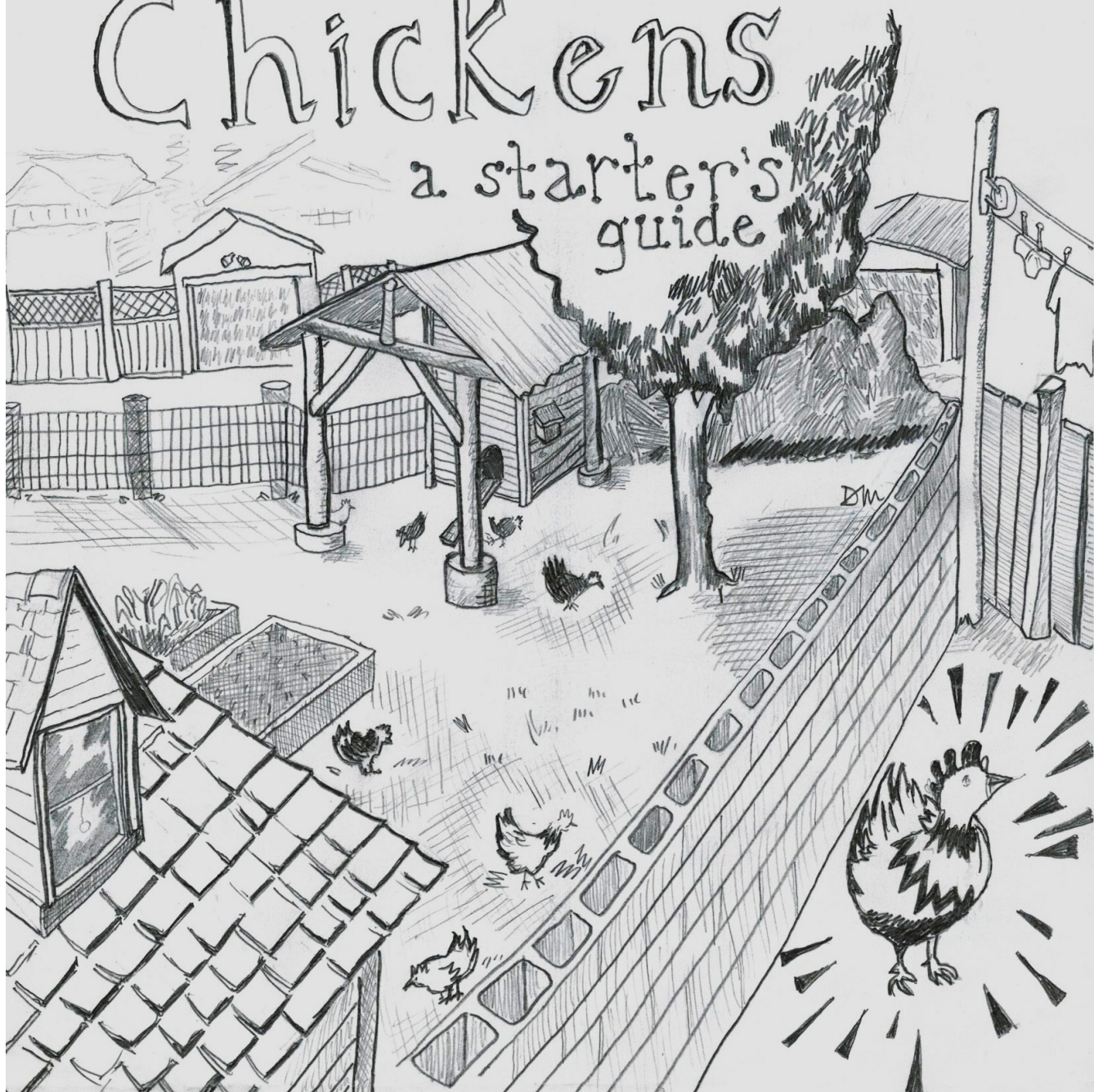


# BACKYARD Chickens

a starter's  
guide



# Backyard Chicken Guide

Duncan Martin from

www.DailyEggs.com – Locally made chicken coops 604-329-3863

Port Hardy Edition.

