

# Chooks and Ducks

## The Beginners Guide

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## My Chooks

It may seem strange talking about chooks and ducks at a garden show but not so long ago they were a part of most gardens. Natural insect killers, producers of great manure and if well managed an asset to the Gardener.

I've been keeping chooks since I was a little tot. We always had chooks for eggs and meat and now I continue that in my garden. I also sell chooks and ducks through my store Mapua Country Trading.

We've been selling birds through the store for the last 2 seasons and we've come across a lot of commonly asked questions that people who're new to keeping chooks ask and that's what we'd like to share with you today – some of the basic need to know's and things we've learnt through our experience over the years.

I'll put a transcript of today's talk on the chooks section of the website for you to download if you'd like rather than taking notes.

## Houses

We've put together our top 10 tips about chook shed design. These are all the things you usually learn after you've built or bought your chook shed.

**1. Make sure your shed is raised off the ground on stilts** if it's static or high wheels if it's a mobile shed. If your shed sits directly on the ground or only a couple of inches off the ground then rats will nest under it and damp will be drawn up into the house. You'll see tell tale holes appearing in the dirt around houses that sit on the ground and if you lift and shift you'll see all the scraps you thought your chooks had eaten have been dragged in under by the rats for later consumption. They'll also raid the nest boxes for eggs.

The other reason that it's good to have a bit of freeboard between the ground and the floor of the shed is so that you always have a dry area for the chooks to have a dust bath. I chuck a couple of buckets of beach sand under my main chook house every few months for the girls to have a bath in. This is their main way of keeping themselves free from parasites like lice and mites.

**2. Make sure you have enough perching poles & that they aren't over the nest boxes.** Chooks naturally want to roost somewhere at night and you need to provide perching poles in the chook house. However Chooks poo at night and if the perch is over the nesting box the nesting boxes get full of poo which means you get lots of cleaning and dirty eggs. They all want to roost, they all want to roost at the same height, they'll roost on anything above floor

height if you don't provide enough space for them – feed bins, waterers, anything. Allow 25cm of perch per bird for them to roost comfortably and make the perches only 60cm off the ground or from the nearest jumping point.

**3. Put your Nesting Boxes in the right place** – Chooks will lay anywhere, especially clucky bantams – long grass anywhere! That's fine if you don't want the eggs – however to encourage your girls to lay – provide nest boxes that are clean, lined with enough bedding to make a nest, have a low front and higher back and sides around 30cm square with about 10cm of bedding. You don't need a box per bird – one per 3 or 4 birds is fine but make sure you position them in a cosy corner, away from draughts and the door and make sure you've got a side hatch to collect the eggs from so you're not climbing under the perches each day to retrieve the eggs.

**4. Make sure perches and nesting boxes can be removed for cleaning** - I've seen a lot of lovely manuka pole perches and cupboard nesting boxes nailed in to chook sheds. However some mites live in the cracks around and under perches and nesting boxes and it's good if these items can be fitted into brackets so they can be lifted out for cleaning.

**5. Make sure your shed is big enough** – You might think you're only going to start with 2 or 3 birds but keeping chooks can grow on you and it's a good idea to get a shed as big as you have budget and space for. Allow 1 sq m of house space for 2-3 birds.

**6. Sheds need ventilation** – you need to let ammonia out, let light in and keep the shed dry - windows look cute but make sure that they're not that big that they let rain in –much better to have a series of small windows up under the eaves or a long low high window with mesh on it – Remember they're not going to sit in there and have a cuppa and look out at the view. Chooks can't stand wet bedding – not good for their respiratory health and if you have a window that lets in rain consider boarding up the bottom half and stapling windbreak to it so the rain runs down and doesn't drive in.

**7. Make sure your fence is high enough** If you are going to keep them in a open topped run make sure it's 1.8m high if you're having bantams or light breeds and at least 1.2m high if you're having heavier breeds.

**8. If it's a closed in run make sure it has enough headroom.** This applies smaller 2-3 chook runs in particular. Make sure it's tall enough – chooks are tall, they're not guinea pigs. I've seen some runs on the market, particularly the triangular shaped runs where there is very little headroom, or only a thin strip down the middle of the run and although there might look like a lot of run room out the sides, the chooks actually can't use it without bending down into

it. Make sure that all available run space is at least 70cm tall on these smaller all in one house and run sheds.

**9. Think about the materials you're going to use** – If you're buying a chook shed then ask what's it made of – treated timber might seem like a good idea for longevity but perhaps consider untreated nesting boxes and perches – do you want your eggs in contact with treated timber? One of our customers made their nesting boxes from old drawers out of a chest of drawers. If you use thick untreated plywood, oil it with linseed and keep it off the ground it will last just as long.

