



Keeping hens

We look at the mechanics of keeping hens so you can have a steady supply of eggs direct from your garden to your kitchen.

Recently many consumers have taken steps to grow their own vegetables and some are moving up a grade to keeping laying hens. Delving deeper into the good life in the quest for self sufficiency is appealing in the ideal. We looked at the ins and outs of keeping hens, including the costs of investing in a readymade coop.

Life as a laying hen

A hen will live for around 5 to 7 years. They begin laying eggs when 3 to 6 months and will continue until around 3 years. Young hens that haven't begun laying yet are called pullets. The term hen is used by those in the know, to describe the more mature birds that have started to lay eggs.

While it varies depending on breed, hens lay around 250 eggs a year. Hens have simple needs, providing them with somewhere to sleep, a run to scratch in, keep them fed and watered and they're generally happy.

Feed

Hens are omnivores. Originally, wild hens lived on a diet of weeds, seeds, worms and insects and domesticated hens are no different. They like a varied diet and will feed happily on kitchen scraps, such as vegetable peelings, bread and potatoes. It's best to avoid feeding hens meat, citrus, onions and potato peelings and don't feed them anything that has gone off. Just as it might make us sick, it also won't do your birds any

good either.

Kitchen scraps should also be supplemented with layers pellets, a concentrated feed source, or grain, such as oats, wheat or maize. Grain and pellets can be sourced from agricultural supply stores and sometimes pet shops, hardware stores or your local vet. Hens do need a certain amount of protein and carbohydrate. A ready-mixed feed can be handy when starting out as it is already balanced. If left to scratch in the garden hens will eat grass, weeds, slugs and snails and can then need less supplementary feed. The more grass they have access to, the more food they'll find for themselves, however they don't like long grass.

Outdoor access also helps keep pests

AT A GLANCE

Hen houses.

Diet and health.

Pros and cons.

HOUSING HENS

Company and product	Price (€)	Houses	Size x w x h (cm)	Assembled	Delivery (€)
<i>Henhouse</i>					
Green Hen Works - Little Alp	145	4	89x100x89	✓	free within 25 miles, 30 elsewhere
Rabbits and Hutches - hen house medium	145	6	109x91x76	✗	15
Grow Green Solutions - Bedgebury 801	250	2	58.5x88x77	✗	included
Willow Tree Cottage - small hen house	270	4	75x120x105	✓	included
Chic Hens - small hen house	300	2 to 3	85x75x130	✓	15
Poulacapple Poultry - house, nest box and roost	305	6	100x105x105	✗	varies with distance
Omlet - Eglu classic	308.41	2 to 4	80x80 ¹	✓	38
<i>Hen house with enclosed outdoor area</i>					
Green Hen Works - Broody Arc	170	2 to 3	180x100x89	✓	free within 25 miles, 30 elsewhere
Urban Chicken Coops - Hen coop	200	2 to 3	240x800x750	✓	free Dublin and Cork, 50 elsewhere
Oulart Poultry - Hen house and run	230	2 to 4	183x122 ¹ (run)	✓	20 to 50
Chicken Coop Company - Shandon	295	2 to 3	91x91x91	✓	25
Urban Arcs - Family Arc	380	6	270x153x153	✓	free
Poulacapple Poultry - house and run	385	6	100x105x105 (house) 220x103x103 (run)	✗	varies with distance
Omlet - Eglu and run	427.03	2 to 4	300x155 ¹	✓ ²	81.43
Willow Tree Cottage - small hen house and run	440	4	75x120x105 (house) 275x95x95 (run)	✓	included
Grow Green Solutions - Forsham 603	440	3 to 4	58.5x88x77 (house)189.5 (run) ³	✗	included
Chic Hens - the Arc	480	3	290x105x92.5	✓	30

NOTES ¹Length x width. ²Hen house assembled, run must be clipped together. ³Length only

and diseases at bay. Some readymade chicken coops have a small enclosed space for hens which is sufficient, but if you can also give hen's access to a greater area of open space it is better. Coops often have handles so they can be moved easily giving hen's access to fresh grass.

Hens also need some grit in their diet to help digest food. They don't have teeth and hold food in a part of their neck called the gizzard, where with the help of grit, food gets ground down. If birds roam outside they will pick up grit as they scratch, but some advise adding this to the diet if outside access is limited.

