



Top 10 tips for keeping chickens

(Written for NAF, 2009. Appeared in Practical Poultry Magazine)

1. Buying healthy birds

Always buy your birds from a reputable breeder or supplier, check that the bird is clean, lively and healthy. Check it for signs of lice and soil around the vent. Be prepared to walk away if the supplier has over-crowded or dirty pens.

2. Good quality housing

Your housing will need to be easy to clean, dry, secure and the right size for the number of hens you intend to keep. If you think that you will end up with a lot more chooks in the future, then buy bigger housing at the outset. Allow at least a foot of roosting space per bird, and check that the interior is easy to access so that you can clean it easily.

3. Siting of housing

Think about where you are going to site the coop; most people like to be able to see their chickens from the house, but bear in mind that you will want them to have a sheltered spot, which is out of direct sun, rain and sheltered from the worst of the wind. You might also want to have the housing sitting inside a large, secure run so that it is totally safe from predators. This really depends on whether you have active foxes in your area.

4. Nutrition

A well balanced and fresh diet is important for the health of your flock, and also for the quality of the eggs that they produce. Choose good quality pellets or mash and be sure to buy the correct size of sack so that you are able to use it before the use by date on the pack. Keep their water topped up regularly, and add a good quality poultry tonic like Life-Guard* to the water once a week in the summer and every day in the winter or when they are moulting; this will ensure that the birds are kept in tip top condition. It isn't imperative to add any supplements to their feed, but my flock of pure breed bantams and miniatures seem to benefit from a little of the following mixed into their pellets: Garlic powder*, seaweed*, limestone flour* and Bokashi Bran. They always look healthy and glossy, laying fantastic, healthy eggs with thick creamy yolks.

5. Inspection of your hens

It's important to get your hens used to being checked regularly and for you to be confident in handling them. When you first get your hens and you're both slightly nervous, I recommend that you take them out of the coop at night when they are roosting and much more docile, that way you can both get used to inspection time without the hens getting nervous and flappy. It is important to check each hen

over at least every two weeks so that you get to know each bird well and will spot whether anything is amiss with them. Check for lice or mites in their feathers, injuries and weight loss. I demonstrate all of these and cover other ailments on my poultry keeping courses run for Cotswold Chickens. Your flock will need a regular preventative treatment for worms and lice (just like with cats and dogs) to keep them in top condition.

6. Cleaning the housing, run and equipment

The housing will need to be cleaned regularly, the frequency depends largely on the number of birds using the coop, but a good clean at least once a week is in order. The coop will need airing, spraying with a good disinfectant/anti-lice treatment like Poultry Shield and clean bedding putting down. I recommend Aubiose, shredded hemp bedding, which stays clean and dry, and is also brilliant to compost after use. The run will need to be dug over roughly every 6 weeks, with garden lime being sprinkled on the soil before laying down fresh Aubiose.

7. Buying and introducing new stock

The 'Chicken Rule of Arithmetic' denotes that you will always end up adding to your flock; chickens are addictive! It is not advisable to introduce just one hen as they will be bullied; expect to buy two at least, and use some extra housing (a spare rabbit hutch is ideal) to house them for a week or so while you quarantine them, inspect/treat them for lice and worms and introduce them slowly to your existing birds.

8. Wing clipping

While your hens are still new to you, it is advisable to clip their wings to stop them flying off and decimating your neighbours' vegetable patches. Always clip just the one wing, trimming the primary flight feathers back about 5cm to stop them getting any height.

9. Moulting

You hens will moult and lose feathers each autumn, in preparation for growing their lovely new winter collection. They will usually either stop laying or lay less eggs at this time as they need all those nutrients to grow their new clothes. I usually augment their feed with extra protein at this time (meal worms or chick crumbs are good) and put Life-Guard Tonic* in the water every day. I have found that this helps them to recover quicker and they soon start laying again.

10. Eggs and freshness

There's nothing as wonderful as that first egg, well... apart from eating it that is! The old adage of getting out of your hen what you put in is so true; if you feed your hens good quality feed, allow them to free range to graze for greenery and insects, provide sound housing, then they will reward you with the best eggs you have ever tasted. It is important to collect the eggs from the nest on a regular basis to discourage broodiness and egg-eating. Your eggs don't need to be kept in the

fridge, just in a cool place and stored pointy end down. Mine never last long enough to risk going out of date!

*All NAF products