**10. Managing population growth around the chook house** – if you plan on having a Rooster then you should think about how you're going to manage the consequences when you're thinking about your chook shed design. You'll have a broody chook who wants to hatch a batch of eggs. She'll need space away from the main flock – either in a separate broody house or a sectioned off space in your main house. It's a good idea to keep mother hen and the little ones separate from the main flock for the first 10- 12 weeks at least.

## Breeds of Chooks

Chooky people have a completely different language that can be a bit baffling when describing the breeds. But breeds break down basically in to two main categories:

**Heavy Breeds** – these are birds that have been bred for meat production – they'll still lay eggs but not as many

**Light Breeds** – these are birds who've been bred for egg production

The other main distinction is between **older breeds**, often referred to as Rare Breeds or Heritage Breeds and **newer breeds**, often bred for commercial production methods.

I sell mostly older breeds both for meat and egg production – partly because they're more interesting and partly because they live longer. Modern laying breeds like Highlines or Shavers will lay like the clappers for 12 to 14 months then peter out whereas older egg breeds like Leghorns will lay steadily for 3 or 4 seasons.

The older breeds are also more robust for free ranging – take the modern meat bird – the Cobb – it will struggle to support it's weight after 14 weeks whereas a meat bird like a Rhode Is. Red will strut around your yard, see off Hawks and Dogs and although it might take 30 weeks to reach eatable size, it's meat will be full of flavour.

The genetics behind these old breeds were laid down in the late 1800's and early 1900's when I think poultry breeding was probably at it's height as a backyard past time.

## Buying Chooks

So you've decided to get some chooks, either to replace the old feed eating, non laying girls you're having or as a new addition to the family.

### 1. Where do you buy them from:

- TradeMe
- Rare Breeds Website – RareBreeds.co.nz
- Mapua Country Trading

### 2. Be an informed buyer

- Be wary buying Fertile Eggs to put under your old clucky girl, they don't transport well and you don't know what you'll get
- Day Old chicks are cheap but again – sometimes you don't get accurate sexing and you have to keep them under a heat source for 6-8 weeks
- Pullets or point of lay birds are the most common way to buy. Chooks start laying at around 20weeks old – their combs start going red. Ask how many weeks old the bird is if you think you're buying point of lay. Also if you're buying these birds try and get ones that were hatched before Christmas as they'll start laying before winter – birds hatched in late Jan and Feb will have to be fed all winter with no eggs.

### 3. How much to pay?

- A good pure breed bird at 20weeks old from a known breeder should cost you \$30 to \$50
- People think you should be able to buy a chook for \$10 or so and can't believe anyone would pay \$50 for a bird.
- My answer to them is that people pay \$1500 for a lap dog and it doesn't lay eggs!
- A hen for \$50 that's going to lay you egg's for 5 or 6 years is a good deal.

### 4. Be realistic when you buy chooks:

- Your girls aren't going to lay perfect, same sized eggs at the same time every day with no effort from you
- They're living creatures and the more you put in to them the more you'll get out of them

## Food & Water

### Water & Water Dispensers

An adult hen will drink up to ½ a litre of water a day in hot weather– so if you have 3 chooks that's a 1.5ltr soft drink bottle a day they'll get through.

Chooks will drink dirty water, but so would you if you're thirsty enough. Keep their water clean and topped up. If they're out of water for a day egg production will stop or reduce and their health will be affected. Their comb will turn blue / black and if they're without water for a couple of days in hot weather they can die.

You can have a bowl on the ground but you need to clean it often. They scratch food into it or poo in it and you're forever cleaning it out.

Small birds or chicks can also drown in open water troughs so if you are going to have an open water container but a brick in the bottom of it so they can get out.

The best way to keep water to your chooks and save you time cleaning and filling is to firstly run a hose to your chook house. I've fitted mine with a cheap click on irrigation on-off tap. It also saves your arms and shoulders lugging heavy water containers.

The next tip is to get an auto waterer that will supply several days water to your birds. Make sure you get one that is raised off the ground or that will be stable if you put it up on bricks. Make sure it's got a strong handle if you do have to carry it and that it's made of tough plastic or the plastic bits can be replaced easily.

### Food & Feeders

Food is the single most important thing to successful poultry keeping. An adult hen needs around 130gms of food a day.

People have a misconception that chooks will survive and thrive on household scraps or "free ranging" alone and I try and discourage this wherever possible. Maybe 30 years ago when our scrap buckets had a load more grains, dairy, fish, offal and meat scraps in them this concept of keeping chooks on the scraps would have held true – but your average household scrap bucket of today with some slimy salad leaves, ½ a pot of non-fat yoghurt and a couple of dried out pita breads isn't going to nourish your flock. (It's questionable whether it would nourish anyone but that's another discussion)

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Laying birds in particular need protein – around 20% of their diet should be protein. If you're buying sacks of pellets to feed your chooks – look at the protein content of the brand. Weston's Layers Pellets, Chick Crumbles and Meat Bird Pellets are a good brand and a good size pellet for the birds to eat.

