



# keeping poultry



## what is it?

Most people equate the word poultry with chickens, but it also covers ducks, geese, turkeys, guinea-fowl, quail, and arguably even pheasants and pigeons (dictionary definition = the keeping of domestic fowl). All have their particular quirks: chickens are easy to keep, ducks need access to water, and geese are hardy, tough and self-reliant but need a bit more space. Chickens of course are the most common; there are many breeds and varieties available with different characters, some are for show and have incredible 'hairstyles', others are renowned for their consistent supply and quantity of eggs, and others make excellent table birds. You don't need much experience or capital to keep a few chickens in the garden and there are many benefits other than fresh, free-range eggs and meat.

## what are the benefits?

There are three main areas in which keeping poultry can benefit the environment. The first is helping to keep food production local; chickens, for example, don't have to be reared along with thousands of others in huge battery sheds using large-scale machinery to be fed chemically-produced feedstuffs, and then the eggs transported across the country to supermarkets where you have to drive to get them. All this entails unnecessary habitat destruction, pollution and carbon emissions; keep them yourself and you just have to walk outside to feed them and collect the eggs. Secondly, you know what they've been fed and



*nesting box with a liftable lid for collecting eggs; the hen-house needs one nesting box for every four chickens.*

treated with, and you can ensure that the whole enterprise is kept organic and free-range. And thirdly, you can ensure that your poultry become part of a natural cycle – you can feed them your food scraps instead of sending it to landfill (it's not a good idea to put cooked food on the compost heap unless it's enclosed, as it could attract rats), and then put their waste on the compost heap, and also let them roam on the garden in the winter, to enrich the soil with their droppings. Garden pests like slugs and snails are a particular favourite of ducks. Free-range poultry are happy, healthy birds, it is a pleasure to watch them scratching around or having a good dust bath. They suffer fewer diseases than commercial chickens and can follow their normal behaviour patterns with plenty of space to roam.

## what can I do?

Chickens are gregarious, so you will need to keep a small flock. Start small and increase numbers as you gain experience and confidence. Just 4-6 hens will keep a family well stocked with eggs with some left over for barter. You can buy 'point of lay' hens (about 20 weeks old) for about £5 each, or day-old chicks for £1.50 (but you won't know what sex they are). Check your local paper, or *Country Smallholding* (see 'resources'); you'll probably have to collect, so take along a large cardboard box with holes in. Some breeds are better layers than others. We've found Black Rock and Warrens (a hybrid bred originally for battery farms) to be excellent.



*Warren hens, originally bred for battery farms, seen here with a gravity-fed drinker; check it every day to make sure it's not empty.*



**Black Rock hens** scratching around outside their home-made hen-house

Healthy chickens need an outdoor run and a weatherproof hen-house of roughly 30cmx30cm per hen. You can buy a hen-house (see *Country Smallholding*) or if you're the least bit handy, you can make one. The house will need dark, private nest boxes (4 birds to one nest box), perches to roost on, a door for the hens, and a larger door for cleaning out. It must be secure from predators and shut up overnight. They can have the run of the garden, as long as they can't get at your vegetable plot in the growing season. You need to put hay in the nest boxes, and hay, straw or sawdust as bedding in the house. This should be changed every week, with the old bedding added to the compost heap.

You can feed them your food scraps, along with a couple of handfuls of grain and layers' mash or pellets (special feed with the minerals and protein chickens need to produce eggs) per day. They need a constant supply of water – from a 'drinker', which gravity-feeds water as they use it; they need small amounts of grit (to help grind their food) and oyster shells (to provide calcium for the egg shells). All this can be purchased from agricultural suppliers, or ordered online and delivered; it doesn't cost much compared to the value of the organic

free-range eggs – chicken feed, you might say. Ducks love water and they are better off with a pond rather than just a bucket; in a pond they keep the weeds down, add fertiliser and keep the edges sealed by their paddling. They don't need a nest box or perch, but do need a fox-proof shelter: 1 m<sup>2</sup> is adequate for 5 birds.

Geese get 80% of their food from grazing, so they're cheaper, but require more land (5 birds per 1/8 hectare). They don't produce many eggs but provide delicious meat are hardy and live longer than ducks or chickens; they also make good guard dogs.

If you're vegetarian, skip this paragraph: you can kill, pluck and gut birds for the table, but if you've never done it before, you should get someone with experience to show you how. After chickens have finished laying (1 or 2 years) they won't have much meat, and it will be a bit tough, but they'll make a good curry. You can breed chicks if you have a cockerel, but chickens will lay well without one, which is just as well if you have close neighbours, as cockerels can be noisy.

## resources

- [poultryclub.org](http://poultryclub.org) - Poultry Club of Great Britain: advice, shows, local groups, books & videos
- [countrysmallholding.com](http://countrysmallholding.com) 01392 888475 monthly magazine: articles on poultry, suppliers' lists and classified ads
- British Waterfowl Association: [waterfowl.org.uk](http://waterfowl.org.uk) - ducks and geese: education and conservation, events, books, breeders, shows and information leaflets
- Katie Thear, series of books on chickens, ducks and geese, Broad Leys Publishing – available from LILI
- Colin Tudge and Michael Allaby, 1977, *Home Farm*, Macmillan. Excellent resource for producing your own food; good section on poultry for beginners
- large range of poultry books available from LILI, plus courses on keeping chickens

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