A general rule of thumb for how much to feed hens is a good handful of grain per hen, which can then be supplemented with kitchen scraps. Depending on the quality of the feed, a hen with outdoor access will eat 125 to 180 grams or more. The amount they need depends on the bird's weight, level of exercise, the type of climate they live in and the ration's energy content.

It's best to feed hens little and often, but this isn't always possible so feed them when they're let out in the morning or early in the day. Rather than scattering feed on the ground, which can result in wastage, it is possible to buy

feeders that release food gradually. Also, always have a supply of fresh drinking water with your hens.

Sourcing hens

Poultry Ireland has a breeder's list where you can find local breeders in your area. The cost of laying hens varies depending on the breed. Prices for good layers can vary from €8 to €15 per hen. Networks of people interested in producing their own food also exist and can be useful sources of information such as Grow it Yourself (GIY) Ireland, the Cork Food Web and Galway Grows (see *Useful websites*) which all have groups on keeping poultry. If buying a readymade coop the company may also sell hens or be able to advise on where to source them (see *Starter packs*).

Another option is sourcing hens from battery egg production farms. Commercial hens are usually kept for just one laying season of around 14 months. When hens are past their point of peak production and no longer efficient enough they will be slaughtered. If consumers go the ex-battery route you won't know exactly how old the hen is and how long it may lay for, if at all. That said hens may cost you nothing or be very inexpensive, and you are giving the hen a longer, happier

life. Ex-battery hens may take a little more time than other hens to re-adjust to their new environment. They may also have few feathers, but in a couple weeks should recover.

In the UK ex-battery hens can be sourced through the British Hen Welfare Trust but there isn't a dedicated organisation in Ireland. So word of mouth is your best bet, or try posting a query on one of the groups already mentioned (see *Useful websites*).

Hen health

Good animal husbandry and diet can go a long way to preventing hen health problems. The hen house should be

REGISTERING YOUR FLOCK

No matter how small your flock, the Department of Agriculture (see *Useful contacts*) should be notified. This is a precautionary measure in the event of an outbreak of avian flu so that poultry populations can be traced. An application form is available online and should be returned to your local District Veterinary Office. Details available at:

<http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/media/migration/animalhealthwelfare/disease/avianinfluenzabirdfllu/poultryindustry/appform.doc>

Useful contact

Department of
Agriculture and Food
Head Office
Agriculture House
Kildare Street
Dublin 2
Lo call 1890 200 510
tel (01) 6072000
email
info@agriculture.gov.ie
www.agriculture.gov.ie

Useful websites

British Hen Welfare Trust
www.bhwt.org.uk

Irish Fowl
www.irishfowl.com

Poultry Ireland
www.poultry.ie

Build your own coop
Build Easy
[http://www.buildeazy.com/
chicken_coop_2.html](http://www.buildeazy.com/chicken_coop_2.html)

Chicken House
<http://poultry.ie/2010/03/12/a-cheap-chicken-or-duck-house/>

Corrigan's City Farm
[http://www.rte.ie/tv/corrigan-cityfarm/build_hen_hous
e.html](http://www.rte.ie/tv/corrigan-cityfarm/build_hen_house.html)

Useful websites

Food growing networks

Cork Food Web

<http://corkfoodweb.ning.com/group/poultrypeople>

Galway Grows

<http://galwaygrows.ning.com/group/thehenhouse>

GIY Ireland

<http://www.giyireland.com/group/1/>

Irish made hen coops

Chic Hens

www.chic-hens.ie

Chicken Coop Company

www.chickencoop.ie

Green Hen Works

www.greenhenworks.com

Irish Chicken Coops

www.irishchickencoops.com

Old McDonald

www.oldmcdonald.ie

Oulart Poultry

www.oulargpoultry.weebly.com

Tippy Chics

www.tippychicks.com

Urban Arcs

www.urbanarcs.com

Urban Chicken Coops

www.urbanchickencoops.org

Willow Tree Cottage

www.chickenhousesni.co.uk

STARTER PACKS

Company	Price (€)	House	No of hens	Feed	Bedding	Feeder and drinker	Delivery (€)	
Urban Chicken Coops	295		Hen house ¹	2	✓	✓	✗	free Dublin and Cork
Chicken Coop Company	335		Shandon ¹	2	✓	✗	✓	25
Tippy Chicks	390		82x57x65	2	✓	✓	✓	50
Poulacapple Poultry	500		Poultry house and run ¹	3	✓	✓	✓	varies with distance
Willow Tree Cottage	520	95x120x105 (house) 275x95x95 (run)		2	✓	✗	✓	no

