

# BACKYARD CHICKENS AND COVID-19

## Make Informed Decisions with Extension Help

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across the country and around the world, more and more people in the U.S. are considering backyard chickens to produce their own meat and eggs. We often see this whenever the economy weakens.

The thinking behind such a decision is understandable, considering the recent panic-buying that has not only emptied the paper shelves at grocery stores but the egg and meat cases, as well. Many people are anxious these days concerning the food supply; store shelves are often without some staple items; and food security and sustainability have everyone's attention—all while folks are being asked to stay at home and practice social distancing.

Even considering all these factors, the middle of a global pandemic is not the best time to start a backyard flock. In fact, perhaps planting a vegetable garden would be a better option today than raising chickens. Come the fall, you're done with the garden until next spring; not so with chickens.

If you are determined to start a backyard flock, it's critical to **do some homework and make informed decisions**. You're not alone, and Extension personnel are here to help you with those decisions.

Though many folks have some extra time on their hands these days, and baby chicks are cute and cuddly, it is important to think this through before calling the local co-op or feed store. For one thing, rushing to join the crowds already lined up to get baby chicks is not proper social distancing. You also need to know what you are getting into.

**Raising backyard chickens is not for everyone.** There's a reason you didn't have chickens before now. What was that reason? Was it your job, your busy schedule, or the financial commitment? You may have some free time on your hands right now, but what about 6 months or a year from now? Will you still have time to devote to the chickens then?

Next, stop and think: Is now the best time to take on increased economic responsibilities? It will be months

before your chicks grow large enough to be processed for meat and even longer for the hens to lay their first egg for you; and the roosters will never lay an egg. Meanwhile, during all those months while they are growing up, you will have to feed, care for, and protect them. You will have increased monetary costs to obtain, feed, and care for them, but no return on investment for several months.

In addition, being unprepared to raise live animals (whether it's chickens, hogs, cows, or anything else) will be a detriment to their quality of life and yours, as well. And again, roosters will never lay eggs, but they will crow, and some locations have ordinances against keeping roosters specifically for that reason. There will likely be numerous local, city, and county zoning rules and regulations where you live dealing with the keeping of chickens in general, and roosters specifically. Before you get your chicks, check with the proper authorities.

## Do Your Homework

First, carefully consider the current situation. Even though there are some empty egg cases at the store, the **poultry meat and egg supply in the U.S. is not at risk**. As part of the nation's food supply and a dedicated critical infrastructure industry, Mississippi-based Cal-Maine Foods Inc., the largest supplier of table eggs in the country, and other egg providers across the U.S. are running operations at full capacity to meet the current high demand for eggs, while at the same time focusing on the top priority of protecting the health and safety of their employees.

There are plenty of hens in the U.S. laying enough eggs every day to go around. The problem is not a shortage of eggs or laying hens; **the problem is the panic buying and hoarding** we are currently seeing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are a lot of households right now that likely have twice as many (or more) eggs than they usually keep. This has led to a short-term supply disruption, but folks will not continue to buy at this pace long-term. The system will catch up and egg cases will be full again. Stress-bakers need not be worried!

In addition, broiler processing plants around the country have shifted their plant schedules to ensure a more even flow of meat to grocery stores to avoid shortages.

Second, realize what you are committing to when you decide to get backyard chickens. **Chickens are living**

**creatures that need care 7 days a week**, including weekends, holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and when you're on vacation. Keep in mind that you likely are home more now than you will be when the pandemic and social-distancing necessity ends.

In addition, baby chicks need a heat source to keep them warm until they grow up. They also require special feed, clean water, and a place to live. And what will you do with the manure? Chickens are reliant on you for all their needs—it's up to you to feed, water, and protect them every day. Are you ready to take on that responsibility?

For those who are, **backyard chickens can be a truly rewarding experience**. For those who aren't, it could be a nightmare, for you and the chickens. If you're going to do this, make sure you are committed; not just for your sake, but for the sake of your chickens. You want this to be an experience that you receive comfort and enjoyment from, not something that will increase your stress level.

Before taking the plunge into the world of backyard chickens, consider the following:

- What is your goal for raising backyard poultry? Is it primarily for meat or primarily for eggs? Generally, the most useful backyard breeds are considered dual-purpose—that is, they are substantial enough to be used for meat, but the females lay enough eggs to be useful producers. If your goal is primarily having a source of meat, consider that you will need a place and a way to butcher those birds when it's time; this requires killing, scalding, plucking, eviscerating, and chilling capabilities.