## Urban Agriculture



- Port Hardy's OCP seeks to provide residents with the opportunity, knowledge and resources to produce local food

### **Proposed Change(s)**

- Other local governments allow:
  - 4 hens in R-1 and R-2 type zones (consider 2-4 tiered structure)
  - Coop must be in a fully fenced rear or side yard at a min. of 1.5m from a lot line and a min. of 3.0m from a dwelling unit
  - Coop must be no more than 9.2m<sup>2</sup> in area and no higher than 2.0m at grade
  - 1.8m fence or vegetative screening required
  - Animal Control Bylaw regulates standards for and care of backyard chickens



**URBAN**  
systems

## **What do chickens eat?**

**Chicken feed** – This is often in the form of nutrient-balanced mash or mash pellets. This is \$15–25 per 20 kg bag depending on whether you get conventional or organic.

Laying hens typically eat mash pellets with 16% protein. This is the most common and productive formula. If you have chicks, make sure to get chick feed, which is lower in calcium. Feed should always stay dry or it will get moldy. A hanging feeder is the best way to keep things clean.

Chickens self-regulate how much they eat, so keep a constant supply of feed and they will decide when they've had enough.



**Chicken scratch** – This is another name for whole grains and legumes that have been dried and cracked. Chickens love to peck at scratch if you scatter a handful of it. It's not necessary, but your chickens will appreciate it and it's a good way to summon them. It will sprout too, which is even healthier. Just spread it on a tray and keep it damp for a few days.

**Table scraps** – Chickens will typically pick and choose what they want to eat, and they leave the rest. Don't worry too much about what is and isn't good to feed them. You'll figure it out pretty quickly. Just avoid coffee, avocados, and be careful of teabags with staples in them. The internet has plenty of extensive DOs and DON'Ts lists if you want to be really careful.

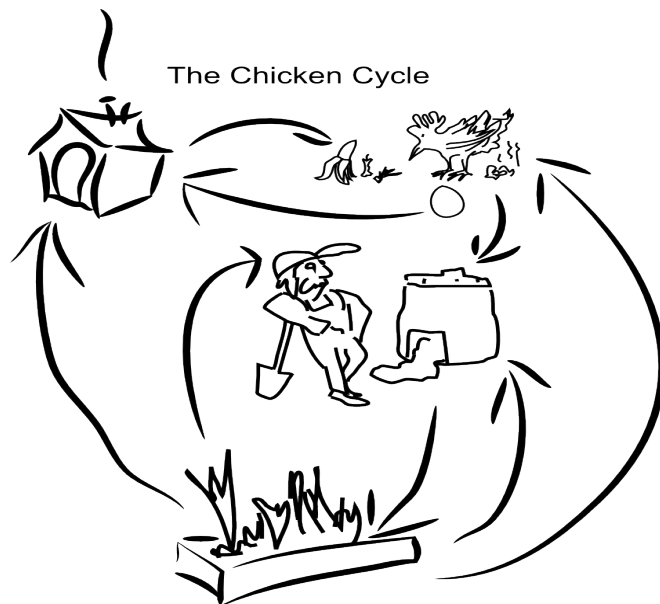
**Weeds, slugs, bugs** – Anything you pull out of the garden can go right into the coop. Again, the chickens will decide what they like. The rest will become bedding or just rot away. Try planting chunks of comfrey root near the coop. If they have a chance to grow, their leaves will provide an endless snack source for your hens. But be careful – comfrey is vigorous. Any piece of root will sprout. If you put stumps in your coop, you can always roll them over to reveal new critters. Some people will even grow their own grubs (mealworms).

**Oyster shell, crushed eggshell** – These provide added calcium and are rarely needed if you are providing fortified feed, but if your eggs' shells are looking weak, it can't hurt to give the hens a supplement. If you use eggshells, let them dry out or bake them and then crush them.



**Grit** – Hens have a gizzard instead of teeth. As they eat small stones, chickens collect them in the gizzard, which grinds their food. After a while the stones wear down and pass through. As long as there is some coarse gravel around, chickens will get enough grit. This is available for cheap, however, at many feed stores.

