



The New Chicken Owner Essentials Guide

Everything we wish we'd known before our first flock
— in one printable, no-nonsense guide.

COOP & CLOVER

Welcome to the flock

Raising backyard chickens is simple once you get the basics right and expensive when you don't. This guide is the short version of everything we learned the hard way. Print it, put it on the fridge, and tick things off as you go.

Inside: the day-one setup checklist, brooder temperatures by week, a coop space calculator, a feed and treat cheat sheet, predator-proofing basics, and a shopping list for three budgets.

Start small. Three to six hens is a great first flock. Learn their habits, build good routines, and add more once you feel confident.

Day-one setup checklist

Do these in order. Finish the coop and brooder *before* the birds arrive.

Before you buy a single bird

- ☐ Check city, county and HOA rules: hen limits, rooster bans, permits and setbacks
- ☐ Tell your neighbors early (fresh eggs help)
- ☐ Pick a spot with good drainage, some shade, and an easy walk from the house
- ☐ Decide on chicks, started pullets or hatching eggs

Coop and run

- ☐ Coop is built or assembled, with all vents and windows covered in hardware cloth
- ☐ Roost bars installed, about 10 inches of bar per hen
- ☐ Nesting boxes in place, lower than the roosts
- ☐ Run is fenced, with a covered top or a skirt buried or laid out along the ground
- ☐ Latches are two-step and raccoon-proof

Brooder (if starting with chicks)

- ☐ Large tote, stock tank or brooder box with high sides
- ☐ Pine shavings on the bottom (never cedar)
- ☐ Heat source set up and tested for 24 hours before chicks arrive
- ☐ Shallow feeder and waterer, with pebbles in the water dish for the first week

Supplies on the shelf

- ☐ Starter feed, grit, and oyster shell for later
- ☐ Spare waterer and feeder
- ☐ Bedding for the coop and a bag of extra
- ☐ Basic first-aid kit: gloves, saline, wound spray, and a small towel
- ☐ Phone number of a vet who sees poultry

Brooder temps by week

Chicks cannot regulate their own temperature. Measure at chick height, under the edge of the heat source.

Age	Temperature	What to do
Week 1	95°F / 35°C	Keep chicks close to the heat. Check water and feed several times a day.
Week 2	90°F / 32°C	Raise the heat source a little. Add a low perch if they start flapping.
Week 3	85°F / 29°C	Chicks feather out. Clean bedding more often as droppings increase.
Week 4	80°F / 27°C	Give more space. Start short, supervised outdoor visits on warm days.
Week 5	75°F / 24°C	Chicks need less heat. Watch their behavior more than the thermometer.
Week 6+	70°F / 21°C or room temp	Most chicks are fully feathered and can move out once outdoor temperatures allow.

Read the chicks, not just the thermometer

What you see	What it means
Chicks huddled under the heat, peeping loudly	Too cold. Lower the heat source or add more heat.
Chicks spread to the edges, panting, wings out	Too hot. Raise the heat or add airflow.
Chicks spread evenly, active, napping in small piles	Just right.
All chicks crowded in one corner	Possible draft. Block it.
Space: about half a square foot per chick for the first 2 weeks, then up to 1 square foot per chick by week 4 to 6. Safety: radiant heat plates are safer than heat lamps, which are a leading cause of brooder fires. Always secure the lid.	

Coop space calculator

More room means fewer problems. Use these minimums for standard-size hens, and go bigger if you can.

The formulas

Coop floor space	hens $\times$ 4 sq ft
Run space	hens $\times$ 10 sq ft
Roost bar	hens $\times$ 10 inches
Nesting boxes	hens $\div$ 4, rounded up (about 12 in. square each)

Quick-lookup table

Hens	Coop (sq ft)	Run (sq ft)	Roost bar	Nest boxes
3	12	30	30 in (2.5 ft)	1
4	16	40	40 in (3.3 ft)	1
6	24	60	60 in (5.0 ft)	2
8	32	80	80 in (6.7 ft)	2
10	40	100	100 in (8.3 ft)	3
12	48	120	120 in (10.0 ft)	3
Your flock: ____ hens $\times$ 4 = ____ sq ft coop ____ hens $\times$ 10 = ____ sq ft run				

Bantams need less space, and heavy breeds need more. Overcrowding causes stress, feather pecking and disease, so when in doubt, build bigger.

Feed & treat cheat sheet

Good feed does most of the work. Treats are a bonus, not a meal.

Age	Feed	Notes
0–8 weeks	Chick starter, 18–20% protein	Offer grit if you give anything besides starter.
8–18 weeks	Grower or developer feed	Do not give layer feed yet. The extra calcium is too much for growing birds.
18 weeks+	Layer feed, 16% protein	Offer oyster shell in a separate dish.
Always	Fresh, clean water	Check twice a day. Hens stop laying quickly without water.

Treats: keep them to about 10% of the diet

Good treats	Never feed
Leafy greens, cucumber, squash Mealworms and black soldier fly larvae Scratch grains (small amounts) Cooked eggs, plain Berries and melon	Raw or dried beans Avocado skin and pit Chocolate and caffeine Moldy or spoiled food Very salty or heavily processed food Green potato skins
Waste less: a hanging feeder keeps feed dry and off the ground, and nipple drinkers keep water clean, which also saves you time every day.	

Predator-proofing basics

Predators are the number one reason new flocks are lost. Most attacks happen at night, and many happen in the first month.

Threat	How it gets in	Defense
Raccoons	Opens simple latches, reaches through wire	Two-step latches, 1/2 inch hardware cloth
Hawks and owls	Attack from above, in daylight or at dusk	Covered run, plus shrubs and shade for cover
Foxes and coyotes	Dig under fences, jump low ones	Buried or apron wire, tall fence, locked at night
Dogs	Dig, chew and push through weak fencing	Strong fence and a solid run perimeter
Snakes and rats	Squeeze through small gaps	1/2 inch hardware cloth and sealed gaps; store feed in metal bins
Weasels and mink	Fit through gaps as small as 1 inch	No gaps. Check every seam and corner.

Nightly lockdown

- ☐ All birds inside the coop (count them)
- ☐ Door latched and secured
- ☐ Feed removed or stored in a sealed container
- ☐ Quick check for new holes, digging or damage

Use hardware cloth, not chicken wire. Chicken wire keeps chickens in, but it does not keep predators out. An automatic coop door that closes at dusk is one of the best upgrades you can make.

Shopping list, by budget

Prices vary a lot by region and season, so use the ballpark figures only as a rough guide.

	Bare-bones	Smart start	Comfort & convenience
Ballpark total	\$300–\$600	\$700–\$1,200	\$1,300+
Coop	Used or DIY coop with a hardware cloth upgrade	Prebuilt coop with a hatch and droppings tray	Walk-in or large coop with easy-clean features
Brooder	Large tote and heat source	Brooder box and radiant heat plate	Full brooder setup plus a spare
Feed and water	Basic feeder and waterer	Hanging feeder and nipple waterer	Large-capacity feeder and automatic watering
Nesting	Buckets or crates with straw	Proper nesting boxes	Roll-away boxes with an egg tray
Predator safety	Hardware cloth and good latches	Add apron wire and a covered run	Automatic coop door and motion light
Extras	Starter feed, grit, shavings	Add a first-aid kit and a dust bath	Add an incubator and treat toys

Where to spend first

If money is tight, spend it on **security** first (coop, latches, hardware cloth), then **water and feed**, then convenience. A cheap coop with strong wire beats a pretty coop that a raccoon can open.

You made it. Now go meet your hens.

Find our tested product picks at **Coop & Clover**.

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