Backyard Flock Profits



The No-Fuss Guide to Eggs, Meat & Extra Money from Home-Raised Poultry

Table Of Contents

Introduction: Protein Independence on a Small Scale ---------- 1

Chapter 1: Getting Started Rights ---------- 10

Chapter 2: Housing That Works---------- 33

Chapter 3: Feeding for Maximum Production---------- 60

Chapter 4: Egg Production Mastery ---------- 79

Chapter 5: Meat Production Basics---------- 96

Chapter 6: Health and Maintenance ---------- 114

Introduction: Protein Independence on a Small Scale



I started keeping chickens twelve years ago because I wanted control over where my eggs came from. I'd read enough about industrial egg production to know I didn't want to support it, and I was tired of paying $6-7 per dozen for organic eggs at the store. A backyard flock seemed like the logical solution.

What I didn't expect was how much those birds would change my approach to household food security. Within two years, I wasn't buying eggs at all—I had more than my household needed. Within four years, I'd added meat birds to my routine and stopped buying chicken entirely.



My freezer stayed stocked with birds I'd raised myself, and my egg customers were covering most of my feed costs. The flock had gone from being a project to being a cornerstone of how I fed myself.

This guide is about what I learned in that process. It's not about raising chickens as a hobby or building a poultry business.

It's about producing your own eggs and meat in a way that's practical, sustainable, and low-stress. The methods I'll share work for people with limited space, limited time, and a strong preference for systems that don't require constant attention.





If you're reading this, you probably already understand why protein independence matters. Eggs and chicken are staples in most households, and they're expensive if you're buying quality. A dozen organic, pasture-raised eggs costs $6-8 in most areas. A whole organic chicken costs $15-25. Over the course of a year, those expenses add up to hundreds or thousands of dollars depending on your household size.

A small backyard flock can eliminate most or all of that expense. A dozen laying hens will give you 8-10 eggs per day during peak production, which is more than most households can use. The surplus can offset your feed costs if you sell it, or you can preserve it for winter when production drops. If you raise meat birds once or twice a year, you can fill your freezer with 30-50 pounds of chicken for less than half what you'd pay at the store—and the quality will be better.





But here's what this guide is not: it's not a manual for running a commercial operation, and it's not a blueprint for getting rich selling eggs and chickens. If someone tells you that you can make serious money from a backyard flock, they're either lying or they're not accounting for their time and costs honestly. What you can do is produce high-quality protein for your household, reduce your grocery bills significantly, and possibly generate enough income from egg sales to cover your feed costs and then some.

I'll be direct about the tradeoffs. Keeping poultry requires daily attention—not much, but it's non-negotiable. Birds need water, they need feed, and they need someone to check on them. If you travel frequently or you're not willing to commit to a twice-daily routine, poultry probably isn't for you.





There are also costs: housing, feed, bedding, and occasional veterinary supplies. A flock is not free, even if it eventually pays for itself.

What you'll get in return is fresh eggs that taste better than anything you'll buy, meat you can trust, and the satisfaction of knowing exactly how your protein was raised. You'll also get manure for your garden, pest control if you free-range, and a degree of food security that's hard to put a price on.



This guide assumes you're starting from scratch or close to it. I'll walk you through choosing the right birds for your situation, setting up housing that's functional without being elaborate, managing feed costs, maximizing egg production, raising meat birds, and keeping your flock healthy with minimal intervention. Everything here is based on what actually works in a small-scale, home setting—not what works on a farm or in a commercial operation.



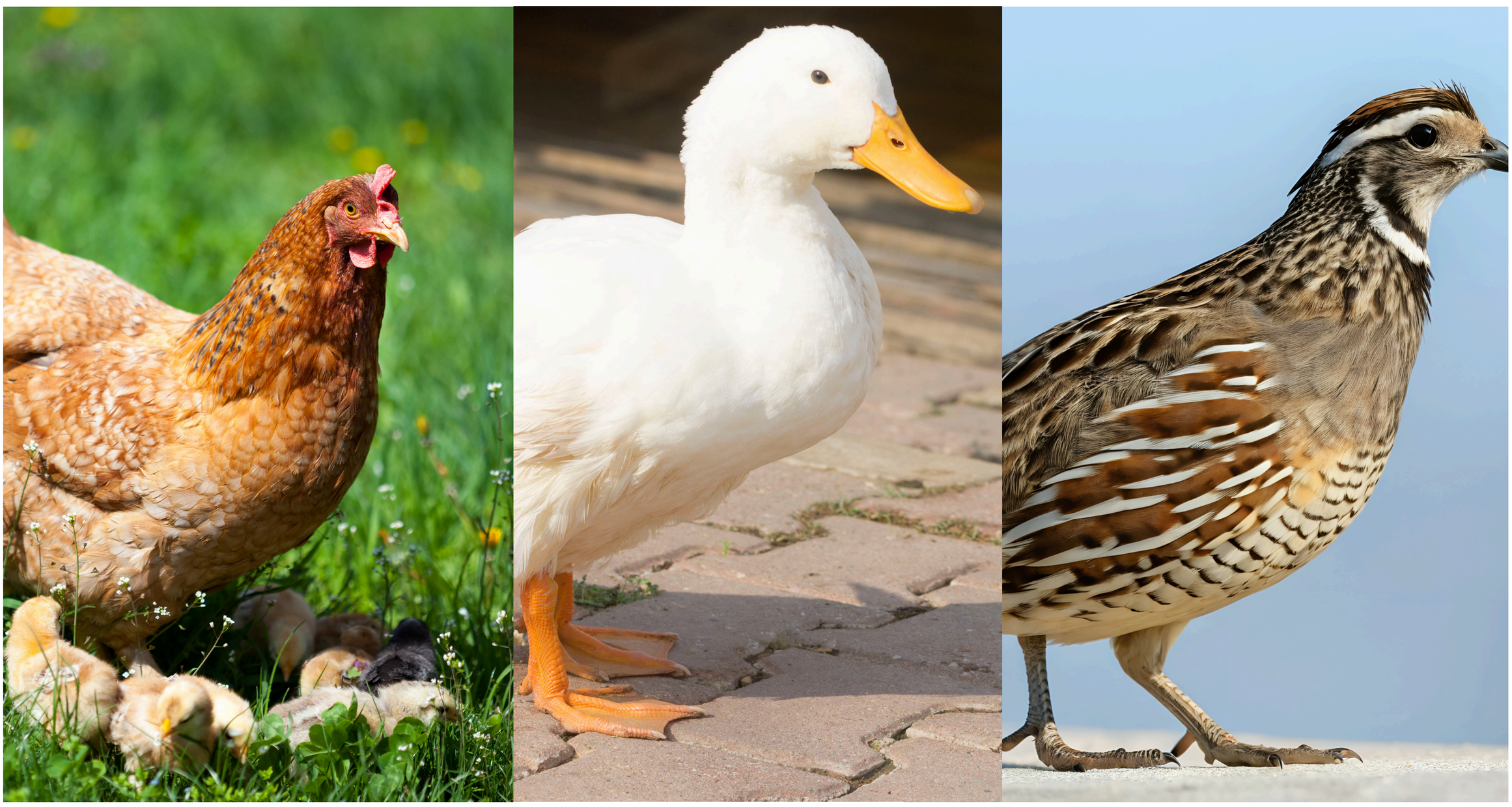
My goal is to help you avoid the mistakes I made and the mistakes I've watched other people make. I want you to start with the right number of birds, the right breeds, and the right expectations. I want you to spend money on things that matter and skip things that don't. And I want you to build a system that fits into your life without taking it over.