**Water** – Keep it clean and always available. I recommend 2 tablespoons of unpasteurized apple cider vinegar per gallon of water to ward off parasites and to help with digestion.



**Feed , Chickens, and Supply Stores .**

### **Vancouver Island**

**Buckerfield's in Parksville** – reliable source

**Alex's Little Critters in P. Hardy** – ask about stocking feed

**True Value in P. Hardy** – ask about stocking feed

**Dunlop's Home Hardware in P. Hardy** – ask about stocking feed

**Robin's Pet Supplies in P. McNeill** – they will special order items

**Craigslist/Kijiji.** Believe it or not, a search on Craigslist brings up many chickens for sale, usually by hobby farmers

### **(Lower Mainland)**

**Fraser Valley Poultry Fanciers' Association Breeders Directory**– (they will send you a copy for a small fee. Also often available at Otter Co-op Locations) <http://www.fvpfa.org/Directory.html>

**Pepinbrook Farm** in Abbotsford – Dawn raises healthy, beautiful birds and you can meet Khloe and Mr. Valdez (the donkeys) as well as horses, llamas and whatever else is wandering about. On Facebook, by appointment: <https://www.facebook.com/PepinbrookFarm>

**Beau Peep Farms** in Chilliwack – Great source for hatchlings, with many heritage breeds as well as common layers. [Beaupeepfarms.com](http://Beaupeepfarms.com). 604-791-FOWL(3695)

**Fraser Valley Auction.** (all kinds of farm animals) at 21801-56th Ave. Langley, BC V2Y 2M9. Open on weekends

**Grade Eh Farms.** Small Delta farm specializing in rare and heritage breeds for hobby and farms. Focusing on pampered, pastured, poultry preservation. Prices for chicks, chickens, and eggs available online and by request. [Gradeehfarms.ca](http://Gradeehfarms.ca)

### **FAQ:**

#### ***Will hens lay eggs without a rooster?***

Like many animals, female chickens produce eggs whether or not a male fertilizes them.

#### ***How often do chickens lay eggs?***

A healthy productive hen will lay about 3-6 eggs per week. This is sometimes interrupted by various natural pauses such as broodiness (a hormonal mothering instinct that can set in for a few weeks), molting (renewing feathers), or just being under the weather. Winter production is bolstered by having a light in order to extend the daylight. Some breeds lay a few more eggs per week than others, so don't hold them to any hard expectations.

#### ***How long do hens lay?***

Hens will lay eggs from about 6 months to 4 years of age. This is approximate and can vary from bird to bird. As they get older, hens will produce fewer – but larger – eggs.

#### ***What should I consider when buying hens?***

Do some research on the breed, their laying capacity, weather hardiness, temperament, etc.

McMurray Hatchery's website & [Backyardchickens.com](http://Backyardchickens.com) have fairly comprehensive online guides to chicken breeds.

When buying from a stranger, make sure you can take them at their word, and that you're not getting an old or sick hen. Do a physical inspection for mites or lice, and look at the legs/feet to see if they are healthy and smooth (like chicken feet in the meat aisle), *not* dry and scaly. A clipped beak means

that the hen was hatched for caged laying purposes. This hampers their ability to peck around in the dirt.

A new hen may take some time to adjust to her new environment before she lays. Usually a bright comb and wattle signify a hen who is ready to lay eggs.

### ***What do I do if I have to go away for a few days?***

It is important to make sure your hens have food and clean water, and you'll generally want to collect eggs daily. This makes for a perfect neighborly agreement. They tend the hens and get fresh eggs.

If you are away for a long period, you can disassemble the coop and move it to a friend's backyard.

I sometimes leave my hens for 3 days with food and water and they're perfectly happy.

### ***What if my chicken gets sick?***

This is a question all pet owners must deal with from time to time. Many afflictions can be diagnosed and treated with a little research. Books such as The Chicken Health Handbook are helpful, as well as this poop-diagnosis site: <http://chat.allotment.org.uk/index.php?topic=17568.0>.

Sometimes it's as simple as giving your flock a poultry de-wormer available at feed stores, however sometimes culling a bird is necessary.

