

## **Getting Started: Chicken Care Info Sheet**

*Disclaimer: Halifax Regional Municipality provides this information for convenience only. The municipality does not intend or believe that this information is exhaustive, and gives no warranties as to the suitability, quality or accuracy of this information. Consult with experts prior to purchasing or keeping egg laying fowl.*

### **Building a Coop**

- Coops need to be built to provide shelter from the wind, rain, cold, heat, snow, and predators. It is your chickens “house” and they will nest, lay eggs, feed, and drink water there. Make sure it is well built with strong, quality materials and is always clean and dry.
- Plastic enclosures, such as a rabbit hutch or plastic sheds, are not appropriate for chickens.
- The floor must be constructed to keep out predators, be easy to clean, and maintain a consistent environment. A dirt floor is not suitable as it permits predators to gain access to the coop. A wood floor a minimum of 30 centimeters (1 foot) off the ground is suitable but must be protected from moisture. A concrete floor is ideal.
- Walls should be moisture resistant, but non-toxic. Anti-fungal agents can reduce the chance of mold. Paint or varnish should be applied prior to assembly. Ensure there are no drafts.
- The roof should be waterproof and not be made of a material that will not collect and hold heat. The eaves should allow for sufficient ventilation while keeping the openings small to prevent water and predators from entering.
- The main door should be wide enough to let the birds pass but does not need to be larger than that. It must be able to be secured at night to keep predators out. Do not place the door more than 2 feet off the ground or the chickens will have difficulty accessing it. Ideally, they will be able to easily walk in and out of the coop with no need to jump or attempt to fly. Provide another door for human access to the eggs. This can usually be located directly above the nest boxes intended for egg laying/nesting for quick and easy access.
- Windows will provide a better environment for the chickens, as well as providing opportunities for ventilation, especially in hot weather. Consider windows with a sliding or swinging outer cover that can be easily removed or locked securely when needed. Place wire mesh over the opening.
- Chickens require somewhere to roost. Lumber or branches can be used, about 5-10 centimetres in diameter. They should be about 2 feet off the floor, and enough space for all the birds should be provided to avoid competitions for space. Ensure they are securely fastened and capable of holding the weight of chickens expected to be on each roost.

- Chickens do well in cold conditions if the coop is well sealed from wind and water intrusion. Under normal winter conditions in HRM, a single 100w light bulb turned on in the coop will provide sufficient heat to keep the chickens warm in the winter, along with passive solar heating. If it becomes exceptionally cold, consider a small heating lamp. Use caution as many materials within the coop are flammable, and the chickens do not need much heat. In contrast, during hot summer days ensure the coop has enough ventilation. If it is exceptionally hot with little or no breeze, provide a small fan to circulate air through the coop.
- Feeders can be incorporated as part of the construction, but many affordable sturdy plastic feeders are available that be easily moved and filled when needed. Ensure the material can be easily cleaned. The feeder should always be capable of keeping the feed dry. They should provide enough space for the birds to eat together, to avoid competition in the flock.
- Waterers should also be made of a non-toxic, non-corrosive, easy-to-clean material. The waterer needs to be positioned away from the feeder to avoid contamination. It should be capable of holding enough water for a full 24-hour period and be cleaned regularly.
- Nest boxes must be provided for every 2-3 hens. They prefer wooden boxes placed as close to the ground as possible. Provide about 8-10 centimetres of straw or grass. The chickens prefer the space to be dark, private and covered on the top for privacy.

### **Building a Run**

- The purpose of a run is to allow the chickens to enjoy space to run, dust bathe, forage, and play. It is to prevent the bird's escape, and prevent predators from getting in.
- The surface of the run can simply be soil, but it must be capable of being raked out to remove droppings. In an urban area, consider leaves, wood chips, or sod as ground cover.
- Fencing must be strong. Chain link or woven fencing is ideal. Small, strong wire mesh should be placed at the bottom and anchored underground to deter tunneling under the fence by predators. Keeping fences adequate will require ongoing maintenance and regular inspection.
- The pen must be covered to prevent hens from escaping, and to keep predators out.
- Provide a windbreak, such as a short wall, to allow the hens some protection from wind while remaining outside.
- Shade should be made available with landscaping or by covering small sections of the walls or roof.
- Ensure the chickens can have a dust bath. Dust baths are an important part of disease prevention as they allow the chickens to remove insects and parasites; chickens also enjoy the bath and it is an important component of their overall

welfare. They will usually dig their own, but if dirt is not available in the run, one must be provided. Provide a kiddie pool or other similar container filled with loose soil. In the winter, provide a large bucket inside the coop filled with play sand as an alternative.

- Add furnishings to the run such as platforms, small trees, branches, and other places for the chickens to interact with, play on and hide within. You could even provide plants which are edible to chickens. Chickens with uninteresting and unfurnished pens may have behavioral issues.

### **Cleaning, Regular Maintenance and Manure Disposal**

- Regular cleaning is vital to reduce the chances of disease spread, to minimize odour and for animal welfare.
- Manure and wet bedding should be removed from the coop daily. Manure and bedding can be bagged in garbage bags and placed curbside for collection. Do not put manure or bedding in the green bin.
- A thorough cleaning of the coop should occur at least once a year. This would include a complete removal of all bedding, straw and other materials inside the coop, and a disinfection of the walls, floors, roosts, and nests.
- Hay, straw, or grass used in the coop or run should be dry, and no older than a year at the time it is being placed. Ensure it is free of insects, mold, and contaminants.
- Clean waterers and feeders at least once a week with hot, soapy water.
- Rake out the bottom of the run at least once monthly and completely replace bedding.
- Keeping the coop and run clean and dry helps to prevent disease.

### **Feed and Water**

- Food and water are required at all times of the day and night. Change water at least daily and ensure it is clean, and food is kept dry. Replace food when it gets damp or wet. Chickens drink about two cups of water per day.
- When it is cold outside you will have to periodically go outside to ensure the water is not frozen. Bringing out warm (not hot) water can extend the time in between these checks, and can help keep the chickens warm in cold weather.
- Onion, avocados and chocolate are toxic to chickens.
- Store food in rodent proof containers in a cool, dry place that is inaccessible to animals.

### **Disposal of droppings, bedding, and deceased birds**

- Droppings, wet bedding, and dirty straw should be placed in the garbage. Do not place droppings or bedding in the green bin. Do not use your chicken's manure in composting or other agricultural practices. The risk of disease is too high.
- If birds die, they must be disposed of by a licensed veterinarian or at a pet crematory. Birds cannot be placed in the garbage, green bin or blue bags. They are non-collectable waste. Do not bury birds as they will attract predators.

### **Staying Safe**

- To avoid germs such as *salmonella* it is vital to practice some basic disease mitigation habits.
- Always wash your hands immediately after handling live poultry, their eggs, or being within their living area.
- Supervise children around chickens.
- Do not hug, snuggle, or kiss chickens.
- Do not touch your mouth, eyes or face around chickens.
- Do not eat or drink around chickens.
- Do not bring chickens inside your home or any building aside from the structure (coop) where they live and to the vet.
- Follow proper cleaning practices for coops and runs.
- Clean tools and equipment used in an around chicken living areas.
- Set aside a pair of shoes to wear for coop cleaning and maintenance that are separate from your other shoes. Do not bring these shoes inside the house.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Wash eggs thoroughly with soap and warm water before consuming.
- DO NOT slaughter or attempt to prepare chicken meat on your own. Consult a licensed abattoir.