NOTE ¹See Housing hens table

completely cleaned out every one to two weeks, or at least once a month. It should also be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at least once a year. Most droppings will fall underneath hen's perches and some coops have a dropping board underneath that can be removed easily on daily basis or at least weekly.

Healthy hens will keep themselves busy scratching around, and will have interest in eating and drinking. They are flock animals so an anti-social hen could also be a sign of ill-health. While hens will naturally moult periodically gradually losing their feathers and acquiring a new coat, it can be a sign of

stress or illness if they suddenly lose a lot of feathers. If you suspect a hen is ill, keep them separate from the rest of the flock to prevent the spread of infection.

Common pests affecting hens include worms, lice, fleas and mites. The British Hen Welfare Trust recommends worming hens 3 or 4 times a year. Ask your local vet for advice on what product is best and if this is necessary. A red mite that is not visible to the eye in daylight can also affect hens. It's hard to detect but red spots on eggs can be a sign because the mite feeds on hen's blood.

Salmonella occurs in the faeces of animals and hens sit on their eggs so

good husbandry practices are also important for food safety. Clean bedding or nesting material will help to keep eggs clean. If eggs are dirty, brush or wipe dirt off with a dry cloth or kitchen paper. To keep eggs as fresh as possible it's best not to wash them because they absorb water.

Problem hens

Other issues that can commonly occur when keeping hens include:

- **Hens stop laying eggs for a period**
This can be for a variety of reasons, such as following stress or if they are moulting. During winter months when there is less daylight hens tend

things to consider

Age and breed

When buying birds for eggs, pullets are probably the best option as they haven't started laying yet and you'll get eggs for longer. Rhode Island Reds or White Leghorn are good layers, but many hybrids or cross breeds lay better than pure breeds. Some breeds are also more aggressive than others. This is something to consider if keeping hens around children and keeping a cock is also then not advisable.

Commitment

Unlike the veg garden, hens can't be left untended for a week or so. Once fed and watered they are happy, but with most coops hens do need to be let out each morning, and closed in at night.

Cost

The initial costs can seem like a lot. However if it's something you're committed to in long term then costs can be justified. Keep costs down by sourcing ex-battery hens, making your own DIY coop and feeding hens on kitchen scraps.

Get ready

Before going to buy your birds, have their house and run set up so they can begin to adjust to their new home immediately. Also when collecting your hens the breeder may not provide you with something to transport them. A sturdy cardboard box with a few holes in the side for air should suffice. You can get special poultry carriers and these may be handy if a bird needs to see the vet.

Numbers

Hens will lay an egg most days so consider how many eggs you use a week. 5 hens at full production will potentially give you 35 eggs a week. They are flock birds, so you'll need to keep at least 2. Once stored correctly, preferably in a cool, dark and dry place, eggs will keep for up to 6 weeks. If unsure whether eggs are still fresh, place in a bowl of water, if it floats it's bad, if it sinks it's good.

Noise

Keeping a cock can cause a noise problem. Hens will lay perfectly well without a cock, whose services are only required if you want to breed. Laying hens are much less noisy and sleep from sundown until sunrise. Hens are much quieter than their male counterparts so noise disturbance is usually not a problem.

Pet adjustment

It can take a short while for pets to adjust to hens. If using an enclosed coop pets won't gain access easily. Cats are not usually a problem, but dogs may be. It depends on the individual animal.

Space

Coops around 250cm long and 150cm wide are sufficient for a couple of hens, but having a bigger area is an advantage. When hens graze the same patch diseases are more likely. Hens can also be useful to clear a piece of ground before planting a veg patch. As they root, they loosen the soil, eat grass and weeds.

