

Chapter 1

The Joy of Chickens

In This Chapter

- ▶ Checking on local legal restrictions for chicken-keeping
 - ▶ Considering the commitments you need to make
 - ▶ Counting the costs
 - ▶ Being mindful of your neighbors
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We love chickens and we hope you're reading this book because you love chickens, too. So we're going to discuss a very basic issue in this chapter: whether you should actually keep chickens. Chickens make colorful, moving lawn ornaments, and they can even furnish your breakfast. But they do take some attention, some expense, and some good information to care for properly.

So consider this chapter as chicken family planning. If you read the information in this chapter and still believe you're ready to start your chicken family, then you have the whole rest of the book to get all the information you need to begin the adventure.

First Things First: Dealing with the Legal Issues

You may be surprised one day to notice chickens in your suburban neighborhood. Many urban and suburban communities are bowing to public pressure and allowing chicken-keeping. But not every community is so enlightened. The person keeping chickens in your neighborhood may be flouting the law. So before you rush out and buy some chickens, too, check whether there are any laws preventing you from legally keeping chickens.

Almost all property is classified into zoning areas (in some very undeveloped areas, there may be no zoning). Each type of zoning has laws that state what can and cannot be done to property in that zone. This is a way to regulate growth of a community and keep property use in an area similar.

Zoning classification is the job of local governments. Each local governmental unit then assigns laws governing property use within each zone. These laws vary from community to community, but laws and ordinances can regulate what type and how many animals can be kept, what structures and fences can be built, whether a home business can operate, and many other things.

The good news, though, is that many cities are giving in to the pressure from citizens who want to keep a few chickens for eggs or pets and allowing poultry-keeping — in most places a person who wants to use his or her property in a way that's prohibited by the zoning can ask for a zoning variance. Zoning classification can also change if several property owners request the change and it is approved. The high population of emigrants in some cities who are used to keeping a few chickens in small quarters has also contributed to the relaxation of some rules.

Knowing what info you need

To know whether you can legally keep chickens, first you need to know what the zoning of your property is. Then you need to know whether any special regulations in that zoning district affect either chicken-keeping or building chicken housing.

Some common zoning areas are agricultural, residential, and business. There may be subcategories such as “single-family” residential or “suburban farms.” Here's what those categories generally mean for you:

- ✓ **If the zoning is listed as agricultural**, you can probably raise chickens without a problem. With this type of zoning you'll probably find a notice about the Right to Farm bill on your paperwork also. The Right to Farm bill states that any recognized, legal methods of farming can exist or begin at any time in that zone.
- ✓ **If the zoning is listed as residential, residential/agriculture, or some other type of zoning, or if you rent or lease your home**, you'll need to determine just what is allowed. Because these zoning areas can have different rules across the United States, you're going to have to check with local officials to find out what that zoning allows you to do. And your landlord may have restrictions in the lease against pets or livestock, so read your lease or talk to your landlord.



If you have lived in your home for several years and have never raised livestock or chickens, you may want to check the zoning with your township because zoning can change over time.

When you have found your zoning, you can ask your government officials what laws there are regarding keeping animals and erecting sheds or other

kinds of animal housing in your zone. There are two types of laws and ordinances that you need to be concerned about before you begin to raise chickens:

✓ **Laws concerning the ownership of animals at your home location:**

There may be restrictions on the number of birds, the sex of birds, and where on the property chicken coops can be located. In some areas, the amount of property one has and your closeness to neighbors may determine whether you can keep birds and, if so, how many. Your neighbor may own five acres and be allowed to keep chickens, but on your two-acre lot they may be prohibited. You may be allowed to keep so many pets per acre, including chickens. You may need to get written permission from neighbors. Many other rules can apply.

✓ **Laws that restrict the types of housing or pens you can construct:** Will you need a permit to build a chicken coop? Will it need to be inspected?

Finding the info

Just because others in your neighborhood have chickens doesn't mean that it's legal for you to have them. They may have had them before a zoning change (people who have animals at the time zoning is changed are generally allowed to keep them), they may have a variance, or they may be illegally keeping chickens.

Not only do you need to find out what *you* are allowed to do chicken-wise, but you also need to make sure that you get that information from the right people. If you recently purchased your home, your deed and your sales agreement should have your zoning listed on them. If you can't find a record of how your property is zoned, go to your city, village, or township hall and ask whether you can look at a zoning map. Some places will have a copy they can give or sell you; in others, you'll need to look in a book or at a large wall map.

