

## Managing a Family Chicken Flock

Maintaining a small poultry flock can be rewarding and will provide an opportunity for various family members to participate in animal care. Chickens are best maintained as a flock and are well suited for such management. With proper care and consideration, the small family flock may be maintained on farms or small acreages near urban areas.



Make sure that your enjoyment of your flock does not infringe on your neighbors' enjoyment of their properties. Fence in small flocks of birds for their own safety and to keep them home. There are many predatory animals even within municipal boundaries and chickens are usually easy prey.

Poultry housing should provide clean, dry, comfortable quarters for birds throughout the year. Moisture is a common problem in poultry houses. Keep fresh air circulating but keep the house free of drafts. Allowing the birds to go outside is an excellent option for the farm poultry flock.

Care of birds requires a commitment to provide them adequate feed and water for the birds' needs. In addition to the requirements for shelter and proper feeding, managing a small flock requires a commitment of time and labor to provide daily care and attention to the birds.

Breeds of large or medium-sized chickens have been developed for egg or meat production; a few breeds produce both fairly well. While the Leghorn strain of chicken produces more eggs than other breeds, these birds are quite small and are not a good choice for meat. The Rock-Cornish commercial broiler has been bred for rapid meat production but can become extremely overweight if not properly managed; this can prevent these birds from producing many eggs. Breeds that serve well for dual purposes include the Rhode Island Red and Plymouth Rock.

Within the poultry house, it is essential to use a good, absorbent litter material for bedding for all chickens maintained on the floor. The litter should be clean, mold free and dry, but not dusty. Keep litter as dry as possible. Provide heat until chicks are well feathered. Birds are more likely to develop respiratory troubles if heat is removed too early. During warm weather, consider using a mobile pen that can be rotated to new ground as the grass inside the enclosure is depleted. Summer-range shelters are usually small sheds in which the birds are confined at night for their protection. These shelters have slatted floors and are periodically moved to a new location.

Whatever system is used, do not crowd chicks or older birds. Larger breeds and older birds require more space than others. The greatest cost of raising chickens is the cost of feed. However, it is not economical to feed an unbalanced diet. Therefore, always provide your birds with quality, commercially prepared feeds.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at [cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu) or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.