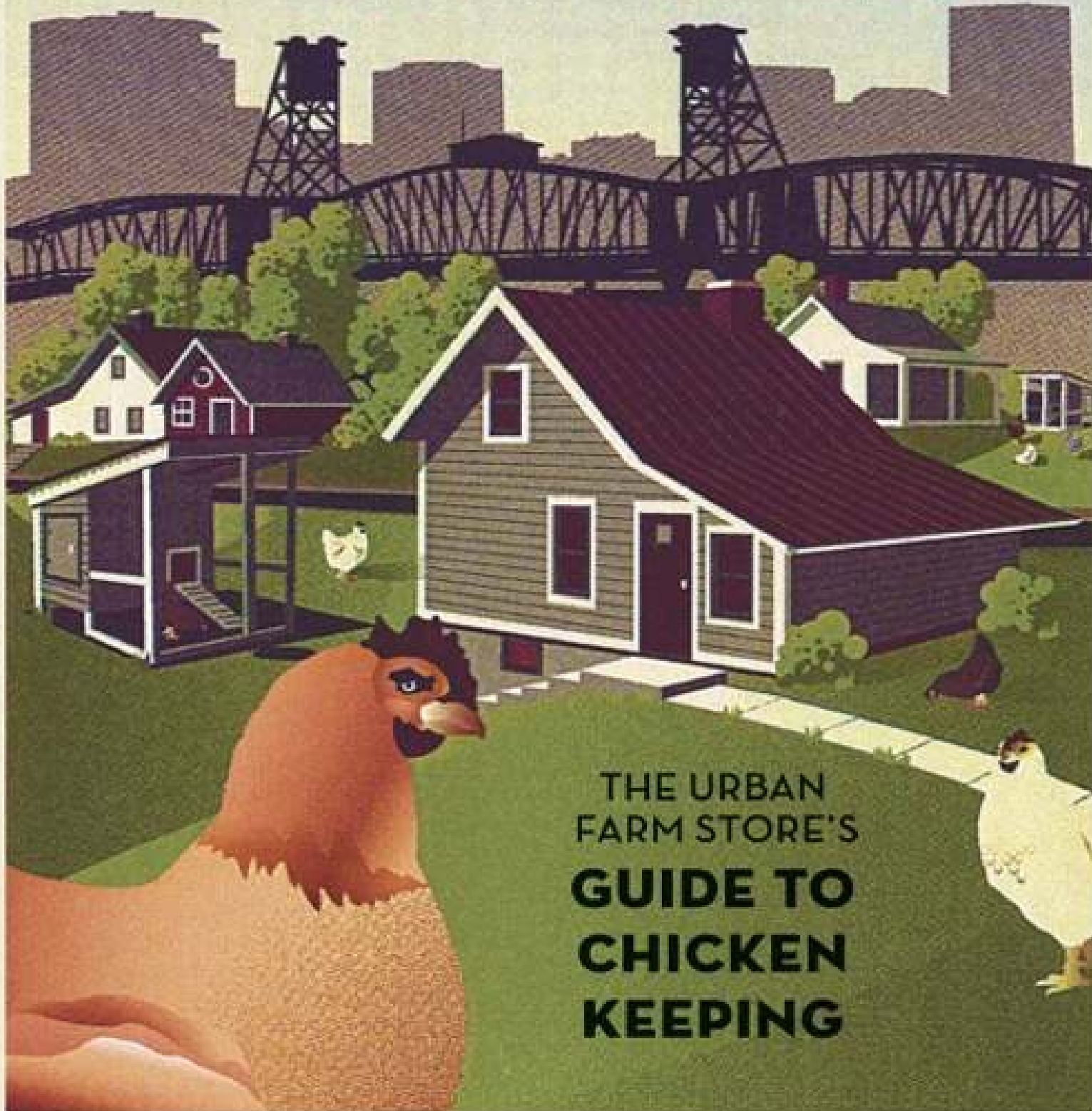


Robert & Hannah Litt

# A CHICKEN IN EVERY YARD



THE URBAN  
FARM STORE'S  
**GUIDE TO  
CHICKEN  
KEEPING**



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CHICKEN KEEPING**

Robert and Hannah Litt

  
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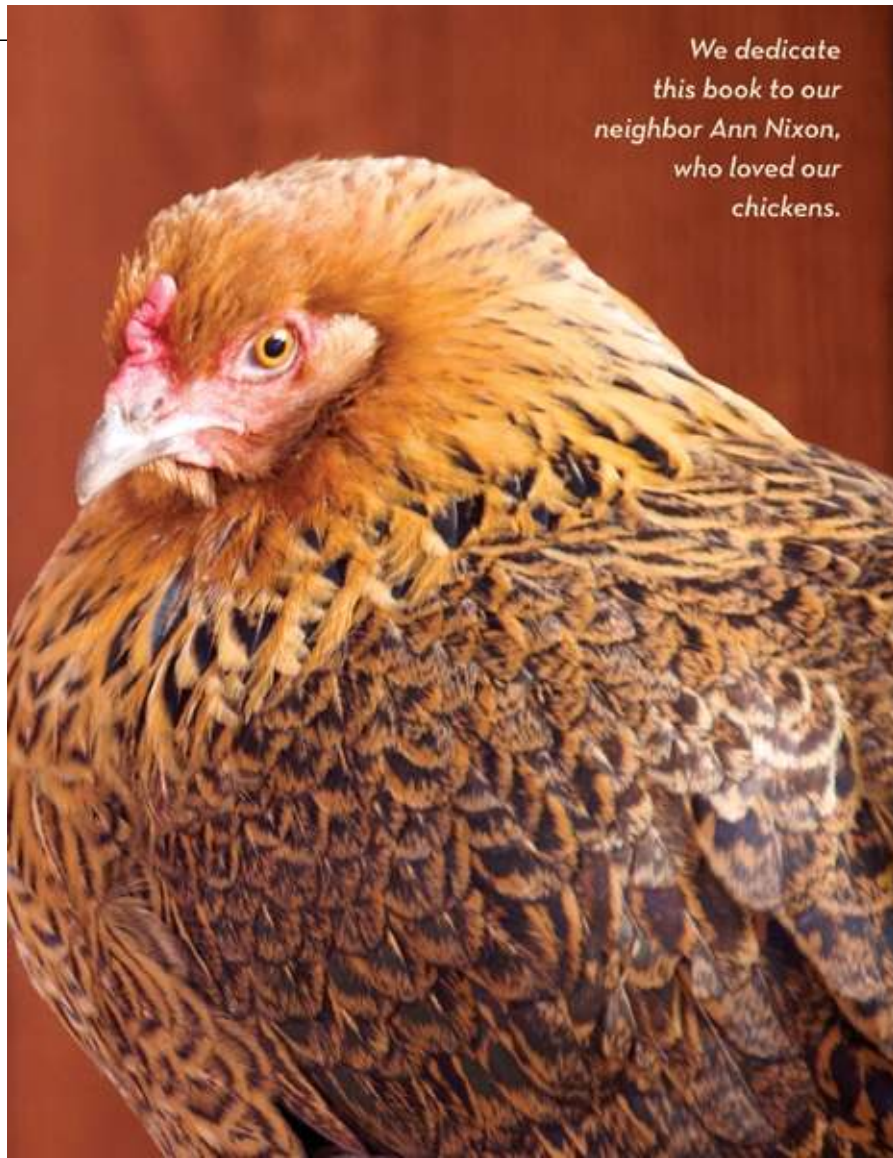
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*We dedicate  
this book to our  
neighbor Ann Nixon,  
who loved our  
chickens.*



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# CONTENTS

Preface	
Acknowledgments	
<b>CHAPTER 1: Why Keep Chickens?</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 2: Planning: Are We Ready for This?</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 3: Breeds: Pickin' Chickens</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 4: Chicks: Parenting Your Peeps</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 5: Coops and Runs: Building Your Poultry Palace</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 6: Adult Chickens: Getting in Touch with Your Inner Farmer</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 7: Health Management: Should I Bring a \$5 Chicken to the Vet?</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 8: Eggs: How to Make Them and Eat Them</b>	
Resources	
About the Authors	
Index	



# PREFACE

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IT'S NOT UNUSUAL for couples to meet and later discover that they share an artistic passion, work in the same field, or have a common religious tradition. For us, it was chicken keeping. Hannah had the most experience, having been around chickens since she was a child. I had been a backyard flock-farmer for only a year or so, but it had already become my favorite hobby. During our first summer together, we