

URBAN CHICKENS

HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR OWN BACKYARD FLOCK.

Proper care for a living being costs money, so make sure you allocate funds for the priorities.

By Margaret Littman

Specific numbers are hard to come by, given the way chickens are permitted and monitored, but Andy G. Schneider, the radio host, public speaker and author known as “The Chicken Whisperer,” says the last decade is when the city and suburban backyard chicken movement really started to catch on.

The reasons people decide to keep chickens are as varied as their flocks, but a survey published in *Poultry Science* in 2014 found that keeping them as pets and having them as a garden partner—essentially composting food waste and producing fertilizer—were top motivators.

Other reasons chicken-owners cite for joining the trend include insect control, a steady supply of fresh eggs, barnyard entertainment and being part of a movement of knowing where your food comes from.

While all those rewards are legit, chicken-tending takes work, too. Before you bring those cute, fluffy chicks home, take these 10 steps:

1. Protect their (and your) health. Above all else, implementing processes that prevent disease is essential for both human health and that of your flock. Some diseases (such as Marek’s Disease, a herpes virus) are with your flock forever once you have them, says Patricia Wakenell, DVM, PhD, a professor of avian diagnostics at Purdue University. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported more than 45 cases of *salmonella* outbreak nationwide in the first half of 2018, all relating to backyard chickens. Some veterinarians may

recommend vaccinations for Marek’s Disease and *salmonella*, depending on the specifics of your flock and how much your chickens interact with other animals.

2. Practice good hygiene.

Vaccinations aside, disease prevention starts with keeping coops clean, washing your hands after touching a chicken, and preventing children under the age of five from handling the birds at all. The CDC suggests folks don’t hug their chickens. In Illinois, Helen Sheyka has a group of fellow chicken-owners who often take turns visiting each other’s flocks. They are careful not to wear their barn boots when touring someone else’s coop, in order to prevent disease transfer.

3. Make the investment.

Proper care for a living being costs money, so make sure you allocate funds for the priorities. “I see people who have no problem spending money on the fun things, like a sweater or a cool \$2,000 coop, but not a \$40 vet visit,” says Schneider.

4. Clean your yard.

Chickens are famous for eating whatever they can get their beaks on. That’s why lots of gardeners (and others) love them: Food waste becomes chicken

Local Regulations

Your city or suburb may have regulations on the number of chickens a resident may own, and many municipalities limit urban flocks to hens, not roosters. If an HOA (homeowners association) governs your property, there may be additional regulations.

Andy Schneider, “The Chicken Whisperer,” recommends starting at municode.com, which has a library of different municipal ordinances. You can also look on your city’s website or check with the city clerk’s office to find out your local codes.



Helen Sheyka with her flock in the Chicago suburbs.



To find a poultry veterinarian: American Association of Avian Pathologists www.aaap.info

feed. But the downside, Wakenell says, is that “these birds will go after anything.” If you have a pool, you need to make sure pool chemicals are nowhere to be found. Lawn chemicals, paint cans—whatever is non-edible and potentially toxic—needs to be locked away from where chickens roam. “Evaluate the home just like you have a toddler,” Wakenell adds.

5. Secure your yard.

The leading cause of death among backyard chickens is from a predator, Schneider says. But you can protect your birds. “There is going to be some predator loss, but there is entirely too much. And that is because people don’t spend money on a predator-proof coop,” says Schneider. When a raccoon gets in, for example, focus on the coop, not the predator, he advises. “You’re never going to get rid of all raccoons.” To make sure your coop is secure: Drop fences 2 feet below ground to stop animals that burrow; have a roof to prevent hawks from swooping in; and let your own dog outside at a different time than your chickens.

6. Know your numbers.

In many municipalities, there’s a legal limit to how many hens you can own in an urban environment (6 is a common number, but check with your local government). Sheyka has 35 chickens, 4 of which are roosters, but she lives on a farm with a barn and plenty of room. There’s no risk of her flock annoying her neighbors.

7. Consult the weather.

Sheyka lives in Illinois, where winter can be harsh. “In this area, the best time to raise newborn chicks is in the early spring when the weather warms up,” she says. “You don’t want to hatch chicks too late in the year, or they’ll get cold when the cold weather sets in.” Your local feed and seed store can help you sort out the right timetable for raising chicks in your climate.

8. Consider the time commitment.

Chickens require daily care. Depending on your coop set-up and your desire to allow chickens to roam freely, someone will need to let them out in the morning and put them in at night. While chickens will move inside on their own as it gets dark, those entrances and exits need to be secured so that predators can’t get inside.

9. Take steps to reduce pecking.

You’ll need to set up a coop with enough perches for your flock to roost without getting into

pecking issues. Whenever Judy Wright, a Nashville gardener and author of the judyschickens.org blog, has to replace chickens in her flock, she replaces them in pairs to reduce issues with pecking.

10. Learn egg recipes.

Depending on how many chickens you have and the age and health of your hens, you can expect a certain number of eggs, which you’ll need to collect and do something with. Wright gets about 3 eggs per day from her flock of 5 or 6. Sheyka gets 8 to 10 eggs per day. That’s a lot of omelets!



Keeping your flock healthy is an essential part of urban chicken farming.

Finding a Veterinarian Who Talks Turkey

Depending on where you live, it can be hard to find a veterinarian who sees poultry patients. Patricia Wakenell, DVM, PhD, professor of avian diagnostics at Purdue University, concedes that it can be tough to find a poultry veterinarian (which is why she is working on helping to train more), but she strongly recommends that backyard flock owners make an effort to locate one.

A veterinarian can vaccinate chicks and help reduce the spread of disease. Wakenell recommends looking at the website for the American Association of Avian Pathologists, www.aaap.info, for local suggestions. Your state diagnostic lab may be able to help as well.

Some chicken owners learn to do basic vaccinations on their own. But you need to know your own limits. “When one of our hens developed bumblefoot, we found a vet to treat her—neither of us was willing to lance an infection,” says Alisa Huntsman, a master gardener, pastry chef and author who has a backyard flock in Nashville.

If you come up empty-handed, Wakenell recommends taking an annual fecal sample (it can be a pooled sample from the coop floor) to any veterinarian for a standard fecal float to test for coccidiosis and other parasites. Knowing that your flock is healthy is an essential part of urban chicken farming.