

Beginner's Guide to Chook-Keeping

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Introduction

Keeping chooks can be a rewarding activity for a household. The advantages are:

- They lay eggs. A good layer can lay over 240 eggs in a year.*
- They can be a joy for children.*
- They provide an economic way of disposing of kitchen scraps.*
- Their litter is a source of manure for composting.*

But, before you start, you need to be aware that chooks need some care and attention every day. You need to give serious consideration:

- Where are they going to live?*
- How will you feed and water them, especially when you go away on holiday?*
- How will you keep them secure from predators, principally foxes? However, neighbors are often happy to keep an eye on the chickens for you in return for some fresh eggs. Chickens can be enclosed successfully in a fox-proof set-up.*

Rules and regulations

- ! The Queensland State Government does not regulate the number of household layers you can keep. Local Government Authorities make their own rules and regulations which affect the keeping of poultry in their areas. You should contact your relevant Local Authority to find out the conditions which apply in your area.*

Getting started

*You can purchase good quality birds, bred for their **egg-laying** qualities. White birds cope best with the heat. A good way to start is to buy vaccinated point-of-lay hens. Purchase birds that have been bred by a recognised breeder. For example, 'Bond white' point-of-lay hens produced by Bond Enterprises are available in some produce stores in the S.E. Queensland area. (Note that roosters are not needed for hens to produce eggs.)*

An alternative is to buy "day-old" chicks. Children love this approach.

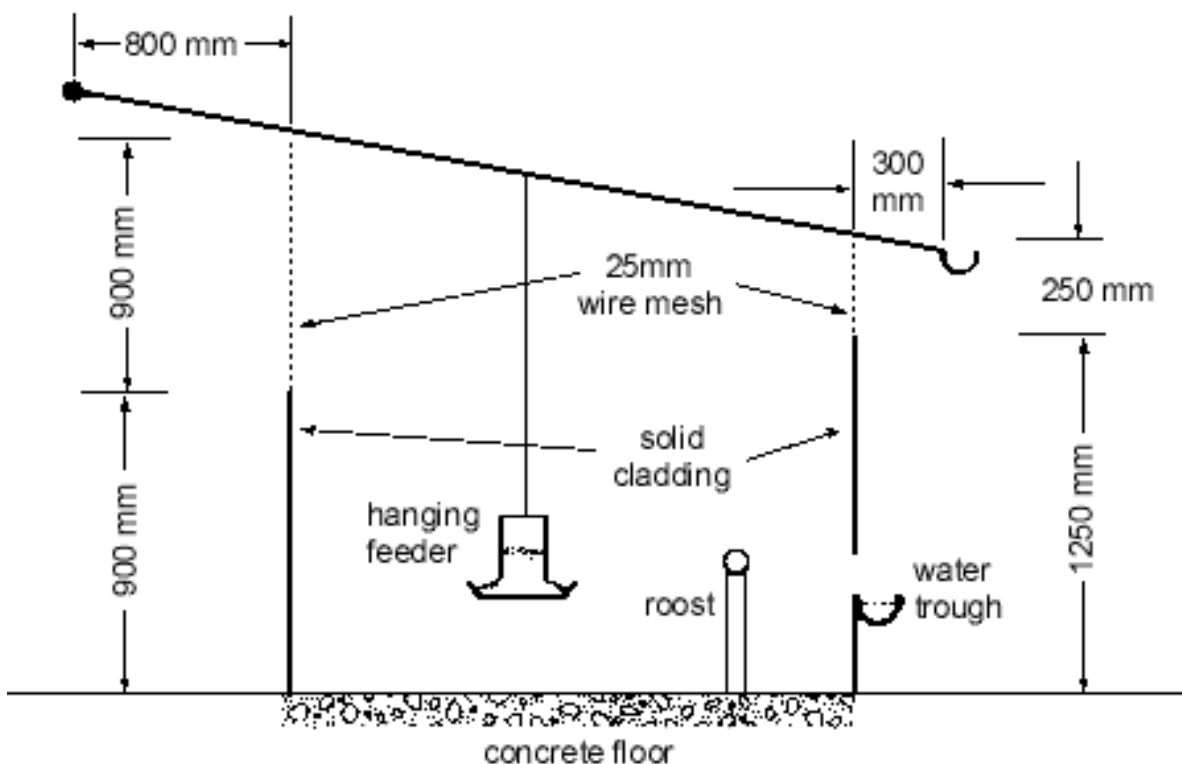
Ensure the chicks are from a reputable commercial hatchery. Most guides to chook-keeping include a section on pests and diseases. For example, *The Barastoc Chook Book*, 8th edition, 2007 (available free from **Ridley Sales and Support**, 1300 666657 or from your local Barastoc feed stockist) has a useful section on the main pests and diseases.

If you ever had a pest like stickfast-flea, or a disease like Marek's disease, you would realize that the best way of handling pests and diseases is to avoid them in the first place. You have a golden opportunity when getting started to avoid most pests and diseases. Firstly buy healthy vaccinated stock, and thence make it your objective to maintain a productive and healthy flock. With proper management, the incidence of pests and diseases can be minimized.

The Chook house/coop

A chook coop is probably the most expensive item you will need. A well-designed and built coop will protect the birds from heat, cold and rain. Good ventilation is also important. You can build your own coop. A good design for 10 laying hens is given at the NSW DPI website: Primefact 603 November 2007 --

http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/195402/small-scale-poultry-housing-layers.pdf



Cross section

This design of poultry house has the advantages:

- It is vermin-proof. It excludes foxes, rats, mice and sparrows.*
- It allows for the floor to have a deep-litter system.*

Alternatively, you can buy ready-made coops. There is a big range. If you do an internet search "chicken coops for sale", limiting the search to "pages from Australia", you get over 11,000 hits.