enjoyed the company of my small flock of two hens, knowing that we would soon add to it. Indeed, by the following spring our flock had expanded to eight birds, and the presence of several hatchery catalogs on the coffee table suggested that it would soon expand further.

That summer, we did not have a chicken-themed wedding, but we did get a lot of chicken-related gifts (thanks, Mom!). Hannah had recently found work in her true calling, nursing and midwifery, and I had just gone back to school for an advanced degree in agricultural science. While Hannah brought home the bacon, I studied the production of bacon.

During the course of my studies I became interested in how animals are fed and what effects these agricultural systems have on their health and, ultimately, our own. I remember looking at the label on my bag of organic chicken feed, trying to decipher what it contained: terms like “processed grain by-products” and “plant protein products” seemed a little vague and possibly sinister to me. I did some research and found that feed (that’s “food” to you and me) was labeled in this way to give big mills the flexibility to formulate their feed from the cheapest ingredients available at any given time. Although this might be acceptable for most farmers, I suspected that I was not alone in wanting something more consistent and potentially healthier for my birds.

To test my theory, I first approached the folks on my local online chicken forum. I asked them whether they would be interested in buying feed that was grown mostly in our region and had quality ingredients that read more like a recipe than a list of commodities. With their encouragement, I commissioned my first 1-ton batch of “Portland Layer” (that is, feed for laying hens) from a local feed mill that did custom blending.