If you approach this with a practical mindset—focused on protein independence first and income second—you'll find that a backyard flock is one of the most valuable components of a self-reliant household.

Chapter 1: Getting Started Right

Chickens, Ducks, or Quail? Choosing the Right Bird for Your Space and Goals



Most people default to chickens without considering whether they're actually the best choice. Chickens are familiar, they're easy to find, and there's a lot of information available about keeping them. But depending on your space, your goals, and your tolerance for noise and mess, ducks or quail might make more sense.

Chickens are the most versatile option for most people. They're widely available, they produce well, and they're relatively quiet (hens, anyway—roosters are another matter). A good laying hen will give you 250-300 eggs per year, and dual-purpose breeds provide both eggs and meat. Chickens are also hardy, they tolerate a range of climates, and they're easy to manage once you understand their basic needs. The downsides are that they're messy, they scratch and dig, and they're vulnerable to a wide range of predators.





Ducks are underrated. They're excellent layers—many duck breeds will match or exceed chicken egg production—and their eggs are richer and larger.



Ducks are also hardier than chickens in some ways: they're less prone to respiratory issues, they handle cold better, and they're more resistant to some common poultry diseases.

The meat is excellent if you like duck. The downsides are that ducks are messy—far messier than chickens—and they need access to water for bathing. They're also noisier than hens, though not as loud as roosters.



If you have limited space or no good water source, ducks are probably not the right choice.





Quail are the best option if you're working with very limited space or if local ordinances prohibit chickens. Quail are small, quiet, and productive. A laying quail will produce about 250-300 eggs per year, and while quail eggs are smaller than chicken eggs (you need about 4-5 quail eggs to equal one chicken egg), they're excellent and they sell for premium prices in some markets.

Quail also reach maturity quickly —they start laying at 6-8 weeks— and they can be raised in cages or small enclosures. The downsides are that quail are more fragile than chickens, they're harder to find locally, and processing them for meat is fiddly because they're so small.



For most people reading this, chickens are the right choice. They're the most practical, the most available, and the easiest to integrate into a backyard system.



Ducks make sense if you have the space and water, and quail make sense if you're extremely space-limited or if chickens aren't allowed in your area. But if you're starting from zero and you're trying to decide, start with chickens. You can always add ducks or quail later if you want to experiment.





How Many Birds You Actually Need

This is where most beginners go wrong. They get excited, they read about people keeping 20 or 30 chickens, and they think that's what they need to do. Then they end up overwhelmed with more eggs than they can use, more birds than they can manage, and higher costs than they anticipated.



Here's the reality: a small household—two to four people—needs about 4-6 laying hens to stay in eggs year-round. That's it. Not 20 hens. Not a dozen. Four to six.

Let me walk through the math. A good laying hen produces about 5 eggs per week on average across the year, accounting for seasonal slowdowns and the fact that production declines as hens age. If you have six hens, that's 30 eggs per week, or just over 4 eggs per day. For a household that uses eggs regularly—breakfast a few times a week, baking, cooking—that's plenty. You'll have surplus in the spring and summer when production peaks, and you'll have just enough in the fall and winter when production drops.



If you want to sell eggs to offset feed costs, you can scale up, but do it gradually. Add 3-4 hens for every dozen eggs per week you think you can sell reliably. If you have buyers lined up for two dozen eggs per week, keep 10-12 hens. If you're not sure you can sell anything consistently, don't add extra birds. Get comfortable with a small flock first, figure out whether you can find buyers, and expand only when you have proven demand.



The same principle applies to meat birds. If your household eats chicken once or twice a week, you need about 50-60 chickens per year to stay stocked. That sounds like a lot, but meat birds grow fast—8-12 weeks from chick to processing—so you're not keeping all 50 birds at once. Most people raise meat birds in batches. You might raise 25 birds in the spring and 25 in the fall, processing each batch when they're ready. That gives you about one chicken per week, which is plenty for most households.



The mistake people make is starting with too many birds because they're worried about not having enough. Then they find out that 20 laying hens produce 12-15 dozen eggs per week, which is far more than they can use or sell, and the surplus becomes a burden rather than an asset.



Start small. You can always add more birds. It's much harder to scale down once you've already invested in housing, feed, and infrastructure for a large flock.

The Two Best Dual-Purpose Breeds for Beginners

If you're raising chickens primarily for household use, dual-purpose breeds make the most sense. These are breeds that lay well and also provide decent meat when their laying days are over or when you raise extra cockerels for the table. You don't need a dozen different breeds. You need one or two reliable, proven breeds that are easy to manage and widely available.







Rhode Island Reds are my top recommendation. They're excellent layers—250-300 brown eggs per year—they're hardy, they're calm enough to handle easily, and they forage well if you free-range

When their laying slows down after 2-3 years, they make perfectly good soup or stew birds. Rhode Island Reds are also widely available, which means you can find them at most hatcheries and feed stores, and they're affordable. I've kept Rhode Island Reds for over a decade, and they're the backbone of my laying flock.





Barred Plymouth Rocks are nearly as good. They lay slightly fewer eggs than Rhode Island Reds—220-280 per year—but they're calmer, they handle confinement better, and they're excellent mothers if you want to hatch your own chicks.

Both of these breeds are cold-hardy, heat-tolerant, and disease-resistant. They don't require special care, they're not flighty or aggressive, and they're forgiving if you make beginner mistakes. If you start with one of these breeds and you're reasonably competent, you'll have eggs within 6 months and a sustainable flock within a year.





I'd avoid specialty or heritage breeds unless you have a specific reason to want them. Breeds like Silkies or Polish chickens are interesting, but they're not productive, and they often require more care. Breeds like Leghorns are extremely productive layers, but they're high-strung and they don't provide much meat. Stick with the basics until you know what you're doing.