In larger communities, the planning board or office may handle questions about zoning. In smaller towns or villages, the county clerk or an animal control officer may handle questions about keeping animals. The issue of building fences and shelters may be handled by another government unit in either case.



Don't take the word of neighbors, your aunt, or other people not connected to local government that it's okay to raise chickens at your home. If you're in the midst of buying a home, don't even take the word of real estate agents about being able to keep chickens or even about the property zoning. You never know whether the information you're getting is legitimate when it comes from a secondary source, so you're better off avoiding consequences by going straight to the primary source of legal info.

If you can, get a copy of the laws or ordinances so you can refer to them later if the need arises. You may want them to show a neighbor who challenges your right to keep chickens or to remind you how many chickens are legal to own.

Confronting restrictions

If your city, village, or township doesn't allow chicken-keeping, find out the procedure for amending or changing a law or zoning in your location. Sometimes all you need to do is request a zoning variance. That would allow you, and only you, to keep chickens based on your particular circumstances.

Finding out what you have to do

In some areas getting permission to keep chickens is just a formality; in others, it's a major battle. Some places require you to draft a proposed ordinance or zoning variation for consideration. In either case, you'll probably be required to attend a commission meeting and state your case.

Ask your city clerk, township supervisor, or other local government official whether you need to attend a planning commission meeting, other special committee meeting, or the general city commission meeting. Find out the date, time, and location of the meeting. In some areas, you need to make an appointment to speak at a meeting or bring up issues.

Be patient — some of these changes can take months of discussion and mulling over. If you don't succeed the first time, ask what you can do to change the outcome the next time. Then try again.

Presenting a compelling case

Come to any necessary meeting prepared and organized. Try to anticipate any questions or concerns and have good answers for them. Be prepared to compromise on some points, such as the number of birds allowed.

Ask other people in your community who seem involved in local government how things are done in your community. They may give you valuable tips on how to approach the officials who have the power to change a law or grant a variance.

If you can afford it, it may help to hire a lawyer to represent you. Most people will want to handle it on their own if they can. If you have a city commissioner or other official assigned to your neighborhood, you may want to enlist his or her help.

It helps if you can find other people in your area who would also like to keep chickens and who are willing to come to meetings to support you. Local experts such as a 4-H poultry leader, veterinarian, or agriculture teacher who can speak on the behalf of poultry-keeping could help. You can also draft a proposed law or ordinance and get people to sign a petition in support of it.

Assessing Your Capabilities: Basic Chicken Care and Requirements

Chickens can take as much time and money as you care to spend, but you need to recognize the *minimum* time, space, and money commitments required to keep chickens. In the next sections, we give you an idea of what those minimums are.

Time

When we speak about time here, we're referring to the daily caretaking chores. Naturally, getting housing set up for your birds will take some time. If you're building a chicken coop, give yourself plenty of time to finish before you acquire the birds. You will have to judge how much time that will be depending on the scope of the project, your building skills, and how much time each day you can devote to it. See Chapter 6 for more on constructing your own coop.

Count on a minimum of 15 minutes in the morning and evening to care for chickens in a small flock, if you don't spend a lot of time just observing their antics. Even if you install automatic feeders and waterers (see Chapter 8), the good chicken-keeper should check on his flock twice a day. If you have laying hens, eggs should be collected once a day, which shouldn't take long.

Try to attend to your chickens' needs before they go to bed for the night and after they are up in the morning. Chickens ideally should have 14 hours of light and 10 hours of darkness. In the winter you can adjust artificial lighting so that it accommodates your schedule. Turning on lights to do chores after chickens are sleeping is very stressful for them.

You will need additional time once a week for basic cleaning chores. If you have just a few chickens, this could be less than an hour. It will include such things as removing manure, adding clean litter, scrubbing water containers, and refilling feed bins. Depending on your chicken-keeping methods, additional time could be needed every few months for more intensive cleaning chores.



More chickens doesn't necessarily mean more daily time spent on them until you get to very large numbers. A pen full of 25 meat birds may only increase your caretaking time a few minutes versus a pen of four laying hens. But how you keep chickens can increase the time needed to care for them. If you keep chickens for showing and you house them in individual cages, feeding and watering them will take at least five to ten minutes per cage.