Following the lead of so many start-up businesses, I began selling this odd new feed from my garage. I often wondered what the neighbors thought of the mysterious cash transactions for enormous, unlabeled white bags. As the traffic around our house increased, Hannah suggested that perhaps a proper storefront would be more suitable for my venture than the driveway of an old Portland neighborhood.

**FUN FACT** *There are more chickens than humans on earth.*

I opened the Urban Farm Store in the spring of 2009 with a few bags of feed, a couple cases of suet, and high hopes that I could transform a ramshackle former recording studio into a feed store. Hannah worked alongside me on her days off, and together we steered this little shop through a season of chick buying and selling, gradually increasing our customer base for the feed and helping others discover the joys of chicken keeping along the way.

From my perch behind the counter at this little store, I researched and answered people



questions about their chickens for hours each day. Here I met folks who had elevated the chicken to full-fledged pet status—stopping just short of dressing them in tiny chicken sweaters (though I wouldn't be surprised if a few of them gave in to the temptation). I met other folks only interested in maximizing their egg production, and even a few who wanted me to teach them how to “harvest” their birds for meat.

I've learned a lot about chickens from my customers and still more from my wife. Together we'd like to share the best of this information with you.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK our chickens: Rosie, Yankee, Wissahickon, Ginger, Butternut, Buttercup, and Tweedy. We don't know how they pulled it off, but somehow our lives seem to revolve around them.

Thanks also to our families and friends for tremendous support and encouragement along the way. From recipes and recipe testing to suggestions for book titles, they had our backs. Iris, Jorjan, Annie, Mari, David, Stuart, Dale, Evan, Jonas, Bill, and Martha are dearly loved and much appreciated.

Hannah would like to thank her friends and childhood neighbors, the Hazzard family, to whom she traces the original inspiration for chicken keeping and backyard livestock keeping in general.

We'd also like to thank Tonya and Chris for sharing their extensive chicken experience with us since we opened the Urban Farm Store. I'm sure they can see their advice throughout the book.

Thanks to all the people at the Urban Farm Store for everything you do.

Last, but not least, we'd like to acknowledge the newest member of our family. Abigail, although you probably had no idea what was happening outside of mommy's belly, we want you to know that you were our greatest inspiration to finish the book on time.



# WHY KEEP CHICKENS?

WHEN WE TELL SOMEONE that we have seven chickens living in our backyard, there is usually a brief silence, followed by a curious “Why?” Hannah will counter, “Why not? They’re great pets—charming, and useful, too.” Indeed, which of your other pets provide you with wholesome, protein-rich food and ask so little in return? Does your dog keep the bunnies population at bay in your backyard? Will the cat mow the lawn for you?

Besides these practical considerations, we think chickens are just plain fun to be around. We derive so much delight from observing the antics of our hens that we would likely keep them even if they did not lay. Indeed, many of our customers are surprised and pleased to discover that chickens have a certain kind of grace and can be truly beautiful. Because of this, Hannah likes to call them “mobile lawn ornaments.” Robert gains the deepest satisfaction from watching them methodically graze the lawn or scratch through the compost seeking hidden bugs. As he cares for these long-domesticated animals, he feels a deep connection to the land and to a not-too-distant agrarian past. Chickens are at once so useful, colorful, and entertaining that we can no longer imagine our lives without them. Best of all, our hearts swell each time we see the look of absolute delight and fascination in the eyes of children when they see their first live chicken bounding across the lawn toward them, or when they hold a warm, fuzzy chick. Children seem to know intuitively that chickens are special creatures with a lot to teach us all about nature and ourselves.

## QUALITY OF LIFE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The chicken is best known as the producer of that humble staple food, the egg. Although the egg is familiar to all, we can safely say that you have never truly experienced its full potential until you have eaten one laid by one of your own hens and cracked open and cooked while still warm. Not only will its deeply colored yolk and firm white taste richer and more flavorful than you ever imagined an egg could, but this special egg will provide an immense satisfaction earned from your role in its production.

Backyard hens enjoy an enviable lifestyle compared to their commercial counterparts. Even so-called free-range hens often suffer from crowding in immense, climate-controlled barns. Your hens, on the other hand, will enjoy a relatively carefree life full of affection, quality food, and fresh air. Couple that with the opportunity to preserve older, heritage breeds and their unique traits, and you can see why Robert likes to say that keeping a home flock truly “allows chickens to be real chickens.”

Another thing we love about producing our own eggs in the backyard is that they don’t have to travel to reach our table. When it comes to commercial eggs, organic included, the fragile orbs are typically deeply chilled to preserve them and then trucked many miles

your plate. Even eggs with distant “use by” dates usually were laid weeks, if not months before and are no longer anywhere near their best. Keeping a few hens in the backyard is a great way to conserve resources by eating food that’s grown so close at hand that the “local” label is more appropriately replaced by “homegrown.” This is one reason many so-called locavores have especially embraced backyard animal husbandry. Only chickens and a few other small animals can provide high-quality protein in the city or suburbs. It’s easy to see where your food comes from—and even easier to get to know the farmers when they eat breakfast with you!