HEN COOPS

Coops vary in price greatly, with some more plush than others. Personal preference can come into play when choosing a coop, including how it fits into your garden aesthetically. From the options we looked at a hen house alone can cost between €145 and €308. Stand alone houses are more suited to a bigger garden where you can fence off an area as a run. A hen house with an enclosed outdoor area can cost between €170 and €480 (see *Housing hens*). These are better for smaller gardens as hens can be left in their enclosure. Many companies also offer start up kits which include a hen house, run, feeders, bedding and feed and cost between €295 and €520 (see *Starter packs*). If buying a readymade coop here are a few pointers to consider:

- Look for good ventilation, easy access to nesting boxes and a removable area beneath perches for easy cleaning.
- Check whether the coop is delivered assembled. Assembling after delivery could be a plus if gaining access to the garden is tight. Some companies offer the option of delivering assembled or will assemble on delivery on request.
- Check to ensure perches and nesting boxes are included or if they must be bought separately.
- Some companies import hen houses, others make them from scratch. So if you're after an Irish made coop, a number of companies specialise in making them (see *Useful websites*).



to lay less often.

- **Eggs have weak shells** This can be a sign of low calcium and crushed egg shells added to hen's feed will increase calcium intake. It is important to dry shells out so there is little trace of egg on the shells, which can be done on a windowsill or in the oven. Hens can sometimes break and eat their own eggs and traces of egg on shells may encourage this behaviour. Any type of crushed shells, ground limestone or oyster shell grit will also add calcium to their diet. If using shells from the beach, ensure they are well washed before crushing as hens don't like salt.
- **The pecking order** If introducing new hens to a flock they can take time to settle in. When a cock is not present the hens will establish their own hierarchy and one hen will usually assert the role of matriarch. So when new hens enter, the flock must readjust to new personalities. Just keep an extra eye on hens during this period, which may last a few days or up to two weeks.

Safe as houses

Your hen house must be a solid enough structure to keep predators out. The fox is a hen's number one threat and is as much an issue in urban as rural areas. A structure like a small garden shed, a dog kennel or a guinea pig hutch can be an

option for a DIY hen house. But you'll have to make a few adjustments to ensure the hens have all the comforts they need, such as having adequate ventilation without being draughty, perches and nesting boxes. Plans for homemade coops are available online (see *Useful websites*). However these are not tried and tested so use your own judgement.

The benefit of readymade coops is that they should be fit for purpose and be solid enough to keep predators out. Also if you buy a hen house without an attached run you will need to fence off a small piece of your garden. While hens love slugs, snails and weeds, free range needs some level of control if you don't want the edible parts of your garden being demolished. Bedding is also needed in the hen house. Suitable bedding includes dry materials like wood shavings, straw or shredded newspaper.

Nest boxes and roots

Hens will lay eggs anywhere but you want them to lay where you can find the eggs easily, which is where nesting boxes come in. Place them in the darkest part of the hen house, which also discourages hens from pecking and eating their own eggs. If hens are not laying in their boxes placing an egg or mock wooden egg in the box can encourage the habit. Different advice is given on the number of nesting boxes needed, but is most commonly 1 box for every 4 or 5 hens.

Because hens are naturally tree dwelling birds they instinctively like to perch so somewhere they can do this should be provided in their house. Each bird should be given around 20cm of space to perch. If constructing your own perch use a pole that is rounded so that hens can grasp their claws around it. If the perch has edges this can cause joint problems as they are uncomfortable for the hens to clutch.

Useful websites

Hen coops

Grow Green Solutions
www.growgreensolutions.com

Omllet
www.omlet.ie

Poulacapple Poultry
www.poulacapplepoultry.com

Rabbits and Hutches
www.rabbitsandhutches.com

choice comment

The initial outlay of buying a readymade coop is quite costly and it will take time to recoup the expense in eggs. Half a dozen free range eggs costs around €2.20, so if you're eating 6 eggs a week, it'll take just over 2 years to break even, and that's when you buy the least costly hen house we priced. Also it doesn't include the cost of hens themselves, feed and bedding. But that said those who have made the leap will say the benefits go far beyond a supply of fresh eggs and hens become almost like pets. There's plenty to consider, but above all the main issue is commitment. Like the old saying goes a puppy is not just for Christmas, chickens are not just for Easter.

Report by
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