You can also supplement pellets with a mixture of wheat, oats and maize if you wish, this used to be done to keep the price down but now a sack of pellets will set you back almost the same as a sack of maize or wheat so there isn't that much difference. Grains give the birds their carb's and a range of other minerals and keep them warm at night over winter if you feed them grains in the afternoon feed.

As well as protein and carbs, chooks need greens. If they free range they'll eat a lot of grass and weeds but if you've got them in a small run feed dig up clumps of grass and they'll demolish them, throw them silverbeet and gone to seed garden veges or grow them their own crop of chickory for greens.

They need grit to make their egg shells – you can buy grit in small bags or you can bash up mussel or oyster shells with a hammer in a bag and give them these.

They're a bit like us – a balanced diet is best and more food in winter when they're burning more food up to keep warm and there are less bugs around as natural protein sources.

There's nothing wrong with supplementing these feed sources with household scraps – when I started making cheese the chooks got my failures and I got some great eggs and I give them the whey leftovers. Don't give them left over egg dishes or chicken meat.

There are all sorts of devices for feeding chooks and I've tried many of them and I'm not a fan of any of them. First of all they are an open invite to rats & sparrows – even the supposed sparrow proof feeders and secondly you have greedy chooks and chooks who don't get a look in. Overfeeding, especially with some of the heavier breeds, can be as bad for egg production as underfeeding.

I also think you have chooks for a reason – visiting the chooks each day is part of my routine – collect the eggs, have a natter, check out everyone is OK. Feeding by hand you know they're getting the feed and that they're all getting the feed. If you have a lot of birds putting out feed in two places is useful to make sure there are no fights.

The best thing you can do is store your sacks of feed in a clip top rubbish bin to keep it away from rats and have an old jug in there with a line marked on the side to indicate how much feed your birds need. I put my feed down in a clean piece of old spouting – don't spray it around on the dirt for them to scratch up as they'll get poo in their feed and take in diseases.

If you're worried your not feeding them enough pick them up and if you can feel the breast bone prominently then you're under feeding them. Another sign of under feeding is feather eating and even cannibalism and this can also be caused by overcrowding.

## Houses & Bedding & Cleaning

### Bedding & Cleaning

I use Barley Straw in my chook sheds – generally buy up a few bales now when it's readily available and store it for winter.

Don't use sawdust with any fine dust in it – large clean wood shavings are fine but chooks are susceptible to respiratory diseases and dust especially young birds.

Change bedding regularly, especially in summer when it can get full of lice and mites. Bedding is used mostly to line the nest boxes but also acts as a general insulation on the floor of the chook shed – so more bedding in winter is good.

Chooks can cope with cold but not wet – something to look for in chook shed design and positioning. Don't put any mesh window towards the prevailing wind. Change bedding as soon as it get's wet and don't leave it.

Once every 3 months or so sterilise perches and nest boxes once you've cleaned out the house. Get a paint brush and tin full of kerosene and paint under perches and in cracks and let it dry before you put the fresh bedding in. This helps prevent infestations of red mites which live in bedding and under perches but not on birds.

## Health & Welfare

Chooks can get sick. There are lots of diseases they are prone to – some you can do things about and some you can't. Chooks are like any pet – if you're worried about them take them to the vet. I'm amazed at the amount of customers who don't think their chooks are worth the cost of a trip to the vets.

The diseases you can cure or prevent on your own:

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- Scaly Leg Mites – try Ivermectin sheep drench or Neem oil
- Mites, Tick's, Parasites – enable the chooks to have a dust bath and dust them with powder twice at 2 weekly intervals if you get a bad infestation
- Worms – put a little Neem oil in their water to kill internal parasites or get worm medicine from the vet if you think your chooks need worming – making sure they have fresh ground to scratch on by rotating their run is a good way to prevent worms.
- Moulting – once a year your chooks will shed their feathers and grow a new lot – it's natural, they're not dying – they will stop laying while they do it – this could be for up to 6 weeks.

The diseases that need intervention from a vet:

- Chooks are susceptible to a range of viral, intestinal and respiratory diseases that manifest themselves with a range of symptoms from runny poo and dirty bums to blindness, sitting with their wings out and not walking – many of these diseases can be fatal to the bird and also to the flock.
- If your chook is displaying any of these symptoms isolate it, clean the house and the run out. Keep it in a warm place like a large cardboard box with access to feed and fresh water and take it to the vet if it's going downhill – however by the time many of these symptoms manifest themselves it may be too late to save the bird.