Some backyard chicken keepers do raise birds for meat, and if you eat chicken, this is certainly a good way to ensure that the birds you are eating had a happy life and ate well while they were alive. This will not be a major focus of this book, however, because the vast majority of backyard chicken keepers regard their chickens as pets and find it unsettling—not outright upsetting—to consider eating them. We feel that this is a choice for the chicken keeper to make; we take no position either way. If you are interested in learning more about harvesting your birds for meat, visit [www.urbanfarmstore.com](http://www.urbanfarmstore.com) to find more information and links to useful resources.

Finally, it’s important to consider that the eggs (and meat) from your backyard buddies will contain a more optimal balance of nutrients than their store-bought rivals. As we discuss in [chapter 8](#), recent findings suggest that eggs from small, pasture-raised flocks (like yours) are lower in cholesterol and have a healthier ratio of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids than even organic, free-range eggs from the store. Remarkably, the nutritional comparison also showed that these eggs were higher in several important vitamins and minerals. Eggs that taste great, are laid by happy hens, and are good for your health—what could be better than that? We’ll go into a lot more detail about eggs in the chapter we’ve creatively titled “Eggs.”

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## Origin of Domestic Chickens

Chickens were domesticated from a wild red jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*) at least eight thousand years ago in Southeastern Asia. By 2000 BCE they had reached the Indus River valley and soon thereafter spread to Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa. The domesticated chicken was established throughout Polynesia by about three thousand years ago, and there’s evidence that they reached the Americas several centuries prior to European contact. Chickens became an important food source wherever they were introduced because of their small size and ease of care.

Like other animals that humans have domesticated, chickens differ in at least two relevant ways from their wild ancestors. First, domesticated chickens are much less aggressive than their wild counterparts. Although this makes them easier to handle, it also means that they require more protection from predators. Domesticated birds are also much more prolific producers of meat and eggs than

**their wild cousins. This results in higher feed requirements and the need for further human support. The result: a red jungle fowl can take care of itself, whereas a domesticated chicken is almost totally dependent on humans for food and protection.**

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## **AFFECTION**

Although few chickens show their owners the blatant dog or cat sort of love, many of our customers report that they have a mutually affectionate relationship with their hens. Some birds do seem to genuinely enjoy human company and will seek physical contact. Our store manager, Sharon, has just this sort of relationship with most of her birds. At the store she regularly picks up and handles our Crested Polish hen, Muppet, who shows her appreciation for the affection by cooing and burrowing into Sharon's arms. At home, she has birds that are sometimes invited indoors to watch TV on her shoulders.

Although it's debatable how much chickens enjoy demonstrative humans, it is clear that their owners often become very emotionally connected to them. Our customers joyfully share tales of first eggs, humorous antics, and moments of concern for their birds' well-being, clearly indicating that strong emotional bonds form with these animals as with other pets.

## **EDUCATIONAL VALUE**

Some of you may have grown up on a farm and experienced firsthand the many life lessons that caring for livestock can provide for young children. For the rest of us, our childhood experiences with farm animals were probably limited to petting zoos and fuzzy-page children's books. If you had some direct experience, keeping a few hens in the yard is a terrific way to pass on what you know. If not, it's a great opportunity to learn together as a family project. Either way, it's clear that kids seem to get a special kind of enjoyment from chickens. The sense of responsibility for and connection with the natural world that children develop from caring for any animal is immeasurably valuable. If that animal happens to offer eggs in exchange for the care, the bond created is even more powerful. When a child picks up his or her first egg from the nest, this incredibly nutritious food becomes very intriguing indeed. You might even find that a kiddo who used to turn up her nose at scrambled eggs suddenly begins to clamor for them.

We have seen many children come into the store who have clearly been studying the chickens. They can recite the exact names of breeds they own, often pronouncing the sometimes complex words better than their parents. Some of them have even written essays and book reports on chicken keeping, astounding us with their encyclopedic knowledge. Others have brought their prized birds into their classrooms for show-and-tell events—much to the delight of their classmates, no doubt. Whether learning proper holding techniques, hen housekeeping procedures, or feeding routines, these kids really seem to enjoy finding out as much as there is to know about their unusual and compelling pets.

Many local schools in our area now have chicken coops because of their tremendous

educational value. Of course, students and teachers have been raising chicks and even hatching eggs in classrooms for years. Usually, the lesson plan will center on biological aspects of the chicken life cycle, embryology, and other developmental topics. These days our teacher customers have also been raising and keeping the chicks into adulthood to teach their students about where food comes from, nutrition, and sustainability.

If the chickens become ill, or when they eventually pass on, there are even deeper lessons to deliver to young ones. For adults and children alike, there is undeniable sorrow associated with the loss of any pet, and chickens are no exception. However, unlike dogs and cats, which regularly live over a decade, chickens will usually live only four years or so (up to eight under ideal circumstances). This fact means that you and your family will need to face the transient nature of life relatively often. Although this could be seen as a liability, we prefer to use the occasion of a hen's passing as a time to reflect on the unique give-and-take these creatures share with us and ponder our own place in the natural cycle of life. That said, we have also helped several parents hurriedly replace chicks that have died suddenly, slipping them into the brooding box before the kids come home from school to discover the loss. You can play it either way.

