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Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Raising Chickens at Home

Posted by [Gail the Actuary](#) on December 10, 2009 - 10:15am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

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I'm afraid I'm not an expert (or even a beginner) regarding raising chickens at home, but I hope a few of our readers are. I know it is a popular thing to do, and not too difficult. There seem to be a lot of good web sites on the subject, and perhaps I can quote from a couple, to start the discussion.



Why raise chickens? [Backyard chickens](#) suggests this list of benefits:

- Easy and inexpensive to maintain (when compared to most other pets)
- Eggs that are fresh, great-tasting & nutritious
- Chemical-free bug and weed control
- Manufacture the worlds best fertilizer
- Fun & friendly pets with personality (yes, you read that right)

There seem to be many sources of information about how to raise chickens available, from books to websites to friends with experience. One short list of tips I ran across is this one by [Keeping Chickens](#) at blogspot:

1. Keep chicken coop clean with fresh water, food and remove droppings.
2. Give chickens enough space to scratch and peck and perch. No cages!
3. Always check on the chickens daily to observe their behavior in case of sickness (and for fun!).

4. Collect eggs daily.
5. Obey the guidelines and regulations of your particular city. Check with your local city hall first to determine if you can legally raise chickens and what the restrictions are.
6. Never chase chickens and approach coop area calmly.
7. Quarantine sick chickens immediately.
8. Diversify their diet of regular feed with fresh table scraps, bread, fresh veggies (especially green veg) and the occasional treat of corn. Mixing in some ground oyster shell with the feed will add calcium, which makes their shells stronger.
9. Keep them safe from predators and offer them some cover from above (They don't like hawks). They will need a nice dark box for laying, perches for sleeping and a run for scratching.
10. Chickens “clean” themselves by taking dust baths, but the odd dusting of mite powder does no harm. By rolling around in the dirt, they’re ridding themselves of mites. So give them access to a patch of dry, loose soil.

Raising chickens without modern conveniences

As I look through some of the sites, it strikes me that the directions provided are pretty much for how to raise chickens in a BAU world. They talk about keeping babies warm with a light bulb, and buying 50 pound bags of chicken food, with different kinds of food for different ages of chickens. They talk about waterers to purchase, and various other equipment. The question I have is what one can do to make the process more sustainable.

What do people who do not have all of the modern conveniences do to raise chickens? I have heard they are quite common in Africa, for example. Do they all use metal fences? What did people do 200 years ago in the US or Europe to raise chickens?



Chicken on oil pipeline in Ecuador (photo from my trip in June).

Where do chickens grow wild? I know I have seen them in Hawaii. Ones that escaped from captivity were able to get along without farmers' support. How do wild chickens escape predators? Where do they lay their eggs? This may give us some ideas for how to imitate what works in the natural world.

One of the issues in raising chickens (or anything else) is energy balance. I have not researched energy balance for chickens raised at home versus commercial chickens, but my guess is that the home raised chickens use more energy, rather than less. Does anyone have figures on this? It would seem like the closer one can make the process to imitating what nature does, the better the energy balance will be.

Some other questions

How much regular attention do chickens need? If a person goes away on a week's vacation, what does one do? Find a neighbor who also raises chickens, and trade services? I don't think dropping them off with the vet (like people do for cats and dogs) would work.

What are good books about raising chickens? Good web sites?

What kinds of chickens do you prefer to raise? What is a good number to start with?

What tips do you have for beginners starting out?



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