Space

Each adult full-sized chicken needs at least 2 square feet of floor space for shelter and another 3 square feet in outside run space if it isn't going to be running loose much. So a chicken shelter for four hens should be about 2 feet by 4 feet and the outside pen another 2 feet by 6 feet so that your total space used would be 2 feet by 10 feet (these dimensions don't have to be exact). For more chickens you would need more space, and you need a little space to store feed and maybe a place to store the used litter and manure. Of course, more space for the chickens is always better.

As far as height goes, the chicken coop doesn't have to be more than 3 feet high. But you may want a bigger coop to be tall enough so that you can walk upright inside it.

Besides the actual size of the space, you need to think about location, location, location. You probably want your space somewhere other than the front yard, and you probably want the chicken coop to be as far from your neighbors as possible to lessen the chance that they might complain.

Money

Unless you plan on purchasing rare breeds that are in high demand, the cost of purchasing chickens won't break most budgets. Adult hens that are good layers cost less than \$10. Chicks of most breeds cost a few dollars each. The cost of adult fancy breeds kept for pets ranges from a few dollars to much, much more, depending on the breed. Sometimes you can even get free chickens!

Housing costs are extremely variable, but they are one-time costs. If you have a corner of a barn or an old shed to convert to housing and your chickens will be free-ranging most of the time, then your housing start-up costs will be very low, maybe less than \$50. If you want to build a fancy chicken shed with a large outside run, your cost could be hundreds of dollars. If you want to buy a pre-built structure for a few chickens, count on a couple hundred dollars.

The best way to plan housing costs is to first decide what your budget can afford. Next, look through Chapters 5 and 6 of this book to learn about types of housing. Then comparison shop to see what building supplies would cost for your chosen housing (or pre-built structures) and see how it fits your budget. Don't forget to factor in shipping costs for pre-built units.

There may be a few other one-time costs for coop furnishings like feeders, waterers, and nest boxes. For four hens, clever shopping should get you these items for less than \$50.

Commercial chicken feed is reasonably priced, generally comparable to common brands of dry dog and cat food. How many chickens you have will determine how much you use: Count on about $\frac{1}{2}$ pound of feed per adult, full-sized bird per day. We estimate the cost of feed for three to four layers to be less than \$20 per month.

Focusing Your Intentions: Specific Considerations

Some of you may just be nostalgic for the chickens scratching around in grandma's yard. Some of you may have heard that chickens control flies and ticks and turn the compost pile. You may have children who want to raise chickens for a 4-H project. Maybe you want to produce your own quality eggs or organic meat. Maybe you just want to provoke the neighbors. There are dozens of reasons why you want to raise chickens. But if you aren't sure, there are reasons why it helps to decide in advance just why you want to keep chickens.

Egg layers, meat birds, and pet/show chickens take slightly different housing and care requirements. Having a purpose in mind as you select breeds and develop housing will keep you from making expensive mistakes and will make your chicken-keeping experience more enjoyable.

It's okay to keep chickens for several different purposes, some for eggs and others as show birds for example, but thinking about your intentions in advance makes good sense.

Want eggs (and, therefore, layers)?

While we're at it, let's define *egg* here. The word egg can refer to the female reproductive cell, a tiny bit of genetic material barely visible to the naked eye. In this chapter, egg refers to the large, stored food supply around a bit of female genetic material. Because eggs are deposited and detached from the mother while an embryo develops, they are not able to obtain food from her body through veins in the uterus. Their food supply must be enclosed with them as they leave the mother's body.

The egg that we enjoy with breakfast was meant to be food for a developing chick. Luckily for us, a hen will continue to deposit eggs regardless of whether they have been fertilized to begin an embryo or not.

If you want layers, you will need housing that includes nest boxes for them to lay their eggs in and a way to easily collect those eggs. Layers appreciate some outdoor space, and if you have room for them to do a little roaming around the yard, your eggs will have darker yolks, and you will need less feed.

Thinking about home-grown meat?

Don't expect to save lots of money raising your own chickens for meat unless you regularly pay a premium price for organic, free-range chickens at the store. Most homeowners raising chickens for home use wind up paying as much per pound as they would buying chicken on sale at the local big-chain store. But that's not why you want to raise them.

You want to raise your own chickens because you can control what they are fed and how they are treated. You want to take responsibility for the way some of your food is produced and pride in knowing how to do it.