## AESTHETIC VALUE

Another reason to keep chickens is that they are just plain appealing to look at. Chickens have long been appreciated for their feather colors and attractive forms, traits that have earned them a place in the art of cultures around the globe. Beyond their appearance, chickens have a unique gait that seems at once comical and graceful. They probe the environment with scratching and pecking motions that we find endlessly fascinating. A flock of chickens adds such a beautiful sense of movement to your garden that this alone makes them a worthwhile addition to your yard.

To accentuate this beauty, most of our customers choose a variety of different breeds rather than raising a flock of all one type. In our breeds chapter ([chapter 3](#)), you will discover that chickens not only come in different colors but also have different feather patterns, sizes, and even body shapes. Chickens are available in a startling variety of breeds from delicately laced-patterned [Wyandottes](#) to Silkies, which look more like fur-bearing mammals than birds. Then there are the truly bizarre breeds: Naked Necks resembling vultures, frizzled breeds with heavily twisted and crimped feathers, and feather-footed orblike Cochins, to name a few. In fact, there are enough types of chickens out there to keep the backyard flock owner researching and pursuing new varieties to collect year after year. Or, as many people do, they may decide to specialize in a favorite one, even going so far as to breed them or ordering eggs to hatch themselves.



Silkie

Before Hannah got her first batch of chickens, she spent months poring over catalogs, books, and online resources, deciding which breeds were the best and most beautiful. Aesthetics should be considered, because your birds will be a long-term feature of your backyard, but we think that each breed and individual has its merits. That said, we would like to tell you that we have never had an ugly chicken, but that would be a lie. Her name was Springsteen (because she was a Jersey Giant), but she was neither giant nor did she have the attractive, glossy black plumage characteristic of the breed. Her dull gray-black feathers were unevenly distributed over her body, leaving bare patches that became tough and reddened from exposure. She was an eyesore—and rather unappetizing to look at when we ate dinner on the patio. We probably would have kept her despite her pitiful appearance, if it were not for her bullying of the other hens in our flock. Her saving grace was that she was a prolific layer of enormous eggs, which made it possible to pawn her off on a farmer friend of ours. Call us shallow, but for us it's not only about the eggs.

## FUN AND HUMOR



Stunt chicken!



Regardless of their motivations for crossing roads, chickens are just plain funny. It seems that some of our customers make visits to the store just to relate the latest antics of their hens. One woman told us her chickens love to entertain themselves by swinging on her hammock. They hop up on the edge and flutter their wings, trying to keep their balance as the hammock swings wildly to and fro. Another customer's hen likes to head-butt her cat. Our own wild chickens tag-team unsuspecting guests at backyard barbecues: one chicken will approach the victim and provide a distraction while her partner in crime hops up and neatly snags the desired food right out of the victim's hand. This has happened enough times now that we are convinced these chickens truly are in cahoots. Finally, we occasionally have our own little Easter egg hunt when a clever chicken of ours decides to hide her eggs in a new location. Once we found a cache of twelve eggs inside a pole bean trellis. Another time she had us completely stumped—until we went out to the composter and nearly dumped out the compost pail onto a little collection of eggs that she had been hiding there! It's hard to know whether our hens are intentionally having fun with us, but it sure seems like it.

## GARDEN HELPERS

Another great virtue of a backyard flock is their eagerness to pitch in around the garden. They are expert insect hunters and can make a substantial dent in the population of unwanted garden pests, such as slugs and tomato-chomping caterpillars, while having little effect on populations of most beneficial ones, like ladybugs. Though earthworms are hardly pests, they are generally abundant, and your birds will also avail themselves of a worm whenever possible, transforming them into a quick, high-protein snack, and eventually into an egg. Now that's true alchemy! Chickens are not just hunters; fallen fruit and other potentially wasted garden produce will be quickly consumed as well. Beyond scavenging, they also eat green plants with a methodical intensity. A small flock of hens grazing a lawn are tapping into a valuable nutritional resource, all the while helping to reduce your mowing chores. In fact, the American lawn of today looks the way it does because it's an idealization of a grazed pastoral landscape. Returning animals to the pasture, even on a tiny scale, just makes sense to us.

This gusto for plant browsing also has its drawbacks. Chickens are big fans of leafy ornamental plants like hostas, and if given free rein they will mow them down faster than you can say "locusts!" Similarly, chickens will gladly devour your lettuces, spinach, kale, and other green leafy vegetables. It's possible to grow a plant palette that avoids becoming expensive chicken food; for example, they will generally avoid herbs and other strongly scented plants. But you will likely want to fence off or otherwise protect your prized ornamentals and veggies before you sort out what your flock will and won't want to eat. (For further information, see "[Chickens in the Garden.](#)")

Chickens will also scratch the earth in search of tasty tidbits, making shallow holes and possibly exposing the roots of plants. Although this activity is usually harmless, you should keep it in mind when planning your garden-protection scheme. You can harness their nibbling and digging tendencies to help you in the garden as well. Chickens can be confined to a pen or other structure and made to concentrate their digging and foliage chomping in a small area, effectively clearing it for future planting.

