

Keeping Backyard Chickens

CHICKENS 101

Here's a few things you should know about chickens:

Sex ID

An adult female chicken is called a **hen**, a juvenile female is a **pullet**. An adult male chicken is a **rooster**, and a juvenile male is a **cockerel**.

Cockadoodledoo

Only roosters make the crowing sound, and not just at sunrise. Hens usually cluck quietly, but will squawk loudly after laying an egg, or if frightened. But the average decibel level of hens is about 63 dBA, while a barking dog may be over 100 dBA.

Eggs Instead

The colour of the shell has no effect on the flavour of the egg. Brown eggs taste the same as white eggs, provided both hens eat the same diet. Hens that free range or have a more varied diet will lay eggs with darker yellow yolks and higher nutritional value.

No Spring Chicken

A well-cared for hen can live for 10 years or more, but egg production declines rapidly after the first year or two.

About Your Peeps

Baby chicks absorb the yolk just before hatching, so they don't need food or water for about 2 days. This is why day-old chicks can be shipped from the hatchery. But they need to be kept at about 95 degrees F when they arrive at your home.



Urban residents across North America are taking advantage of new opportunities to keep chickens inside city limits. There are many reasons to have a small flock of hens in your backyard: fresh eggs, a learning experience for children, a closer connection to our food or a steady supply of garden compost. If you are thinking about keeping chickens in the city, there are some best practices that will make life better for you, your hens and your neighbours. Know the rules—start by finding out about your municipal regulations.

Provide Shelter

Prepare adequate shelter for your birds before you bring them home. It should be predator-proof and offer sufficient nests, roosts and floor space to accommodate your flock. Think about winter accommodation—a heat source isn't necessary but the coop will need to be draft-free, with sufficient light, and way to keep drinking water from freezing. A garden shed can be easily refitted for a chicken coop. An outdoor run area is needed, and this should be fenced on the sides as well as the top, to keep hens in and wild birds out.

Choose Your Birds

Purchase the birds from a reputable supplier. Ready-to-lay pullets (about 5 months old) are easiest; day-old chicks will require several weeks of special care and a heated environment. There are more different chicken breeds than there are dog breeds, with an endless variety of colours, shapes and sizes. There are breeds meant for eggs or for meat, or dual-purpose breeds for both, as well as many ornamental breeds for exhibition or just fancy pets! Different breeds lay different colours of eggs too—brown, cream, white, or even green or blue! For backyard birds, make sure the supplier can give you sexed birds so you can request hens only, as most municipalities don't allow roosters.

Be Diligent with Maintenance

Clean the coop on a regular basis and have a plan for dealing with the manure. It should be composted for several months before being added to gardens. A clean coop and secure feed storage will prevent issues with odours or rodents, and will also keep hens healthy and free from pests and parasites.

Backyard Chickens in Thunder Bay

Other cities have adopted by-laws to allow urban chickens. Will this happen in Thunder Bay?

City Council has endorsed the Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy. The Strategy includes the following goal:

“Conduct research and develop policy that is supportive of urban agricultural practices such as backyard chickens, urban beekeeping, and land use arrangements that would facilitate more land being used to grow food.”

- Visit the website at tbfoodstrategy.ca for up-to-date information on bylaw changes currently under discussion.
- Let your city councillor know that you support an urban chicken bylaw.

Can I keep chickens in the City of Thunder Bay?

Under certain conditions, there are areas within the City of Thunder Bay where a “personal farm” is permitted. If your property falls within the Rural Zones 1 and 2, you may be allowed to keep up to 20 chickens. Rural zones are generally west and north of the Thunder Bay expressway, with the exception of the County Park, Woodcrest and Arthur Street areas, but you should confirm your zoning by checking your property tax bill or by contacting the Planning Division at 625-2216. Your lot must be at least 2 hectares with at least 60 metres road frontage. The by-law requires at least 85 metres of separation between a dwelling on another lot and the structure used to keep fowl. Note also that the definition of “personal farm” means that the animals and any animal products must be for the owner/occupant’s use only, and not sold to the public.



A well-built and properly maintained coop is essential for urban chickens.

Chickens are not currently permitted in any other property zones, so if you live in any Urban property zone, you cannot legally keep chickens in the City of Thunder Bay.

--See *City Zoning by-law 100-2010*

What other regulations govern backyard chickens?

By-law 068-2008 makes it an offence for an owner or occupant of land to fail to keep it free and clean of debris, which includes animal feces. Residents are also subject to by-law 066-2008 which prohibits a property owner or occupant to use land in a manner which creates a nuisance. An example of a “nuisance” can include an objectionable odour.

In addition, the province’s Animal Health Act 2009 applies to all animals and animal products, such as eggs. This act makes your coop subject to inspection by a provincial officer who may issue a compliance order for failure to meet defined standards of care for the poultry.

Where can I find out more about keeping chickens?

Check the local feed stores to see what supplies are available in town. There are lots of on-line resources and forums including My Pet Chicken, The Chicken Chick and Mother Earth News, as well as books in your local library. Ask around—you may be surprised by how many people in this area have chickens, and most are happy to share their knowledge and lessons learned.