If you plan to process your own birds, help is available. Many hatcheries around the country, such as Murray McMurray and Stromberg's, that hatch and sell backyard chicks also sell small-scale poultry-processing equipment for backyard operations. If you are a bit more ambitious and want to build your own mobile or stationary processing unit, the Northeast SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) program, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Agriculture Innovation Center and the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, has developed a publication that can help you do just that. Find the publication here: <https://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/SARE-Project-Products/Northeast-SARE-Project-Products/Building-an-On-Farm-Poultry-Processing-Facility>.

If you plan on selling any meat from your operation, check with the Mississippi Board of Animal Health for guidance and the proper documentation and permits that may be required.

- If you are more interested in a supply of eggs, **unless you purchase sexed chicks, roughly half will be males and half females**. In roughly 5 to 6 months, the females will reach sexual maturity and start laying eggs.
- **Hens will lay eggs without roosters when they reach maturity**. The eggs will not be fertile and cannot be hatched to produce more chicks, but roosters are not required for hens to lay eggs.
- Like their human caretakers, **chickens need a place to live**. They require shelter from the elements. This could be a pen, hoop structure, coop, or shed. The shelter should be dry and well-ventilated with adequate space for the number of birds you have. Allow roughly 2 to 3 square feet per adult bird both inside and outside the coop. More information on managing and raising the backyard flock is available at <https://extension.umd.edu/learn/publications/raising-your-home-chicken-flock-eb-409> and <http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/managing-the-backyard-flock>.
- Chickens may become injured or sick at times. You should have a plan in place to deal with this possibility. Many veterinarians are not poultry-specific veterinarians and may not be able to attend to your chickens right away. Do you know how to recognize sickness or disease in chickens? Local county Extension agents can help you with this or find a poultry specialist who can help. Possible disease signs in chickens include:

sneezing	decreased egg production
swollen sinuses	decreased fertility/hatchability
watery eyes	depression
coughing	misshapen eggs
nasal discharge	huddling
twisted neck	lethargy
dehydration	increased mortality
decreased feed/water intake	
- Chickens have specific nutritional needs and require a specific diet based on their age and purpose (meat or eggs or dual-purpose). You must provide them with a nutritionally balanced diet. Where is the nearest feed store?
- The current crisis will pass, and store shelves will be full again. When that happens, it's likely cheaper to buy eggs from the store than to produce them

yourself. Backyard chickens come with several costs—chicks, feed, housing, medical care, time, and so forth. Are you willing to commit financial resources to your chickens?

- Raising chickens is not as easy as it may seem, particularly if you've never done it before. It takes work to maintain and protect your flock. However, if you are truly committed, Extension personnel can help you succeed, even if you've never raised chickens before.
- Be aware that, if you plan to sell meat or eggs from your flock, you will need to have your flock inspected and certified disease-free and have a permit from the state that allows you to do so.

## Other Factors to Consider

Consider that things are not normal in the middle of the current COVID-19 pandemic. It's possible that **not everyone getting into the backyard chicken business right now will still be in it when their baby chicks grow up** and start laying eggs 6 months from now.

In addition, there will be **environmental considerations such as flies, odor, and noise to deal with, not to mention neighbor relations**. Check into these things and visit with your neighbors before you spend money on chickens and housing. You might discover that you can't have chickens where you live or that your neighbor has the right to file a complaint that could lead to you losing your chickens.

If you prefer to maintain social distancing and not get your chicks from the co-op or feed store, **you can order baby chicks by phone or over the internet** from a variety of hatcheries around the country. If you go this route, you can tell the hatchery what breed, number of chicks (minimum order is often 25), and sex you want, and they will **ship the chicks to you through the mail**. Millions of baby chicks reach their new homes by this route every year. Be aware, however, that as increasing numbers of people turn to backyard chickens during the current pandemic, many hatcheries nationwide are seeing increased numbers of orders, and the wait may be longer than usual. You can find help with selecting a particular breed of chicken at <https://extension.umd.edu/learn/publications/choosing-best-poultry-breed-your-small-farm-fs-987> and <http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/choosing-the-right-breed-for-your-backyard-flock>.

**Mediterranean breeds generally do better in hot, humid areas, while American breeds do better in cooler climates.** Choose a breed that fits your location.