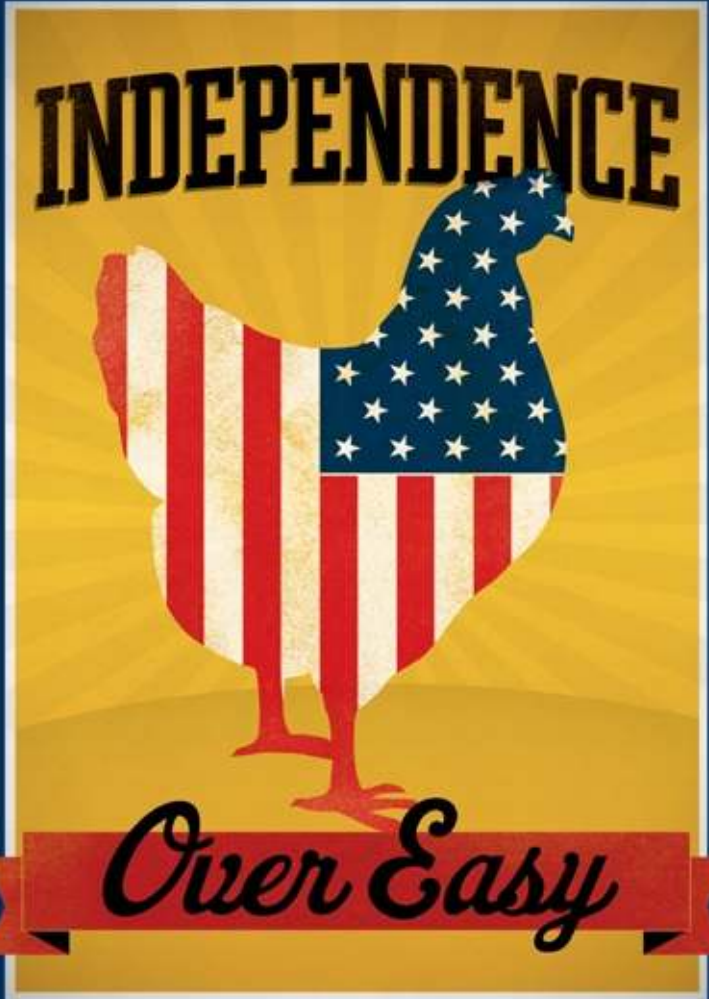
Perhaps the greatest assist that your birds will provide in the garden will come not from the beak end of the bird, but from the other. Your flock's pooping practices will produce enough soiled bedding to supercharge your compost pile, and they will spread nutrients wherever they are allowed to roam. Contrary to popular belief, widely dispersed chicken poop in this form will not burn your plants (though it is advisable to hot-compost large amounts of poultry waste to ensure that any potentially harmful organisms are eliminated). Indeed, we have noticed a marked improvement in the health of plants in the backyard where the chickens live, compared to the front yard, from which they are excluded. Chickens and gardens seem to love each other's company, and we think that you will love the combination, too.

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## **Chicken Family Tree**

**Chickens share an ancestor with an unexpected animal: the *Tyrannosaurus rex*! In 2008, Harvard researchers compared proteins from a nearly seventy-million-year-old T-rex with those of modern creatures. The result? Chickens and ostriches were the closest matches, meaning they are distantly related to the fearsome dinosaur. They even share the same wishbone (furcula) shape in their skeletons. You will find that your chickens are not nearly as fierce as their distant cousins, although they will occasionally surprise you with their speed and cunning when foraging in your yard.**

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## PLANNING: ARE WE READY FOR THIS?

WE HOPE THAT the opening chapter has convinced you that chickens are a lot of fun and can make an enriching addition to your life. However, keeping a flock in your yard is not all fun and games. We tell our friends and customers that it's important to do some homework before bringing home a basket full of peeps. Chickens, like other pets, require a commitment of time, energy, and a little money. Chicks will need to be kept indoors for their first few weeks and tended to several times a day; adults will need daily care and a safe place outdoors to live (although we do know of one flock that spent a year in an attic during a remodel!). And before you build that coop, don't forget to check with your city or neighborhood association to confirm that it's legal to keep chickens at your home and to learn what rules need to be followed. Lastly, remember to be considerate of your neighbors and inform them of your plans—bribing them with promises of eggs as needed.

### LIFESTYLE CONSIDERATIONS

At the outset, you'd be wise to consider whether this unusual pet would be a good fit for your lifestyle. Judging by our diverse range of customers, the answer is usually "yes." Chickens are really quite low-maintenance animals—we like to say that they take about as much time and energy as a cat does, once your chicken-keeping setup is complete. This initial setup does require planning, a short burst of energy, and, above all else, commitment. Most of that initial energy will go into coop building (or purchasing and setup), which, if done right, should be largely a one-time investment of time and money. After this, chickens in a flock of two to ten birds should require an average of five to ten minutes a day, mostly for feeding, watering, and egg collection, punctuated by an occasional coop cleaning.