Chicks vs. Pullets vs. Mature Hens: Cost/Benefit Analysis

When you're starting a flock, you have three options: buy day-old chicks, buy pullets (young hens that are close to laying age), or buy mature hens that are already laying. Each option has tradeoffs, and the right choice depends on your budget, your timeline, and your willingness to deal with the early stages of raising birds.



Day-old chicks are the cheapest option. You can buy them for $2-5 each depending on breed and whether they're sexed (guaranteed female).The downside is that chicks require 5-6 months to reach laying age, and they need special care for the first 6-8 weeks.

You'll need a brooder setup with a heat lamp, you'll need to monitor them closely, and there's a higher risk of losing birds to illness or accidents.



Chicks also don't produce anything for months, so you're spending money on feed and housing without any return. But if you're patient and you're comfortable with the learning curve, chicks are the most economical way to build a flock.

Pullets—young hens that are 16-20 weeks old—are more expensive, usually $15-25 each, but they're much easier. They're past the fragile chick stage, they don't need heat, and they'll start laying within a few weeks of arriving.





This is the option I recommend for most beginners. You're paying more upfront, but you're skipping the brooding phase and you're getting eggs much sooner. The cost difference between chicks and pullets is usually recouped within a few months once the birds start laying.

Mature hens—birds that are already laying—are the most expensive option, often $25-40 each, and they're harder to find. The advantage is immediate production: you bring them home and they start laying within days. The disadvantage is that you don't know how old they are or how many productive years they have left. Some sellers will offload hens that are past their prime, and you won't realize it until production drops. If you buy mature hens, make sure you're getting them from a reputable source and that you know their age and laying history.



For most people, pullets are the sweet spot. You're paying a bit more than you would for chicks, but you're avoiding the hassle of brooding and you're getting eggs within weeks instead of months. If you're on a tight budget and you're willing to wait, chicks are fine. If you want immediate production and you're willing to pay for it, mature hens work. But for a balance of cost, convenience, and reliability, start with pullets.





Legal Considerations: Checking Local Ordinances

Before you buy a single bird, check your local regulations. Poultry are allowed in many residential areas, but not all, and the rules vary widely. Some cities allow hens but not roosters. Some allow a maximum of 3-4 birds. Some require permits, setback distances from property lines, or inspections. Some ban poultry outright.



The easiest way to find out what's allowed is to check your city or county's municipal code. Most municipalities have their codes available online. Look for sections on animals, agriculture, or nuisances.

If you can't find the information online, call your local planning or zoning department and ask.

Pay particular attention to rooster restrictions. Most residential areas that allow chickens prohibit roosters because of noise. If you're planning to keep hens only, this won't affect you. But if you're thinking about breeding your own birds or keeping a rooster for flock protection, you need to know whether it's legal.

If you live in a homeowners association (HOA), check your HOA rules as well. Some HOAs prohibit livestock even in areas where the city allows it. If your HOA rules conflict with your plans, you'll need to either get a variance or reconsider whether poultry are feasible.

I've seen people invest hundreds of dollars in a coop and dozens of birds only to find out that their city doesn't allow backyard chickens. Don't make that mistake. Spend 30 minutes researching your local rules before you spend any money.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The biggest mistake beginners make is starting with too many birds. I've covered this already, but it's worth repeating: start small. Six laying hens is plenty for most households. You can always add more later.

Another common mistake is buying the wrong breeds. Avoid high-maintenance or low-production breeds when you're starting out. Stick with proven dual-purpose breeds like Rhode Island Reds or Barred Plymouth Rocks. You can experiment with specialty breeds later if you want, but don't make them your foundation.





A third mistake is not budgeting for startup costs. Even a basic setup—coop, feeders, waterers, fencing—will cost $200-500 if you're building from scratch or buying used. Add another $100-200 for birds and initial feed. Make sure you have that money available before you commit.





A fourth mistake is underestimating the time commitment. Chickens need daily care. Someone has to feed them, water them, collect eggs, and check for problems. If you travel frequently or you have an unpredictable schedule, you need a plan for who will care for the birds when you're not available. Chickens can't be left alone for days at a time.



Finally, watch out for predators. I'll cover this more in the next chapter, but it's worth mentioning here: predators are the number one cause of flock loss in backyard settings. If you're not prepared to protect your birds from raccoons, hawks, foxes, dogs, and other threats, you will lose birds. Plan for predator-proofing from day one, not after you've already lost half your flock.

Chapter 2: Housing That Works

The Minimum Viable Coop: What You Actually Need vs. Pinterest Fantasies

If you spend any time looking at backyard chicken setups online, you'll come across elaborate coops with built-in planters, shuttered windows, and shiplap siding. They're beautiful, and they're also completely unnecessary. A coop is a box that keeps chickens safe, dry, and comfortable. Anything beyond that is decoration.



Here's what you actually need: a weatherproof enclosure with enough space for your birds to roost at night, ventilation to prevent moisture buildup, nesting boxes for egg-laying, and secure doors to keep predators out. That's it. Everything else is optional.

