugs?](#) by Tom Turpin

Regulations

Before you get started, check with the city or county where you live. If applicable, also check your CC&Rs. Annie G says that hens make soft noises that are not usually a problem, but roosters crow loudly at any time from early morning to late at night.

Choosing Breeds

Annie G recommends *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens*, by Gail Damerow for good advice on choosing breeds.

[My Pet Chicken.com](http://MyPetChicken.com) provides a breed selection tool (see Sources for url).

A Home for your Flock

Provide a mix of shade and sun for your pen (or run), as well as shelter. The amount of space depends upon how many chickens you plan to keep. Annie G. has 25 chickens and has an 8'x10' coop with 7 nesting boxes and three 5' long roost bars, surrounded by a 12'x24' pen. Her coop design was inspired by *Chicken Coops*, by Judy Pangman, a book Annie highly recommends.

Chicken wire makes the best fencing around the pen. To keep predators away, embed it at least 18" into the ground. You may also want to put chicken or deer wire or other wire fencing over the top as well, to protect your flock from climbing and flying predators.

See [My Pet Chicken.com](http://MyPetChicken.com) for ideas on coops and runs.

You may want to let your flock range about your yard during the day, but be sure to fence off any areas you do not want them to dig up (like your garden).



Chicken Tractor
(from The City Chicken)

The Chicken Tractor

Build a moveable cage and run, fitted to the top of your raised beds (or compost pile). Set it atop a bed you want tilled and let the chickens do their thing. They will excavate, add new excrement, and eat weed seeds and insects.

This is permaculture, at its best! For more, see:

- [Permaculture Institute](#)
- [The Walden Effect: Chicken Tractor Permaculture](#)
- [The City Chicken](#): Photo gallery of chicken tractors
- [Alternative Poultry Production Systems & Outdoor Access](#) by Anne Fanatico
- [Chicken Tractor: The Permaculture Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil](#), by Andy Lee and Pat Foreman (see Amazon.com for a sneak peak)
- [Backyard Poultry Magazine](#), June/July 2009: Permaculture – Gardening with Chickens

Food & Water

Give them access to clean water at all times; this is especially important during hot weather. In cold weather, provide heat to keep the water from freezing. Heat lamps in the coop work well, when there is electricity.

From Annie G.: Local feed stores provide all that you will need, including layer mash, grit, oyster shells, and scratch. Allowing them to range around your yard will also provide them with maggots, insects, seeds, etc.. In the winter, when ranging may not be possible, provide a flock block. Stale bread and kitchen scraps are always welcome treats.

Broody Hens & Raising Chicks

Broodiness is behavior of hens when they want to raise chicks. This behavior can be problematic in a flock, so many people try to discourage this behavior. However, if you want to raise chicks, check out the following websites:

- [“Chick Success - Start Those Birds Right!”](#) by Gail Damerow
- [Mother Hen and Chicks](#) (Ithaca Univ).
- [How to hatch baby chicks from your broody hen](#)
- The Modern Homestead: [Working with Broody Hens: Let Mama Do It](#)
- [The Broody Hen](#)

Roosters

Do you really need one? Only if you want to raise chicks. And even then, you can use a “stud service.” Hens will produce eggs, whether there is a rooster or no

Pecking can be a big problem with roosters, according to Annie G. Rooster foreplay includes pulling out feathers of the hens; you can de-beak your roosters if this becomes problematic. And hens can also peck the roosters (hen-pecked...). Refer to *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens*, by Gail Damerow for more advice.

When you get a chick, it's hard to tell if it is male or female until it gets older. Some cities ban roosters in backyard flocks; certainly their noise can be annoying to the neighborhood. What do you do with unwanted roosters?

Butcher it, of course....

Butchering Chickens

Ah, there's the rub. It's hard for some to kill a pet, but it must be done. What if you're raising chickens for meat, do you have the stomach to do your own butchering? If not, do you know of someone who can do it for you?

And that brings up the question: Is there anyone in our community who could butcher your chickens for you?

If you want to learn how to butcher them, consult *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens*, by Gail Damerow.

It is possible to use all parts of a butchered chicken. Feathers can be used for stuffing pillows, heads and feet can be added to the mix for making chicken stock.