You'll also need to judge whether the cost of keeping chickens is prohibitive for you. As we will discuss in a moment, coops can be expensive to build or buy, and you will need to invest in some durable equipment at different stages of your flock's life. Don't forget that feed and litter will also be recurring expenses. Compared to your other pets, chickens are actually pretty reasonable, but they do cost more than just chicken feed!

As we mentioned earlier, keeping chickens also means being present to do daily chores, even if they are easy. If you spend much of your time traveling away from home, you may want to postpone actualizing your chicken-keeping dreams until your life settles down a bit. That said, the lure of free eggs will have neighbors clamoring for the privilege of caring for your chickens when you are away on short trips. We even know a number of neighbors who have entered into chicken keeping as a joint venture. This is a smart way to go (assuming that your neighbor is someone you want to deal with regularly), because costs, responsibilities,

and eggs are all shared, which makes it much easier to work chickens into your life.

Other folks think that chickens are not for them because they work long hours or have busy social lives. If this is the case, you will need to make some slight modifications to your routine and some major changes to your chicken-keeping setup, but it can be done. Chickens do not need to be babysat during the day; they are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves if they have a secure environment and flock-mates to keep them company. However, if you regularly return home long after sundown, think about how you can get your chickens safely shut in their coop in your absence. Happily, chickens will go back into their coop at dusk on their own—they just need someone to shut and secure the door behind them to keep predators out. We have totally unpredictable schedules ourselves, so we chose to install a rather expensive automatic door that operates on a timer. For us it was well worth the price for the peace of mind it affords us when we're running late. There are, of course, other less expensive options. Perhaps there is a neighborhood kid who will close the coop for you every day after school in return for eggs or a small fee.

We have also heard people fret because they always neglect their houseplants to death and wonder what would happen to a chicken in their care. We tell folks like this to not let the lack of a green thumb stop them, because chickens are much better than a ficus at telling you (loudly and vigorously) what they need. A houseplant fades into the background, whereas chickens lure you every day with the promise of fresh eggs and delightful antics. You won't forget them, we promise!

Other prospective chicken keepers may be daunted by stories of people having to deal with alarming chicken health problems that sound too complicated to treat. Like any pet, chickens do have occasional health issues, but one of our goals with this book is to empower you to prevent or address most of them easily yourself. Indeed, most backyard chicken keepers we know—and we know hundreds—never have to address a major chicken crisis at all. It's also reassuring to know that more vets are welcoming chickens into their practices and can offer help with anything that you don't feel capable of dealing with yourself.

Having children should not stop you, either. Chickens are fascinating for kids, and they will introduce basic concepts of food sources, animal care, and responsibility. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, children seem to be delighted by chickens and are eager to learn about them. If you play your cards right, you might be able to rope the kids into doing some of the chores for you.

## SPACE REQUIREMENTS

In addition to time and energy, you will also need an appropriate spot in your yard for your birds. Those with no outdoor living space will be hard-pressed to find a way to house the chickens—a sixth-story apartment is a difficult place to imagine accommodating a successful flock. Some imaginative chicken owners keep their hens in diapers running around the house, but we don't recommend this approach. As Robert likes to say, "Chickens need a place to express their chicken-ness." At a minimum, you will need an area in your backyard that is large enough to accommodate a coop (the enclosed chicken house, also called a henhouse) and a run (the securely fenced pen adjoining the coop).

We hesitate to quote exact figures for how many square feet to provide per chicken.

because most studies that have been done on this subject are for commercial laying operations, not for home flocks. We have found that the per-chicken requirement is a whole lot different if you have three chickens than if you have a hundred. As we often say, backyard chicken keeping is an art rather than a science.



A spacious backyard coop

When customers ask what they'll need for a typical backyard flock of three birds (which is a manageable number for a beginner and is usually the legal limit without a special permit), we tell them that they'll need an area of at least 4 by 8 feet—more (say, 8 by 10 feet) if the birds will be mostly confined to the space all day. We have much more to say about space and building requirements in [chapter 5](#), but we're throwing out some numbers here to help you decide whether your back (or front) yard can accommodate a small flock. In addition to space for the coop and run, plan on allowing your birds access to the whole yard to forage and frolic for even a few hours a week if at all possible. They will reward you for this with better health and egg production, not to mention lots of cheap entertainment.

In addition to available space, your backyard should meet the basic environmental needs for this type of animal. For instance, chickens require both sun and shade at various times, and they will not thrive in places that are either excessively wet or overly dry. Most yards meet these minimum requirements or can be easily modified to do so. However, if you live on a houseboat, you might want to think twice before building a coop in that leaky old rowboat. Or just get ducks instead!

