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Preparing to Raise Chickens

Spring is here and you may have heard the sound of chicks peeping the last time you were at the feed store. You may even be thinking about getting a few chicks yourself. Before going out and purchasing chicks there are a few questions you should first consider. Questions to consider before venturing into raising chickens include: Are there any town or city ordinances that restrict raising poultry where you live? Do you have the time to care for chickens and who will take care of the chickens when you go out of town? If you want your flock to be a source of income, is there a local market for eggs or chickens? If you will be raising chickens for meat, is there a local processor or are you able to process the chickens yourself?

After considering the previous questions, next, you will need to decide what breed of chickens you are going to raise. Different breeds of chickens have been selectively bred for specific purposes and traits. Meat breeds have been bred to have increased meat yield and improved feed conversion rates. However, they usually do not lay enough eggs to justify keeping as laying hens. Similarly, breeds that have been selectively bred to be layers, have been bred for increased egg production, smaller frame size, and will not grow as fast as breeds that have been developed for meat production. If you are interested in raising chickens for egg and meat production there are dual purpose breeds that can be raised for both egg and meat production.

Once you have decided what type of chickens you want to raise, the next step is making sure you have adequate housing for the chickens. Having a coop that will provide protection from heat, cold, inclement weather, and predators is very important. A dry, draft-free coop with ventilation is necessary to help ensure the health of the chickens. In the summer, ventilation provides a way to keep the interior temperature at a comfortable level. Ventilation in the winter is also necessary, to provide fresh air to the house, and reduce moisture accumulation. If you plan on having just a few chickens and only need a small coop, windows or vents on one or two sides of the coop will usually provide plenty of ventilation. To determine how big of a coop you will need first decide how many chickens you will have. Laying hens will need one and a half to two square feet per bird inside the coop and broilers (chickens raised for meat production) will need one square foot per chicken. If you do not plan on letting the chickens free range in the yard, a pen or run will also need to be built.

When you bring your chicks home, they may need an extra source of heat, depending on their age and the outside temperature. For the first week, the young chicks should be kept at about 90 to 95° F. The temperature may be lowered by 5° F each week until a temperature of 70° F is reached. After, an additional heat source may be necessary only if the outside temperature is

extremely cold. A heat lamp can provide additional heat if needed. The chicks' behavior is the best indicator of appropriate temperature. Chicks scattered out giving a contented sound are comfortable. Huddled, peeping chicks need additional heat, while those panting with their mouths open need cooler temperatures. It is also important ensure chicks have access to feed and fresh water when they are brought home.

Doing your homework, selecting the right breed of chicken for your goals, and having a coop ready for the chicks before you bring them home will help you have a successful start to raising chickens.

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