WEATHERPROOF ENCLOSURE



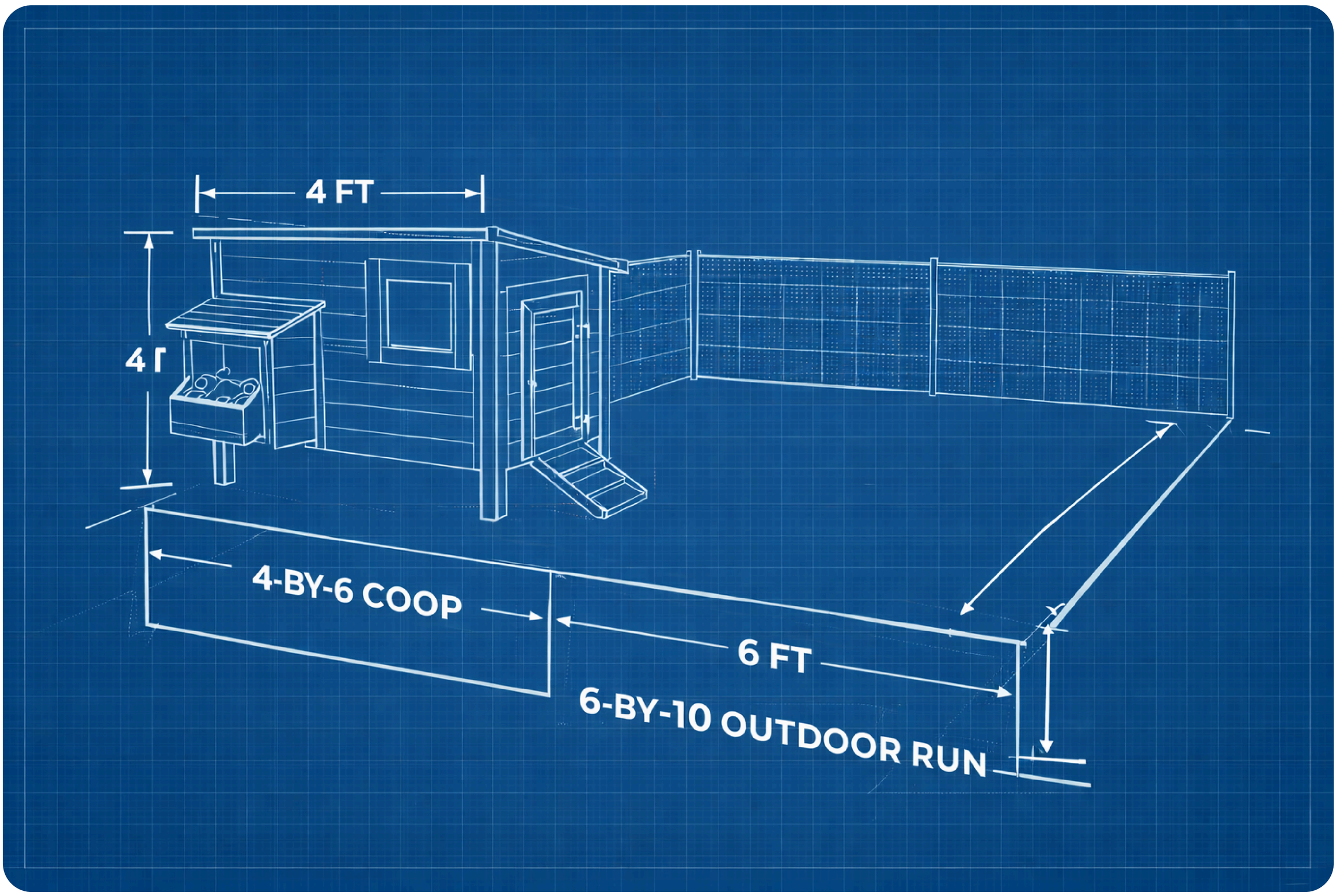
NESTING BOXES



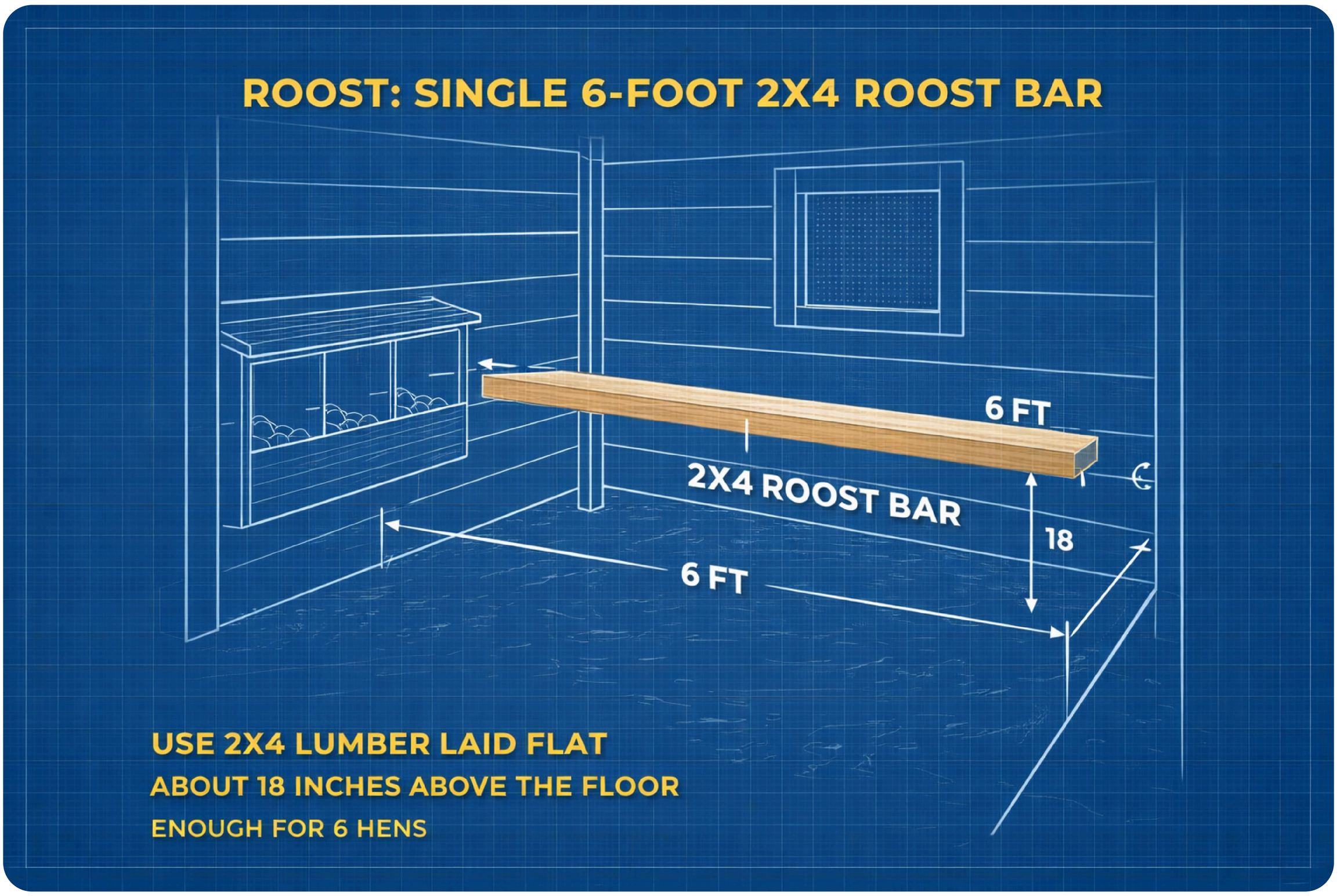
SECURE DOORS



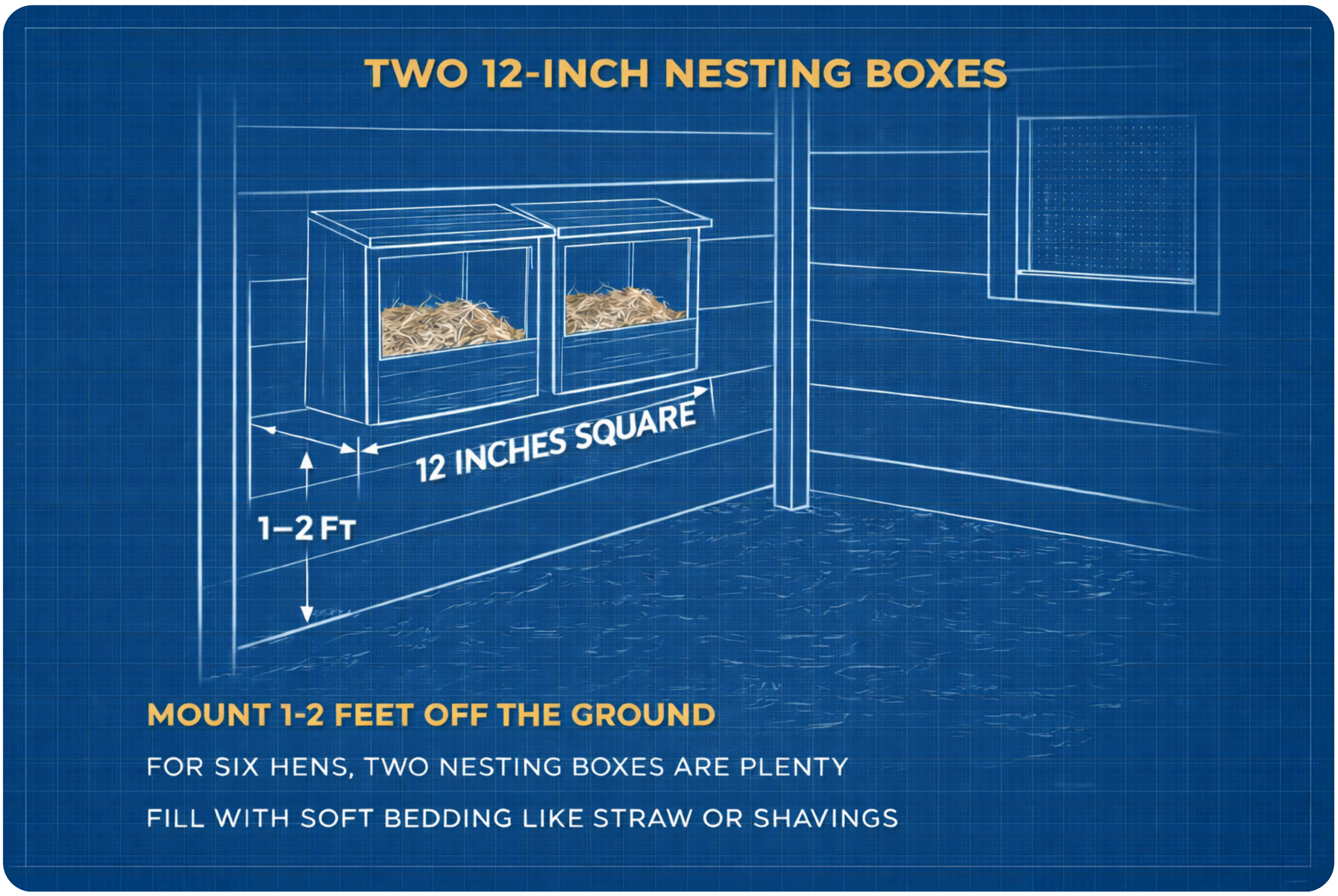
For space, the general guideline is 3-4 square feet per bird inside the coop. So if you're keeping six hens, you need about 18-24 square feet of interior space. A 4-by-6 coop is plenty. You'll also want an outdoor run—an enclosed area where birds can spend the day—and the guideline