If you are uneasy about doing your own diagnosis or treatment, most vets can treat chickens. This will almost always be more expensive than replacing them, but sometimes flock medication can be necessary in the case of spreadable disease, and a vet will be well-equipped to suggest a course of action.

### ***What Happens at the End of a Chicken's Life?***

Not every chicken owner sees their birds the same way. Some will want new birds each year for maximum egg production. Some will keep them on payroll until they stop completely. Others still will keep their birds as pets after their laying days are up. The older a chicken gets, however, the more prone she is to any number of health problems –respiratory trouble, becoming eggbound, muscle problems etc. You may opt instead to spare them the pain – and reduce the risk to other birds – by culling them early. This also means they will be fine for eating.

If you decide it's time to end your chicken's life, make sure you are permitted to carry this out where you live. Alternatively, you can have your hen put down by the vet for \$20-\$40, but it will not be edible and you may need to dispose of it separately.

Don't name your hens if you think you might slaughter them eventually. This makes it much harder. Slaughter is done by snapping the chicken's neck (easiest method for humane slaughter) or very quickly cutting off its head with a sharp knife. The chicken will have muscle spasms for a minute or so, but it will die instantly. Rules on disposal of dead animals varies by city.

From the BCSPCA:

Acceptable methods of on-site humane euthanasia are:

- \_ Cervical (neck) dislocation, ensuring that the operator has adequate training and strength to ensure fast and effective dislocation of the neck;
- \_ Concussive force using a suitable captive bolt gun;
- \_ Hand-held electrical stunning followed immediately by severing of the carotid arteries;
- \_ Controlled atmosphere stunning with an inert gas, such as argon or nitrogen, alone or as a mixture or mixed with no more than 30% CO<sub>2</sub> by volume (vehicle exhaust is not an acceptable method of euthanasia);
- \_ Intravenous injection of T61 by trained farm staff, providing carcasses are disposed of safely and in accordance with any regulatory requirements.

### ***What are some good chicken resources?***

1. Books: The Chicken Health Handbook and City Chicks are two good books, among many, for new and experienced chicken keepers alike
2. [Backyardchickens.com](http://Backyardchickens.com) is a wealth of chicken knowledge. It has “official” info and participatory forums. Just make sure that the advice given by others is relevant to your environment.

### **Common Types of Chicken Enclosures (not mutually exclusive).**

**“Doghouse” Coop.** Variations include the “Kids-have-grown-up-playhouse-coop” and the “area-under-the-back-stairs” coop

Pros: Already built, often watertight and sturdy

Cons: Can be difficult to clean, may not be in the best location/not moveable. Can be difficult to include predator-protected run (on all sides)

**Garage apartment.** Put up a wall inside an unused part of your garage or shed and make a small side door

Pros: Easy modification, walk-in for easy cleaning, weathertight, convenient food storage and power

access

Cons: Improper setup can lead to pests in garage. Loss of garage space

**Chicken tractor:** A moveable chicken run that allows birds to explore new ground each day. Many designs feature wheels on one end for easy moving. Other designs are fitted to raised garden beds for rotation during fallow periods.

Pros: Chickens graze on free grubs and grass shoots. Egg quality improves with natural diet. Grass and/or garden receives fertilizer from chicken manure.

Cons: ground-level predator protection is compromised due to mobility. Small yards do not have time to regenerate during rotation. Roofing, nesting areas, etc. all add weight to chicken tractor and make moving it difficult.

\*\*consider a tractor as an add-on to an established coop with proper predator protection and sleeping/laying accommodations.

**Alleyway special:** The coop you make from all those great free pallets, barrels, oven racks, and discarded Ikea dressers in the back lane.

Pros: Potential money savings, diverting matter from the waste stream, recycled materials lead to creative re-uses and interesting features.

**Ready-to-go kit:** The Vancooper, the Egloo, the Kippenhouse, and many available from China

Pros: Little assembly required, minimal headaches, good predator protection (varies), time-tested designs. These coops also can be moved in case your landlord sells and you have to move.

Cons: Expect to pay for the convenience. Don't forget about shipping charges and US exchange rate. Some internet coops look much bigger and sturdier than they are – beware

**Vanity Project:** The coop that looks like your house, the coop that has every bell and whistle, the coop that you built because you saw a buzzfeed list of chicken mansions and had to have one.