## WHAT'S THIS GONNA COST ME, ANYWAY?

The cost of keeping chickens depends largely on the choices you make at the outset, and the single most important decision you will make is how to approach coop building. At the Urban Farm Store, we have seen our customers' choices run the gamut from practically free to thousands of dollars. For instance, several intrepid folks we know have built their coops for under a hundred dollars by using almost entirely reclaimed lumber and hardware. Although

this may not be practical for most of us, using some reclaimed building materials will help keep both cost and environmental impact low. Most customers build a solid but modest coop for a couple hundred bucks and construct it themselves as a weekend project (or five weekends, if you are as slow as we were). Others hire a contractor to build the chicken palace of their dreams. We even know one customer who spent hundreds of dollars building a coop that resembles Hogwarts from the Harry Potter books. They call it “Henwarts.”

Of course, before you build the coop, you will also be on the hook for the chicks and the equipment for raising them. This will total about \$75 to \$150, depending on a few factors we will cover later in the book. After the initial layout for the coop, chicks, and their supplies along with a few other durable accessories for the adults (up to an additional \$100), the cost of chicken maintenance is essentially tied to the cost of their feed and litter (that is, the bedding that helps keep the coop clean). We figure this at about \$5 to \$10 per chicken per month, depending on whether you go for a homegrown, basic, or premium diet and how often you clean out the coop.

If you think you’ll be saving money on eggs, try dividing the cost of your coop and other expenses by the average cost of a dozen eggs. You’ll quickly surmise that, for most of us, it takes many years of chicken keeping to recoup the investments. Though you may not soon be saving money on your grocery bill, we think the cost is more than justified in other ways (see [chapter 1](#)). In the final analysis, your hens will always be pets, not money-savers. We do, however, know one adorable young chicken keeper who sells homegrown eggs to her neighbors to supplement her allowance. It would be hard to resist that sales pitch, to be sure.

**FUN FACT** *Alektorophobia is the fear of chickens.*

Keep in mind that getting things set up correctly from the start will be the most thrifty approach in the long run. For instance, trying to save money by building a flimsy coop will lead to unhealthy chickens, possible losses to predators, and frequent repairs—neither efficient nor economical. Similarly, we recommend that you invest in the appropriate feeding and watering accessories. We’ve known many people who’ve tried to keep using their chicken feeders for their full-grown chickens, only to eventually realize that the cost of the wasted feed (from the chickens repeatedly kicking over the feeder) would have paid for a durable adult feeder. Likewise, we encourage you to seek out and use the best feed that you can buy. Quality feed will likely improve your birds’ health and laying—not to mention the nutritional quality of the eggs—enough to easily justify the outlay.

## **AM I ALLOWED TO KEEP CHICKENS?**

Not too long ago, a few chickens pecking around the front yard of a house in an American city was a common sight. It was a matter of simple practicality; people had a vegetable garden and some chickens because these were two of the easiest ways to grow their own food—and they still are. After WWII, the rise of the supermarket began a sudden and pronounced shift away from self-sufficiency. At about the same time, the emergence of the suburb signaled the end of most home chicken keeping, as restrictive community rules were drawn up that limited pet choices to cats and dogs. This anti-chicken bias was particularly evident

former farming communities wishing to shed their rural image.

These days we are witnessing a widespread reversal of these attitudes. Many cities and their surrounding suburbs are revising their ordinances to reclassify chickens as pets, not livestock. The result? Chickens have become downright trendy. Even sophisticated New York City is fascinated with the chicken-keeping movement. As proof, our friends and family regularly send us articles clipped from the *New York Times*, *New Yorker* magazine, and other highbrow publications about chickens and the people who keep them (including Martha Stewart). Across the pond in England, backyard chicken keeping is an established hobby that has been mushrooming in popularity lately. According to the *Guardian*, there are currently over half a million UK households keeping chickens!

Here in Portland, Oregon, where chickens have been allowed more or less continuously since the 1800s, they are practically an institution. There is a popular online chicken forum and an annual backyard coops tour, and our little store has been featured on the news several times. Of course, we dearly hope that the current resurgence of love for chickens is not just a flash in the pan. Unlike most trends, chickens are downright practical, so we think that they are here to stay.

When trying to figure out whether your home town is hip to chickens, we suggest that you start by consulting the online resources that list various cities and their current laws regarding chicken keeping. We will not attempt to print a list of cities and laws here—would be out of date by the time this book made it into your hands. See the Resources for a list of some of the more comprehensive websites listing chicken laws and regulations.

Even if chickens are allowed in your area, consider your neighbors before you take the chicken plunge. It's in your best interest to notify them in advance about your plans. Tell them how you plan to keep the chickens confined to your yard (with a fence) and keep the odor nonexistent (cleaning the coop regularly and keeping a reasonable number of birds) and the noise down (by not keeping any roosters—which many cities don't allow anyway). By involving your neighbors in your plans and educating them in advance, you will avoid future conflict with them. You can also try persuading them with the promise of eggs!

If you know in advance that one of your neighbors is extra finicky, it would be wise to position your coop as far away from their property as possible (25 feet seems to be a safe distance), and anticipate any complaints they might have in advance. In some cities (Portland is one), there are some regulations in place that protect both neighbors and chicken keepers. If the county receives a complaint, an inspector will arrive at your home (announced) and inspect your setup. They are usually helpful and are often a great resource for helping to resolve disputes.



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