



guinea fowl



what are they?

They're poultry kept for meat, eggs and feathers. They have attractive plumage and a reputation for being 'wilder' than other poultry. They're noisy, and are often kept as guard animals.

Guinea fowl originate in Africa, where they are found in a range of habitats. They prefer dry, warm, climates with a mix of cover and open space including forest, scrubland and grassland. Like chickens, they're naturally omnivorous – their diet includes seeds, berries, insects and small mammals and reptiles. Guinea fowl tend to run rather than fly, though they're adept at fluttering straight upwards and will roost in trees. They live in large flocks and roost communally. They mate for life, though a male may mate with several females if there's a shortage of males.

what are the benefits?

If you want a self-sufficient bird, guinea fowl may be the poultry for you. If allowed space to roam they'll forage much of their own food and happily roost in trees. But - they will also hide their eggs, tend to wander off, prove difficult to tame and refuse to come into their house at night.

Their meat is often likened to chicken with a slightly gamier flavour. You may be able to find a market for it with local restaurants.

Guineas lay around 100 eggs a year. Their eggs are smaller than an average chicken egg but are more strongly flavoured, which makes them particularly good for baking with.

Guineas are sometimes kept for pest control in gardens and orchards. They'll scratch less and eat fewer of your plants in the garden than a chicken would. A bonus income can be made from selling the attractive guinea feathers, used to make fishing flies and for craft projects.



A wild guinea fowl in South Africa.



Guinea fowl egg.

what can I do?

Getting started: guinea fowl are gregarious, so get least 5-6. They're happy in mixed-sex groups although, if you have more males than females, keep an eye on aggression levels in the breeding season and be prepared to get rid of surplus males. If you want fertile eggs you should have no more than 5 females per male.

It's usually best to get your fowl as hatching eggs or chicks, (known as 'keets'). Mature birds are hard to tame, or train to roost in a particular place. Guinea fowl tend to make unreliable mothers, but keets can be hatched and raised by a broody hen or turkey. Some choose to raise their guinea fowl using a broody hen and ensure there's a chicken chick in the brood. The thinking is that the guineas will be more chicken-like – i.e. lay their eggs in nest boxes and go into their house at night. If you're keeping your guineas with hens this may help integrate them into the flock and prevent bullying of chickens by guineas.

Hatching and raising keets is not hard with a little research. You'll need an incubator and heat lamp or an 'electric hen'. You'll need an indoor space for the keets until they're ready to go outside, at around 6-8 weeks depending on the weather. Keep them in an enclosed run initially to protect them from predators and stop them roaming off before they become accustomed to their home. It will also make it easier to train them to come to roost in a house in the evening.

Housing: convincing your guinea fowl to use their house may be a problem! The higher the roosting place you provide, the more likely they are to use it. Guineas will fly vertically upwards onto perches, and lower perches lower can help them reach the high ones. The house needs to be draught-proof and dry. It should have a wide entrance, or multiple entrances, or submissive birds may be reluctant to enter and will roost elsewhere. Guineas don't need nest boxes.

guinea fowl



If you want to keep your fowl fenced in, clip their wings and have fences at least 2m high. Fencing them in can encourage them to use their house. But guineas dislike being restricted and their pen should be large enough to allow them to run around and forage, and have places to shelter and hide and branches for them to perch on. Give them places to shelter in poor weather, both on and off the ground, and roosting places inaccessible to foxes e.g. tall trees.

Feeding: feed keets on turkey or game bird feed as these meet their protein requirements. Give starter crumbs until 6 weeks, then grower pellets until 10 weeks, or until slaughter for meat birds. After this the adult birds will be fine on layers pellets, supplemented with some greens. You may find that free-ranging fowl forage most of their food and only need supplemental feeding in the winter. It's possible to buy organic and/or soya-free compound feeds, but you can also mix your own feeds using ingredients such as seeds, grains and meal worms. You can choose more sustainable ingredients and save money. Your birds should have access to fresh water and grit at all times, and layers should have a source of calcium (e.g. oyster shell).

Health: they suffer less from health problems than chickens, but are susceptible to the same parasites. They need a dust bath to help control external parasites like lice and mites. Provide a box of dry soil and sand, or a covered area where they can dig their own dust bath. Add diatomaceous earth to the dust bath to help prevent parasites. If they have lice or mites, add lice powder to the dust bath - less stressful to the birds than trying to apply it yourself.

Red mite can be a problem. If you have a house for your birds the mites will live in it and attack them at night. Prevent and treat red mite by regularly cleaning the house with a pressure washer, special detergent and/or a steam cleaner. Afterwards, dust the house with diatomaceous earth or a mite powder (organic products are available). If you begin to lose the battle with red mite, maybe get a plastic house, which won't provide the same hospitable habitat for mites.

Treat for internal parasites twice a year. Birds with a large area to roam in will be less susceptible to parasites. To avoid chemical wormers, perform a faecal egg count (FEC) to check if they need to be wormed. See our site for more info.



Guinea fowl roosting in a tree.

Keeping guinea fowl with other poultry: bullying among guinea fowl can be more severe than among chickens, especially when new animals are introduced. Keeping different species together is more likely to succeed in a free-range system with plenty of space. Guinea fowl may pick on cockerels and cocks in particular, so avoiding keeping these with your flock may help, as will reducing the number of male guinea fowl.

Meat production & slaughter: slaughter at 12-14 weeks, or 20 weeks for a more flavoursome meat. They're usually butchered straight after slaughter, but, you can hang them for a few days as you would a pheasant. It's legal to slaughter at home for consumption by you and your family. See the Humane Slaughter Association for more info. To produce meat for sale, you'll need to follow hygiene regulations and have your premises inspected by Environmental Health on a regular basis. Contact the Food Standards Agency for further information.

Paperwork and regulations: register with DEFRA if you keep more than 50 birds (including other types of poultry). There are no regulations for people keeping fewer than 50 birds other than the general rules and regulations covering animal welfare; plus you can sell your eggs directly to consumers without being registered.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/guinea-fowl for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Jeannette Ferguson, *Gardening with Guineas*
- Adrian Marks, *Guinea Fowl: Owners' Guide*
- John Butler, *Keeping Guinea Fowl*
- guinea-fowl.co.uk – for guinea fowl enthusiasts
- guineas.com – Guinea Fowl International

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 220+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials. Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.