Pros: When you finish it, it will be the best coop in the world.

Cons: You may never finish it. If you do, it may require a home equity loan. Elaborate coops often have many places for mites to hide. Sometimes simple is better.

**Greenhouse Coop:** Greenhouse to the south, chicken coop to the north. The chickens warm keep things warm at night, while exchanging CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> with the plants across the wall.



## Building a coop.

1. Follow the bylaw whenever possible. Most municipalities enforce on a complain-based basis, so it doesn't hurt to be compliant.
2. Size: A rule of thumb is to give hens at least 10 square feet of ground per bird. Some of this should be covered from rain – especially where they eat. Inside their coop (as opposed to their run), they generally need 1.5 square feet per bird.
3. Consider your schedule and likely pattern of maintenance. Can the kids reach it if they need to clean it? Will you be letting them out in the morning and in the evening, or giving them full reign over the whole pen and house at all times? Where will you store your feed? Is there a compost nearby?
4. Use a material and a design that considers our wet weather. Large roof overhangs, cedar wood, protective stain....
5. The chickens **must have a perch** – something simulating a tree branch that they can all stand on to sleep. Allow about 10" per bird.
6. Use 1/2" hardware cloth, **not chicken wire**, on all outdoor enclosures. Chicken wire is weak and has rat-sized openings. It is only good for keeping *chickens in*. Bury some hardware cloth into the ground to discourage burrowing pests and predators – Or build a coop that sits atop a raised garden bed. Make two beds and move it back and forth year-to-year. The wood on the garden bed offers good moisture protection and prolongs the life of your coop.
7. Make it **easy to clean**. This means access and materials. Bedding (hay, straw etc.) on linoleum makes for quick cleaning. You will find concentrated poop underneath the perch. Consider a removable board or strips of cardboard that you can periodically just throw in the compost. Simpler coops are easier to clean. The fewer seams, cracks, and features, the fewer places for mites to hide.
8. At least four chickens can share one nest box. This just needs to be about 12"x12"x12" and slightly shut off from the rest of the coop. If there's no nest box, the chickens will make do – it just might not be the easiest place to gain access.
9. Raccoons are smart; don't underestimate their dexterity – make sure that your doors have latches or locks that a raccoon can't open. **Rats will eat chicken feed if they can reach it.** Clean up any spills when filling a feeder and keep your feed in a rat-proof container like a metal trash can.
8. Ventilation – make vents in the coop that allow air flow without uncomfortable cross-drafts. Humidity is worse than cold, so don't seal them in the coop just because it's -10 outside. If you use hot water to heat the coop on an especially cold night, make sure it's in a closed container

so it doesn't add moisture to the air.

9. Light – Chickens lay best with about 14–16 hours of light per day, so buy a cheap light timer and stick a bulb or Christmas lights in the coop for the winter months. This also provides some heat, although most chicken breeds are hardy enough to not need heat.
10. Heat – I don't recommend heating the coop, as chickens are able to withstand freezing temperatures, especially with the ocean providing some temperature regulation. If providing heat to help during an especially cold snap, make sure it is safe. Methods include heat mates, heat lights, jugs of hot tap water, or reptile cage heaters.
11. Feeders and water should be outside the coop so the chickens stay outdoors during the day. If temperatures fall, make sure chickens still have liquid water. They will eat snow in a pinch. Store feed in pest-proof containers.
12. A dust bath is helpful for dealing with mites and lice. Chickens enjoy a sandy area (you may include some diatomaceous earth) where they can roll around. The small particles slice the skeletons of the pesky insects.
13. Bedding – There are various options for bedding and ground cover. I prefer pine shavings (not sawdust though).

In the coop: pine shavings, straw, hay, cardboard, pond liner, even newspaper

In the run: pine shavings, straw (cut short if possible), gravel, sand, hay, *dry* grass clippings

Carbon-based materials turn into great compost

Hay has grains, which chickens love, but can also cause weeds in the compost and it gets moldy if not stored dry.

Deep litter or deep bedding method involves less frequent cleaning and instead allows manure and bedding to compost when layered in place.