there is 8-10 square feet per bird. For six hens, that's a run of about 50-60 square feet, or roughly 6-by-10.



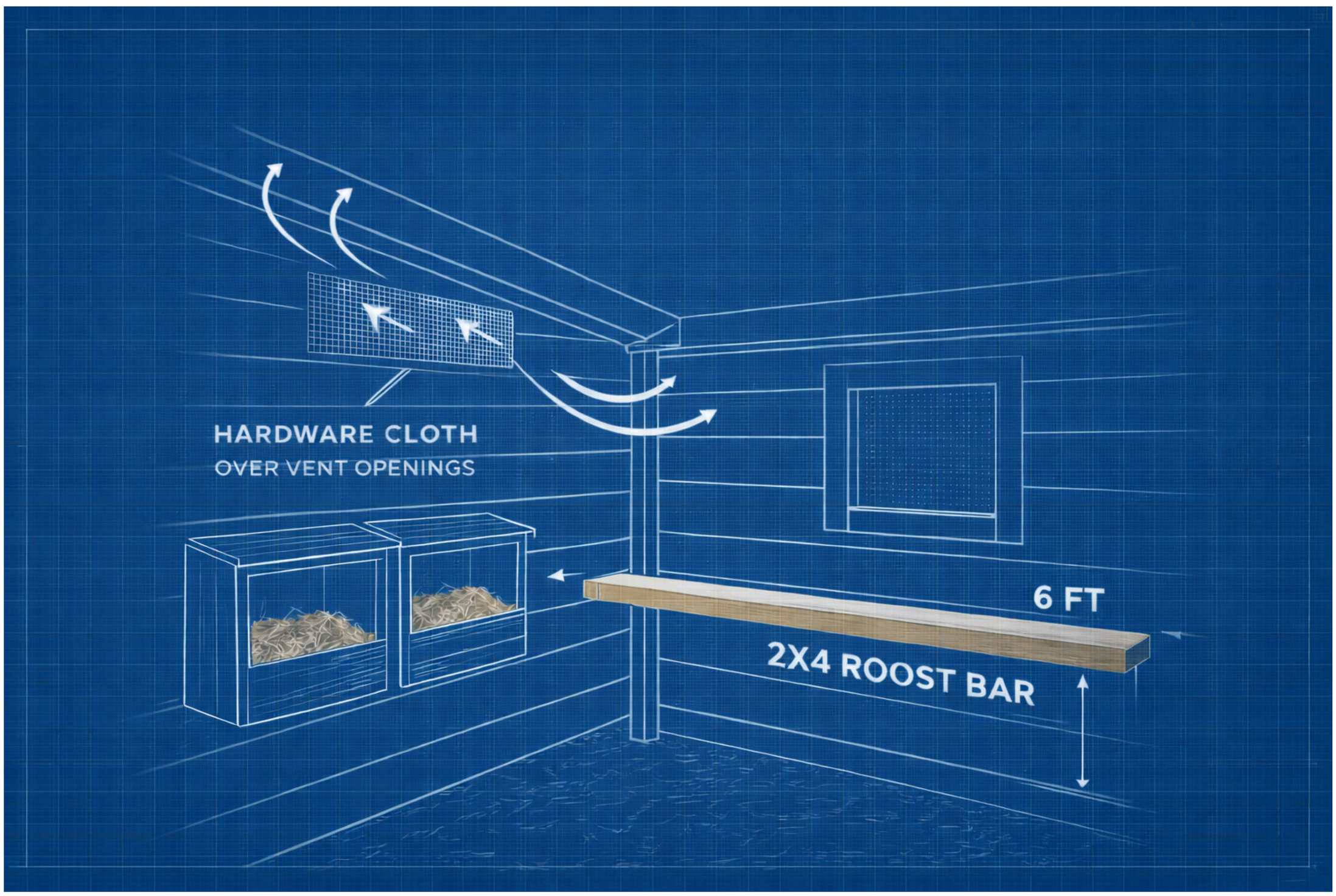
The coop needs roosts—horizontal bars where chickens sleep at night. Roosts should be 2-4 feet off the ground, and you need about 8-12 inches of roost space per bird. A single 6-foot roost bar is enough for six hens. Use 2x4 lumber laid flat (not on edge) so chickens can rest their feet comfortably.