Sources & References

- Annie and Paul Guerrant

Books

- *Chicken Coops*, by Judy Pangman
- *Chicken Tractor: The Permaculture Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil*, by Andy Lee and Pat Foreman (see sneak peek on Amazon: www.amazon.com/Chicken-Tractor-Permaculture-Guide-Healthy/dp/0962464864)
- *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens*, by Gail Damerow

On the Web

- [Alternative Poultry Production Systems and Outdoor Access](http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultryoverview.html) (<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultryoverview.html>)
- [Birds for Natural Insect Control](http://organicgardens.suite101.com/article.cfm/birds_for_natural_insect_control) (http://organicgardens.suite101.com/article.cfm/birds_for_natural_insect_control)
- [Bird Hobbyist: Chickens as Pets](http://www.birdhobbyist.com/articles/BirdHobbyist/Species/PetChickens.html), by Kathy Bernhardt (www.birdhobbyist.com/articles/BirdHobbyist/Species/PetChickens.html)
- [The Broody Hen](http://www.animalloversweb.com/article_chicken_broody.html): www.animalloversweb.com/article_chicken_broody.html
- [Chickens as Pets](http://www.small-farm-permaculture-and-sustainable-living.com/chickens_as_pets.html) (www.small-farm-permaculture-and-sustainable-living.com/chickens_as_pets.html)
- [Chick Success—Start Those Birds Right!](http://www.backyardpoultrymag.com/issues/04_05_06.html#article3) (www.backyardpoultrymag.com/issues/04_05_06.html#article3)
- [Chicken Tractor Permaculture](http://www.waldeneffect.org/blog/Chicken_Tractor_Permaculture/) (www.waldeneffect.org/blog/Chicken_Tractor_Permaculture/)
- [The City Chicken](http://home.centurytel.net/thecitychicken/tractors.html), a photo gallery of chicken tractors (home.centurytel.net/thecitychicken/tractors.html)
- [Heirloom Poultry](http://www.permaculture.org/nm/index.php/site/Heirloom-Poultry-Pasture/) (www.permaculture.org/nm/index.php/site/Heirloom-Poultry-Pasture/)
- [How Beneficial are Birds in Battles with Bugs?](http://www.agriculture.purdue.edu/agcomm/newscolumns/archives/OSL/2008/April/080424OSL.html) (www.agriculture.purdue.edu/agcomm/newscolumns/archives/OSL/2008/April/080424OSL.html)
- [How to hatch baby chicks from your broody hen:](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1780666/how_to_hatch_baby_chicks_from_your.html) www.associatedcontent.com/article/1780666/how_to_hatch_baby_chicks_from_your.html
- [Poultry Pest Patrol](http://www.motherearthnews.com/eggs/pestpatrol.aspx) (www.motherearthnews.com/eggs/pestpatrol.aspx)
- [Mother Hen and Chicks](http://www.ithaca.edu/staff/jhenderson/chooks/chicks.html) : www.ithaca.edu/staff/jhenderson/chooks/chicks.html
- [My Pet Chicken.com](http://www.mypetchicken.com/) (www.mypetchicken.com/)
- [My Pet Chicken.com Breed Selection Tool](http://www.mypetchicken.com/chicken-breeds/which-breed-is-right-for-me.aspx) (www.mypetchicken.com/chicken-breeds/which-breed-is-right-for-me.aspx).
- [Picture Show: Urban Chickens](http://www.good.is/post/picture-show-urban-chickens/) (www.good.is/post/picture-show-urban-chickens/)
- [Raising Chickens at Home](http://www.theoil drum.com/node/6036) (www.theoil drum.com/node/6036)
- [Working with Broody Hens: Let Mama Do It:](http://www.themodernhomestead.us/article/Broody-Hens-1.html) www.themodernhomestead.us/article/Broody-Hens-1.html

Potential Questions for Chicken Panel Discussion

1. Any city/county or other regulations regarding raising chickens in your backyard?
2. How much space for penned chickens if one's property is not suitable for free range?
3. What's the best way to keep predators from getting the chickens?
4. Best yard location for raising chickens (under trees, in a sunny spot, out of the wind?)
5. What are the costs to start up raising chickens; and for maintaining them?
6. What do you have to be mindful of in really hot or cold weather?
7. Best breeds for your own property and conditions?
8. Is it better to mix breeds, or stick with one breed?
9. Any advantages for bantams vs regular size?
10. How often should you move a chicken tractor?
11. Any local vets to treat chickens?
12. Do you have to have a rooster at some point?
13. Is there anyone who will butcher them for you?
14. Is there a use for all chicken parts (feet, beaks, feathers, bones?)
15. If you only want chickens for eggs but not meat, who will take live chickens from you to butcher and market (or eat, or cook in their restaurant?)
16. What about keeping water from icing in winter, especially without electricity?
17. What is the best feed for chickens and other small animals?
18. How to handle pecking problems?
19. Type of fencing; fencing design?
20. Differences/concerns for geese, ducks and turkeys, or rabbits?