It isn't going to be easy, especially at first. But it isn't so hard that you can't master it. For most people the hardest part is the butchering, but the good news is that there are people in almost every area of the country who will do that job for you for a fee.

You can raise chickens that taste just like the chickens you buy in the store, but if you intend to raise free-range or pastured meat chickens, expect to get used to a new flavor. These ways of raising chickens produce a meat that has more muscle or dark meat and a different flavor. For most people it's a *better* flavor, but it may take some getting used to.

Average people who have a little space and enough time can successfully raise all the chicken they want to eat in a year. And with modern meat-type chickens, you can be eating fried homegrown chicken 14 weeks after you get the chicks or even sooner. So unlike raising a steer or pigs, you can try raising your own meat in less than four months to see if you like it.

The major differences between how you're going to raise meat birds and how they are "factory farmed" are in the amount of space the birds have while growing, their access to the outdoors, and what they are fed. You can make sure your birds have a diet based on plant protein if you like, or organic grains or pasture. Most home-raised chickens are also slaughtered under more humane and cleaner conditions than commercial chickens.

Some people also object to the limited genetics that form the basis of commercial chicken production and the way the broiler hybrids grow meat at the expense of their own health. The meat is fatter and softer, and there is more breast meat than on carcasses of other types of chickens.

But many people are getting used to a new taste in chicken. They are concerned about the inhumane conditions commercial meat chickens are often raised in and the way their food is handled before it reaches them. So they are growing their own or buying locally grown, humanely raised chickens.

Chickens that are raised on grass or given time to roam freely have more dark muscle meat, and the meat is a little firmer and a bit stronger in flavor. Your great grandparents would recognize the taste of these chickens.

Many of you may be thinking that you would like to raise some chickens to eat. You would be able to control the conditions they are raised in, what they are fed, and how they are butchered. Some people want to butcher chickens in ways that conform to kosher or halal (religious) laws. If you want to raise meat birds, here's what you need to think about:



- ✓ **Emotional challenges:** If you are the type of person who gets emotionally attached to animals you care for, or you have children who are very emotional about animals, think carefully before you purchase meat birds. While traditional meat breeds could end up all right as pets, the broiler strain birds tend not to live too long and are tricky to care for if left beyond the ideal butchering time.

We like our birds and we don't like to kill things. But we love eating our own organically and humanely raised meat. How do we get around the emotional thing? We have someone else do the butchering, at another location. In almost every rural community there is someone who will butcher poultry for a fee. It adds to the cost of the final product but it isn't much, and to us, it's well worth it.

That being said, we know how to butcher a bird, and we advise everyone who raises meat birds to learn how to do it. There may come a day when you need the skill, and knowing about the process makes you aware of all the factors that go into producing meat, including the fact that a life was sacrificed so you can eat meat. You will appreciate the final product and all of the skills it takes to produce it even more. In Chapter 16 we discuss butchering. Read the chapter; then see whether you can do what's necessary if needed.

- ✓ **Do you have enough room?** You need enough space to raise at least 10 to 25 birds to make meat production worthwhile. If you live in an urban area that only allows a few chickens, producing meat probably isn't for you. Even in slightly roomier suburban areas, you should carefully consider things before raising meat birds. In these areas you probably won't be able to let chickens free-range or pasture them, so you will be raising the meat birds in confinement.

If you live in a rural area, feel you have plenty of room, and think you can do your own butchering, then you probably should try raising your own meat chickens. Start with a small batch and see how you do with the process.



Don't think that raising your own meat chickens will save you money at the grocery store. It almost never does. In fact, the fewer birds you raise, the more costly each one becomes. Economy of scale — for example, being able to buy and use 1,000 pounds of feed instead of two 50-pound sacks — helps costs, but most of us can't do that. You raise your own meat for the satisfaction and flavor.

Enticed by fun and games or 4-H and FFA?

Showing chickens is a rewarding hobby for adults and an easy way for youngsters in 4-H or FFA to begin raising livestock (and possibly earn a reward!). Chickens can also be a good hobby for mentally handicapped adults. They are easy to handle, and care is not too complex. A few chickens can provide hours of entertainment, and collecting eggs is a pleasing reward. If you want pet birds, there are chickens that tame easily and come in unusual feather styles and colors.