If you purchase chicks from a hatchery, **make sure that hatchery participates in the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) program**. This program certifies the rigorous testing of breeder flocks to assure the purchaser that the chicks are free of egg-transmitted diseases. Most commercial hatcheries that sell to reputable feed store chains are NPIP-certified.

If you have never raised chickens before, you will likely need some guidance. Is there someone who can help you, such as a friend, neighbor, or local county Extension agent? Also consider that **chickens are like any other living creature—at some point, they die**; or a varmint may get in the pen and kill them. What will you do with the ones that die? What are your state regulations on handling dead chickens? There's a lot to think about.

**Getting backyard chickens is not a decision to make in haste.**

Biosecurity is critical to keeping your chickens safe, just as it is to keeping you safe right now. **Biosecurity is any and all practices for the prevention of disease**. Isolation, traffic control, and sanitation are necessary to protect your chickens, just as handwashing, using hand sanitizer, and social distancing are necessary to protect you. Information on how biosecurity can protect your chickens is available at <http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/poultry-growers-should-maintain-heightened-biosecurity-practices> and <http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/backyard-biosecurity-the-best-defense-against-avian-influenza>.

The USDA has developed six steps to help keep your birds healthy:

1. Keep your distance. Isolate your birds from visitors and other birds.
2. Keep it clean. Prevent germs from spreading by cleaning shoes, tools, and equipment.
3. Don't haul disease home. Clean vehicles and cages that may have been off your farm.
4. Don't borrow disease from your neighbor. Avoid sharing tools and equipment.
5. Know the warning signs of infectious diseases in chickens.
6. Report sick birds.

Also consider that chickens are prey creatures and will be at constant risk. They will need protection from predators such as skunks, cats, dogs, opossums, raccoons, hawks, owls, snakes, and others. They should be kept inside a fence or pen if possible and have access to housing at night

and during periods of inclement weather. More information on predator protection is available at <http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/protect-backyard-birds-predators>.

Most predation occurs at night, so make sure your birds are in their house and that it is shut tight before dark. If a predator does make it to your flock, the problem will only worsen over time if the predator thinks the chow line is open. You must either remove the predator (not an option with hawks and owls because they are federally protected) or provide better protection for your flock—or expect more losses.

## Summary

Backyard chickens can be a rewarding and enjoyable experience. However, **chickens come with costs and a time commitment** you must be willing to provide. Do your homework and know the rules that apply to keeping chickens in your area. It's best to plan ahead when considering getting backyard chickens. Chickens are not the type of project that you want to jump into on the spur-of-the-moment.

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, getting chickens for your own meat and eggs may seem like a good idea, but **think this idea through**. Will you still be as committed 6 months or a year from now when the meat and egg cases are full at the store and you're back to working a normal schedule? Also, who will take care of your chickens if you are sick or go on vacation?

Extension personnel are here to help you enjoy your backyard flock. However, your chickens will depend on you for their protection and survival, and that will require a commitment of time and money on your part.

**Extension personnel can help you determine if backyard chickens are the right fit for you and your family.** Even though in-person interactions have been severely curtailed during the pandemic, Extension personnel are still working and remain available to assist you online, on the phone, and through a variety of distance technologies including social media, webinars, WebEx, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other platforms. If needed, your local county MSU Extension agent can put you in touch with an Extension poultry specialist who can help you make informed decisions concerning backyard chickens.

*The information given here is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products, trade names, or suppliers are made with the understanding that no endorsement is implied and that no discrimination against other products or suppliers is intended.*

### Publication 3447 (POD-04-20)

By Tom Tabler, PhD, Extension Professor, MSU Poultry Science; Jonathan R. Moyle, PhD, Extension Poultry Specialist, University of Maryland Extension; Shawna L. Weimer, PhD, Poultry Extension Assistant Professor, University of Maryland; Jonathan Moon, Poultry Operation Coordinator, MSU Poultry Science; and Jessica Wells, PhD, Assistant Clinical/Extension Professor, MSU Poultry Science.

*Copyright 2020 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.*

Produced by Agricultural Communications.

*Mississippi State University is an equal opportunity institution. Discrimination in university employment, programs, or activities based on race, color, ethnicity, sex, pregnancy, religion, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, genetic information, status as a U.S. veteran, or any other status protected by applicable law is prohibited. Questions about equal opportunity programs or compliance should be directed to the Office of Compliance and Integrity, 56 Morgan Avenue, P.O. 6044, Mississippi State, MS 39762, (662) 325-5839.*

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, Director