*Also, you can look at the latest issue of *Australasian Poultry* to get ideas.*

I bought a zincalume garden shed kit and suitably modified it.

Perches should be made from 75mm × 50mm smooth timber. One of the 50mm edges faces upwards, and is rounded at the corners to make it comfortable for the chooks' feet. Perches should be fixed 500 mm above the floor.

Nest boxes should be as dark as possible. Simply use redundant lawnmower catchers, or the boxes can easily be made from cut-down 20l liquid containers. Screw the boxes onto a firm frame of some description. I bought my two frames from op shops: an industrial trolley, and a retail display unit. Nest material can be strip-shredded paper.

Deep-litter system

Deep-litter is an excellent labor-saving system. It provides ideal conditions for poultry when properly managed. A 150 mm layer of wood shavings is placed on the floor of the shed. (Do not use treated pine shavings. Chromium bromide, used to protect the pine can poison birds.)

Keep the litter at 150 mm by topping-up with fresh material when necessary. You can do this topping-up by sprinkling confetti-shredded paper. Over time, the scratching birds and their droppings cause the litter to break down into a compost-like material.

The litter must remain dry at all times. Any that becomes wet or caked must be removed. The old litter should be cleaned out at the end of each year. It makes an excellent garden fertilizer after composting.

The Chook run.

Healthy, happy chickens need a chook run – a fenced area surrounding the chook coop. It is a good idea to have a large run. This gives you the opportunity to grow perennial plants in the run. Properly selected plants

will yield fruits, seeds and foliage that can supplement the chooks' diet.

To prevent chooks flying out of the run, it should be fenced with 1.8 m high chicken mesh. If a particular bird still flies out, clip one of its wings. A lightweight chicken-meshed gate should also be included in the fence arrangement.

You may choose to increase the security of the chook run by enclosing the top with chicken mesh. This will

- discourage wild birds from eating the chooks' food*
- stop crows stealing eggs*
- prevent foxes killing your birds.*

As an additional measure, you could think of burying the wire netting at least 20cm into the ground to stop foxes and stray dogs from digging under the fence.

Feeding chooks

*The best feed for backyard chooks is commercial layer pellets. These provide a well-balanced diet. (Contrary to popular belief, they do not contain antibiotics or hormones.) **The chooks should have full-time access to them.** They are available from produce stores in S.E. Queensland.*

There is a variety of feed pellet dispensers available for sale. Plastic hoppers like the one shown here are fine.



This one can be hung up above the floor to stop the chooks fouling it. It has little plastic bars around the feeding ring to stop the birds from scratching/billing out feed onto the floor. There is very little waste from one of these hoppers. Unfortunately, models like this one only last a few years, but have the advantage that you can see the feed level easily.

Foraging and kitchen scraps

To reduce your expenditure on feed pellets, you can supplement the birds' diet by

- encouraging them to forage for their own feed whenever possible*
- feeding them kitchen scraps/lawn clippings, etc.*

You may be able to grow feed-supplying perennial plants in your chook

pen. This includes many wattles. Try a mulberry tree - also great shade. Note that some chook food trees are big, such as Hill's fig (*Ficus hillii*). Smaller perennials include Dwarf koa (*Desmanthus virgatus*) -- a small shrub. The species named in this paragraph are generally very productive once they are established.



As a guide as to what scraps you can put out for the chooks: a rule of thumb: if we can eat it, they can eat it. Fresh scraps are best. (The Chook Book goes further "Care should be taken to avoid ... mouldy or 'off' feed such as old damp stored grain or mouldy bread. These may contain toxins ...".) Feed the scraps in a flat-bottomed dish. At the end of each day, collect any uneaten scraps and dispose of them as you would normally dispose of any unwanted scraps. (Mine go into the worm farm.)

In the context of this supplementary feed (forage and scraps), it is important that **at all times, the chooks have access to the layer-pellets.** (Numerous studies have shown that chooks, if offered a choice of feed, have the ability to select between various ingredients in accordance with their individual needs. In other words, it is up to you to provide them with that choice, by providing backup layer pellets. Do this, and you will not have too much worry about by giving them supplementary feed which might do them harm. The chooks will simply leave the harmful feed alone.)

Feeding calcium for egg-shells

You need to ensure that you provide your chooks with the calcium (Ca) they need to lay eggs with strong shells. Layer pellets manufactured by two of the main supplying companies in S.E. Queensland have Ca at levels -- Riverina red label layer pellets, minimum Ca=3.5%. (The actual level of

calcium can be typically from 3.5 to 4.5%.)

-- Barastoc golden yolk layer pellets, minimum Ca = 3.8%.

These levels are sufficient to provide for your chooks' needs if they are fed pellets alone. However, when other sources of feed form a significant portion of the birds' diet, additional Ca must be supplied to them in the form of shell-grit or hard marble chips.

Crusher dust/grit

Crusher dust/grit also needs to be supplied to the chooks. This helps them grind down their food. (Hens do not have teeth. Or at least, I believe they are rare!) The footpaths in my chook pen are surfaced with crusher dust, so my girls have a plentiful supply.

Water

It is emphasized that the chooks should always have cool clean water available. The Chook Book covers this important matter in more detail, including the matter of saline water.

There is a number of water container types available. Galvanized containers are strong and long-lasting. Plastic can break easily but it is useful to be able to see how much water is left in a container.



Management aspects

It is best to collect eggs promptly, and store them in a refrigerator. As a rule of thumb, as much freshness is lost during three days at room temperature than is lost during three weeks in the refrigerator.

For maximum production, you should replace your flock when birds reach 75 weeks of age. Beyond this age, the rate of lay is much lower, and egg shell and albumen quality will be poorer.

Happy chook-keeping!