## Predators

Stoats, Hawks and cats are the main predators that will take an adult chook or duck. There are 4 things you should do to protect your flock:

1. Set a few cage traps and stoat traps around the place BEFORE you take delivery of your new birds. Bait them with fresh eggs and see what you catch.
2. Get into the habit of shutting your chooks in their house at night until you trap the predators.
3. Consider getting a Rooster if you're council zoning allows you – Roosters are great Hawk detectors – they won't stop a hawk taking a bird but when they see a Hawk approaching they have a particular warning call which alerts the girls and they all run for the shelter of the shed.
4. Have a roof on your run or Cover your chook run with monofilament netting if the Hawks are problem

## Hatching / Breeding

### Chooks

You might like to raise a few chicks from your flock. Hen's will go broody when they want to hatch some chicks – they don't leave the nest and they growl at you and spread their feathers. They can go broody even if there isn't a rooster in site – it's just mother nature telling them to hatch some eggs.

You really need to move the broody hen away from the main flock to a hatching box and small run so she can get on with it and not disturb the laying in the main house. Let her get really broody before you move her otherwise she may well snap out of it but don't leave her for too long otherwise she won't see the distance when you move her – 2 or 3 days is usually long enough to make sure she's serious about hatching some eggs.

Have the run ready with the same bedding as she's on already and move her at night when she is calm and settled in. If you're putting in fertile eggs from the fridge make sure they're at room temperature and make sure there are the same number as the ones you were letting her sit on in the main house. If you're taking the eggs with her then take them first and put them in the nest. Settle her on the eggs and hold her there for a few minutes so she know's she's on the eggs then let her get on with it. You will know by morning if she's accepted the move or not.

A large hen can comfortably sit on 8 to 12 eggs and a small hen can hatch 6-8 eggs. They will sit for 21 days and only come off the nest for food and drink when it's warm enough to leave the eggs. Not all eggs will hatch – don't be tempted to interfere and help them out of the shell.

You can store fertile eggs in your fridge for 10 to 12 days before putting them under the chook but make sure they get turned twice a day to keep the air sack moist.

If you don't want chooks to go broody isolate them in a wire cage for 24 hours with access to water and light rations at the first sign of broodiness.

### Ducks

Ducks will nest where they like – not where you'd like them to. I made some lovely nesting boxes around my pond for my ducks and they all marched up and made nests around the house – under the deck, under the tussock by the laundry window – basically as close to mother duck as they could get.

When the ducklings hatch you do need to round them up within a day and pen them up – otherwise predators will get them. Scoop whitebait nets are good

for this. If you're rural this means hawks, pukeko's and stoats and if you're urban it means cats.

Don't worry if you can't catch Mum – she'll sit vigil outside the raising pen until they're let go. Make sure you put some food and water down for her as well.

Ducklings will eat chick starter crumbles and it's best to sprinkle them in a big dish like the upturned lid of a rubbish bin filled with water for the first week or so until they're big enough for dry food and a water bath.

## Regulations

Before you rush in and get your chooks make sure your local council allows you to keep chooks. Some councils ban it altogether in residential zones and some put restrictions on it. Quite a few councils will let you keep a small number of hens but no roosters if you live in a built up area. It's also polite to check with your neighbours – you never know, they might like to share them with you?

## Ducks

Ducks are just as easy, if not easier to keep as chooks but they really need a bit more room. Keeping ducks in houses and runs is going to be hard work with lots of cleaning required. Free ranging ducks is best. I often get asked – won't they just run away or go into the neighbours? They'll stay where they know there is food and shelter – if your ducks do roam, it's because they're not getting what they need.

Adult ducks love Maize – if you're trying to fatten them up a sack of Maize is a good investment – they will eat Barley, cheap bread from Couplands is good too and you can feed them chook pellets. After rain they get a lot more feed by way of bugs and worms.

Some people keep ducks just for their aesthetic value – they do look good waddling around the place and gliding around the pond and they are characters – more intelligent than chooks I think – very knowing. However you can keep ducks for both meat and eggs. Some breeds are better for eggs and some for meat. The meat breeds I would recommend Aylesbury, Pekin and Muscovy and the egg breeds I would recommend Indian Runners and Khaki Campbells. The eggs are very large and rich and are great in baking.

I try and keep only 2 Drakes for my ducks – one as an insurance policy in case anything happens to the main Drake. Anymore than 2 drakes isn't really fair on the ducks – they get too much of a hard time during the mating season.

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Ducks will generally lay and hatch eggs from early summer through until Christmas.