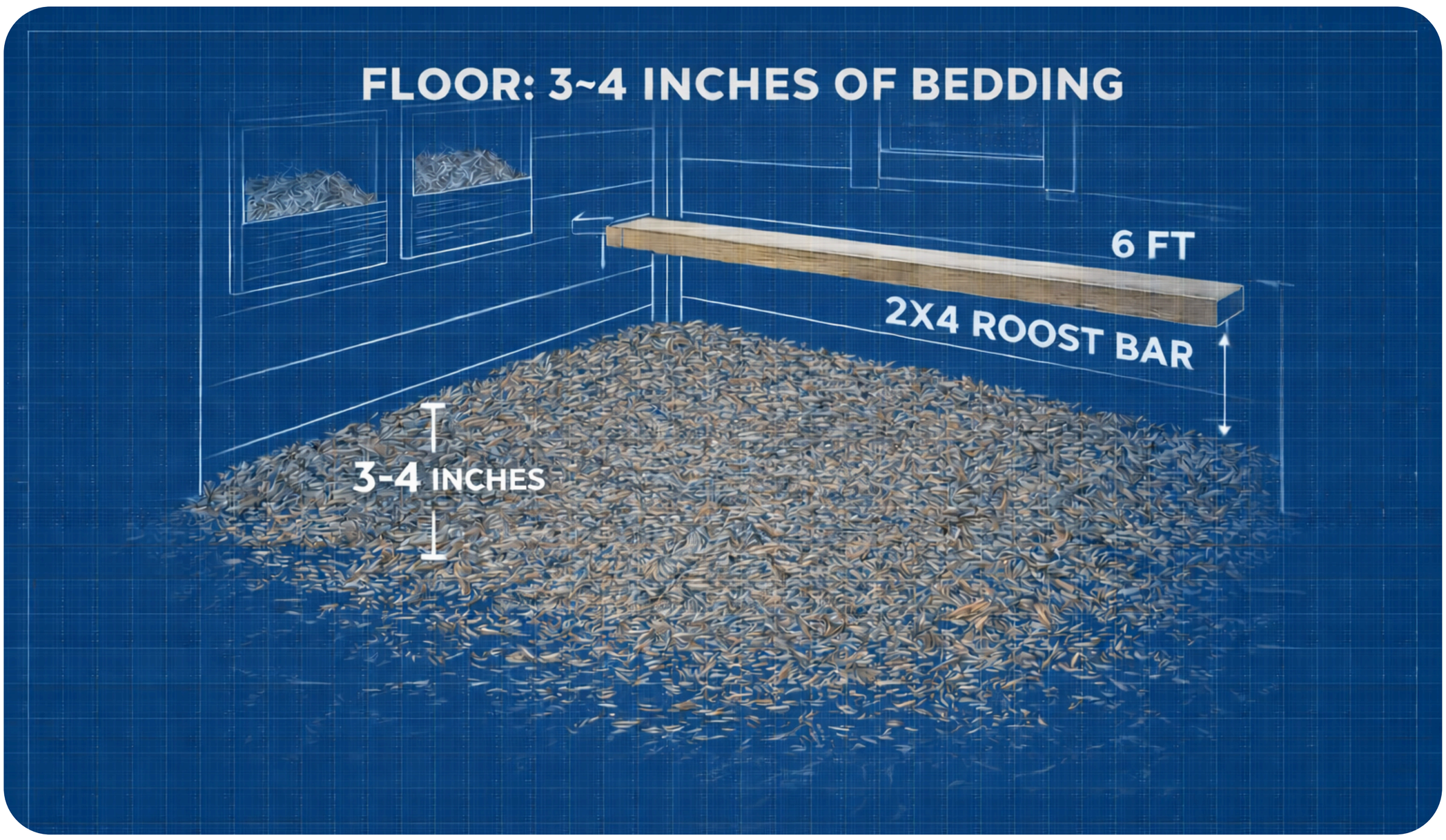
You also need nesting boxes—enclosed spaces where hens lay eggs. One nesting box per 3-4 hens is sufficient. For six hens, two nesting boxes are plenty. Boxes should be about 12 inches square and filled with soft bedding like straw or wood shavings. Mount them 1-2 feet off the ground so hens feel secure.



Ventilation is critical. Chickens produce a lot of moisture through breathing and droppings, and without ventilation, that moisture creates ammonia buildup, respiratory problems, and frostbite in cold weather. Your coop needs ventilation near the roof—vents, windows, or gaps—that allow air to flow without creating drafts at roost level. I use hardware cloth over vent openings to keep predators out while allowing airflow.



Floors can be dirt, wood, or concrete. I prefer dirt because it's cheap and it composts the bedding over time, but wood or concrete work fine if you're willing to clean more frequently. Whichever you choose, cover the floor with 3-4 inches of bedding—wood shavings, straw, or chopped leaves—to absorb moisture and make cleaning easier.



That's the minimum viable coop. It doesn't need windows with shutters. It doesn't need painted trim or decorative hardware. It needs to be sturdy, weatherproof, ventilated, and secure. If it meets those requirements, your chickens will be perfectly happy.

Predator-Proofing Essentials



Predators will kill your chickens if you give them the opportunity. This is not a maybe. It's a certainty. Raccoons, foxes, coyotes, hawks, owls, weasels, snakes, opossums, and neighborhood dogs all see your flock as easy meals. If your coop and run aren't properly secured, you will lose birds.





The single most important predator-proofing measure is using hardware cloth instead of chicken wire. Chicken wire is designed to keep chickens in, not to keep predators out. Raccoons can tear through it, and small predators like weasels can squeeze through the gaps. Hardware cloth—galvanized wire mesh with 1/2-inch or 1/4-inch openings—is much stronger and more secure. Use it for all windows, vents, and run walls.