If you're considering raising chickens as show birds or as pets, consider the following requirements:

- ✓ **Space:** For showing you'll often need to raise several birds to maturity to pick the best specimen to show. This may require extra room. Pet birds in urban areas need to be confined so they don't bother neighbors or get killed in traffic.
- ✓ **Time:** Show birds are often kept in individual cages, which increases the amount of time needed to care for chickens.
- ✓ **Purchasing cost:** Excellent specimens of some show breeds can be quite expensive.

If you live in a rural area, you can indulge your chicken fantasy to the fullest, maybe getting one of everything! Just use common sense and don't get more than you can care for or legally own.

Considering Neighbors

Neighbors are those who are in sight, sound, and smelling distance of your chickens. Even if it's legal in your urban or suburban area to keep chickens,

the law may require your neighbor's approval and continued tolerance. And it pays to keep your neighbor happy anyway. If neighbors don't even know the chickens exist, they won't complain. If they know about them but get free eggs, they probably won't complain either. A constant battle with neighbors who don't like your chickens may lead to the municipality banning your chickens or even banning everyone's chickens. Regardless of your situation, the following list gives you some ideas to keep you in your neighbors' good graces:

- ✓ **Try to hide housing or blend it into the landscape.** If you can disguise the chicken quarters in the garden or hide them behind the garage, so much the better. Don't locate your chickens close to the property line or the neighbor's patio area if at all possible.
- ✓ **Keep your chicken housing neat and clean.** Your chicken shelter should be neat and immaculately clean.
- ✓ **Store or dispose of manure and other wastes properly.** Consider where you are going to store or dispose of manure and other waste. Poultry manure can't be used in the garden without some time to age because it will burn plants. It makes good compost, but a pile of chicken manure composting may offend some neighbors. You may need to bury waste or haul it away.
- ✓ **If roosters are legal, consider doing without them.** While you may love the sound of a rooster greeting the day, the noise can be annoying to some people. Contrary to popular belief, you can't stop roosters from crowing by locking them up until well after dawn. Roosters can and do crow at all times of the day and even at night.
- ✓ **If you must have a rooster, try getting a bantam one, even if you have full-sized hens.** He will crow, but it won't be as loud. Don't keep more than one rooster; they tend to encourage each other to crow more.
- ✓ **Keep your chicken population low.**
- ✓ **Confine chickens to your property.** Even if you have a two-acre suburban lot, you may want to keep your chickens confined to lessen neighbor complaints. Foraging chickens can roam a good distance. Chickens can easily destroy a newly planted vegetable garden, uproot young perennials, and pick the blossoms off the annuals. They can make walking across the lawn or patio barefoot a sticky situation. Mean roosters can scare or even harm small children and pets. And if your neighbor comes out one morning and finds your chickens roosting on the top of his new car, he's not going to be happy.

Cats rarely bother adult chickens, but even small dogs may chase and kill them. In urban and suburban areas, dogs running loose can be a big problem for chicken-owners who allow their chickens to roam. Free-ranging chickens can also be the target of malicious mischief by kids. Even raccoons and coyotes are often more numerous in cities and suburban areas. And of course, chickens rarely survive an encounter with a car.

You can fence your property if you want to and if it's legal to do so, but remember that lightweight hens and bantams can easily fly up on and go over a 4-foot fence. Some heavier birds may also learn to hop the fence. Chickens are also great at wriggling through small holes if the grass looks greener on the other side.

- ✔ **Be aggressive about controlling pests.** In urban and suburban areas you must have an aggressive plan to control pest animals such as rats and mice. If your chickens are seen as the source of these pests, neighbors may complain. Read Chapter 9 for tips on controlling pests.
- ✔ **Share the chicken benefits.** Bring some eggs to your neighbors or allow their kids to feed the chickens. A gardening neighbor may like to have your manure and soiled bedding for compost. Just do what you can to make chickens seem like a mutually beneficial endeavor.
- ✔ **Never butcher a chicken in view of the neighbors.** Neighbors may go along with you having chickens as pets or for eggs but have strong feelings about raising them for meat. Never butcher any chickens where neighbors can see it. You need a private, clean area, with running water, to butcher. If you butcher at home, you will also need a way to dispose of blood, feathers, and other waste. This waste smells and attracts flies and other pests. We strongly advise those of you who raise meat birds and have close neighbors to send your birds out to be butchered.

Don't assume that because you and your neighbors are good friends, they won't care or complain about you keeping chickens illegally.