Dig barriers are essential for ground predators. Raccoons, foxes, and dogs will dig under fences to get into your run. To prevent this, bury hardware cloth 12-18 inches deep around the perimeter of your run, or lay it flat on the ground extending 12-18 inches outward from the fence line and cover it with soil or gravel. This creates a barrier that predators can't dig through.





Secure all doors and latches. Raccoons are incredibly dexterous and can open simple latches, hooks, or sliding bolts. Use carabiners, padlocks, or complex latches that require two-step actions to open. I use carabiners on all my coop doors—they're cheap, effective, and raccoons can't figure them out.

Carabiners





Padlocks



Cover the top of your run if hawks or owls are a threat in your area. Hawks will take chickens in broad daylight, and owls will take them at dusk. A roof of hardware cloth, welded wire, or even netting will prevent aerial attacks. If a full roof isn't feasible, at least provide covered areas where chickens can hide.





Lock birds in the coop at night. Most predators hunt at night, and chickens are vulnerable when they're roosting. Every evening at dusk, close and secure the coop door. Every morning, open it. This simple routine will prevent the majority of predator losses.

Inspect your setup regularly. Look for holes, gaps, loose hardware cloth, or signs of digging. Predators are persistent, and they'll probe for weaknesses. Fix problems as soon as you find them.









I learned these lessons the hard way. In my first year keeping chickens, I lost three hens to a raccoon that squeezed through a gap in the coop door. I lost two more to a hawk before I covered the run. Those losses were preventable, and they were entirely my fault. Don't repeat my mistakes. Build secure housing from the start.

Mobile Coops vs. Stationary: Pros and Cons





A mobile coop—often called a chicken tractor—is a lightweight, movable structure that you relocate every few days to give birds fresh ground. A stationary coop stays in one place, and birds either free-range from it or use a permanent run.

Mobile coops work well if you have a large yard or pasture and you want to move birds around for grazing and pest control. The advantage is that birds always have access to fresh grass, bugs, and soil, which reduces feed costs and improves egg quality. The disadvantage is that mobile coops are smaller (they have to be light enough to move), they're less secure than stationary coops, and moving them every few days is labor-intensive.



I used a mobile coop for my first flock, and I eventually switched to stationary housing. Moving the coop was easy at first, but it got old quickly, especially in wet weather or when the grass was tall. I also found that mobile coops are harder to predator-proof because they don't have permanent foundations or buried barriers.

Stationary coops are more secure, more spacious, and easier to manage long-term. You build them once, and they stay put. The disadvantage is that the ground around the coop gets bare and muddy over time if you're not free-ranging. You'll also need to clean the coop more frequently because waste accumulates in one place.



For most backyard flock keepers, a stationary coop with a permanent run is the better option. It's more secure, it's less work, and it's easier to expand or modify over time. Mobile coops make sense if you have significant space and you're committed to rotational grazing, but for small backyards or limited space, stationary housing is more practical.

Ventilation, Lighting, and Nesting Box Ratios



I've already touched on ventilation, but it's worth emphasizing: poor ventilation is one of the top causes of respiratory illness in backyard flocks. Your coop needs airflow year-round, including winter. That doesn't mean drafts—you want air movement at the top of the coop, not at roost level where birds are sleeping—but it does mean openings that allow moisture and ammonia to escape.

I use a combination of ridge vents along the roofline and small windows near the ceiling covered with hardware cloth. In winter, I leave these open. In summer, I open the coop door during the day for additional airflow. If your coop ever smells strongly of ammonia, you don't have enough ventilation.



Lighting affects egg production. Hens need about 14-16 hours of daylight to lay consistently. In summer, natural daylight is sufficient. In winter, daylight hours drop below 14, and production slows or stops. You can extend laying through winter by adding artificial light to the coop.



I use a simple timer and a low-wattage LED bulb set to turn on early in the morning so the birds have 14-16 hours of combined natural and artificial light. I don't use light in the evening because sudden darkness when the timer shuts off can disorient birds. Morning light allows them to settle naturally as daylight fades in the evening.

Some people prefer to let hens take a winter break and not use supplemental lighting. That's fine if you're not relying on winter eggs or if you have enough birds that even reduced production meets your needs. I use lighting because I want consistent production year-round, but it's a personal choice.



Nesting boxes should be placed lower than roosts so hens don't try to sleep in them (which leads to dirty, soiled nesting material). One box per 3-4 hens is plenty. Hens often share boxes even when multiple boxes are available, so don't worry if all your hens favor one box and ignore the others. As long as you have at least one box per 3-4 birds, you're fine.



Fill boxes with 3-4 inches of soft, clean bedding. I use straw because it's cheap and hens seem to prefer it, but wood shavings work too. Replace bedding when it gets dirty or wet. Clean nesting boxes result in cleaner eggs.



Budget Coop Options Under $200

You don't need to spend $1,000 on a coop. A functional, secure coop for 4-6 birds can be built for under $200 if you're resourceful and willing to do the work yourself. The cheapest option is to repurpose an existing structure. An old storage shed, a large dog house, or even a section of a garage can be converted into a coop with minimal modification. Add roosts, nesting boxes, ventilation, and secure doors, and you're done. I've seen excellent coops made from repurposed pallets, salvaged lumber, and materials scrounged from Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace.

If you're building from scratch, keep it simple. A basic 4-by-6 coop can be built from two sheets of plywood, some 2x4 lumber, a few hinges, and hardware cloth. You don't need fancy siding or roofing—a simple plywood box with a sloped roof covered in tar paper or metal roofing will work fine. The key is making it weatherproof and secure, not making it pretty.

For the run, use T-posts or wooden stakes and hardware cloth. T-posts are cheap and easy to install. Stretch hardware cloth between the posts, secure it with zip ties or wire, and you have a functional run. It's not beautiful, but it works.



One note on used coops: if you're buying a used coop or repurposing a structure that previously housed birds, disinfect it thoroughly before adding your flock. Old bedding, droppings, and parasites can linger in wood and transmit diseases to new birds. Scrub everything, let it dry completely, and consider using a poultry-safe disinfectant before moving birds in.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common mistake with housing is building too small. People underestimate how much space chickens need, or they build housing for the number of birds they have now without planning for expansion. If you think you might add birds later, build slightly larger than you need. It's much easier to have extra space than to rebuild or expand later.



Another mistake is inadequate predator-proofing. I've seen people lose entire flocks because they used chicken wire instead of hardware cloth, or because they didn't bury barriers around the run. Predators are relentless. Build your housing assuming that every possible predator will test it, because they will.

A third mistake is poor ventilation. People worry about keeping chickens warm in winter, so they seal up the coop to prevent drafts. Then they end up with respiratory problems, frostbite, and moisture buildup. Chickens handle cold very well as long as they're dry and out of the wind. Prioritize ventilation over insulation.

Finally, watch out for the temptation to overbuild. I've known people who spent $2,000 on an elaborate coop for six chickens. That's fine if you have the money and you enjoy the project, but it's not necessary. Your chickens don't care about decorative trim or painted shingles. They care about being safe, dry, and comfortable. Focus on function first, aesthetics later.

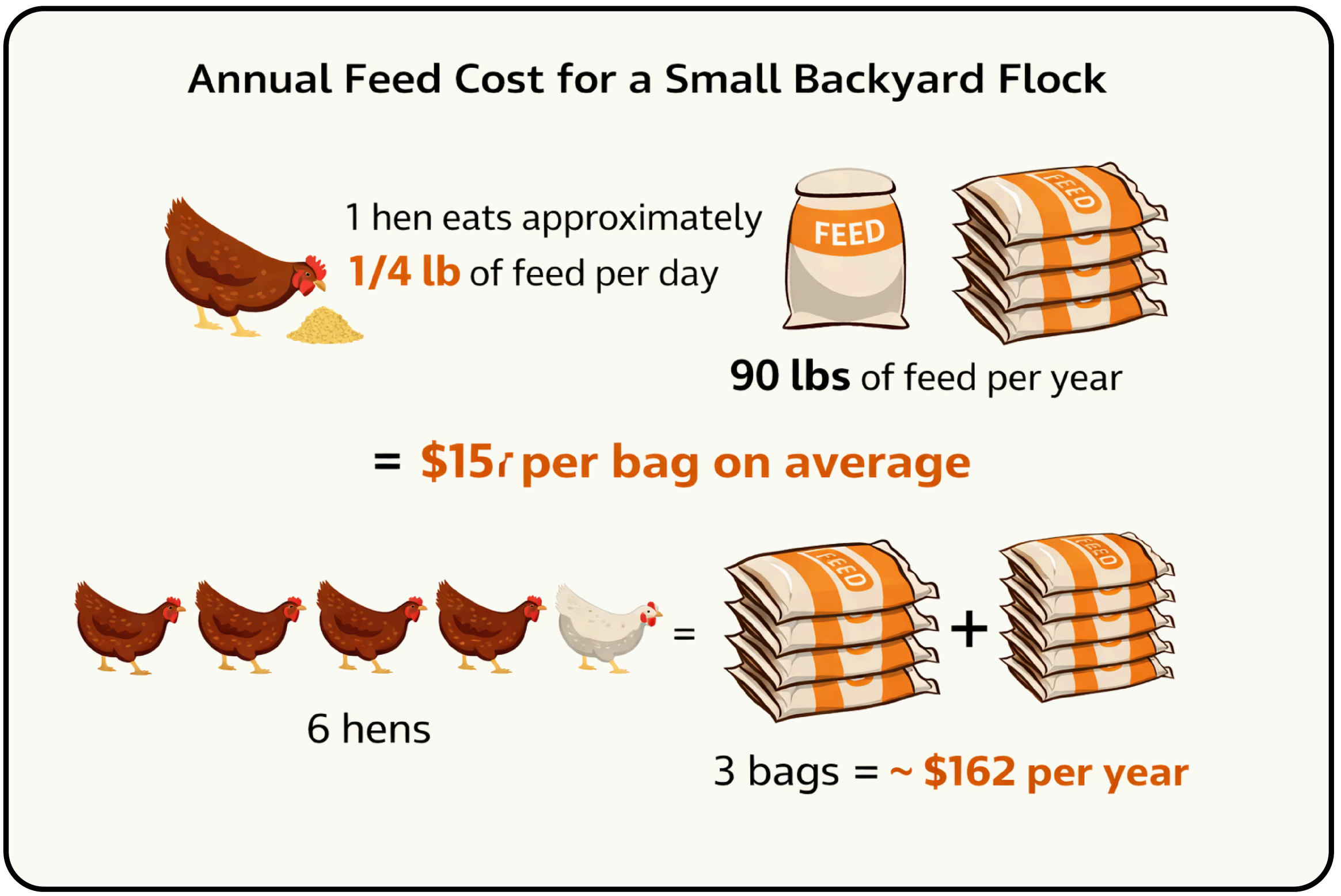
Chapter 3: Feeding for Maximum Production

Understanding Feed Costs: Your Biggest Ongoing Expense



Feed is the single largest ongoing expense of keeping chickens. Depending on your flock size and local feed prices, you'll spend $15-30 per month on feed for every six hens. Over the course of a year, that adds up to $200-350 or more. If you're not accounting for feed costs when you're calculating whether your flock makes financial sense, you're fooling yourself.

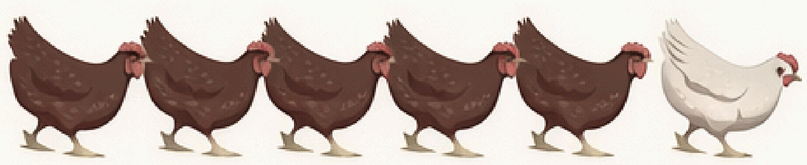
Here's the basic math. A laying hen eats about 1/4 pound of feed per day, or roughly 90 pounds per year. If feed costs $15 per 50-pound bag (a typical price for standard layer feed), that's $27 per hen per year in feed costs alone. If you're keeping six hens, you're spending about $160 per year on feed.



Now compare that to your egg production. Six hens will give you roughly 1,500 eggs per year if they're good layers. If you're buying eggs at the store for $6 per dozen, that's $750 worth of eggs. Even after feed costs, you're ahead by $590. That's not counting bedding, time, or other expenses, but it shows that a backyard flock can produce value if you manage it well.

Annual Feed Costs vs. Farm Fresh Eggs

Backyard Flock of 6 Hens



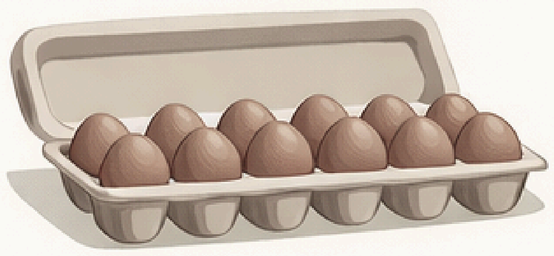
6 hens produce about **1,500 eggs** per year



Worth about **$750***

VS.

Store-Bought Eggs



Eggs cost **$6** per dozen at store



1,500 eggs = $750



= **You're ahead by $590!**

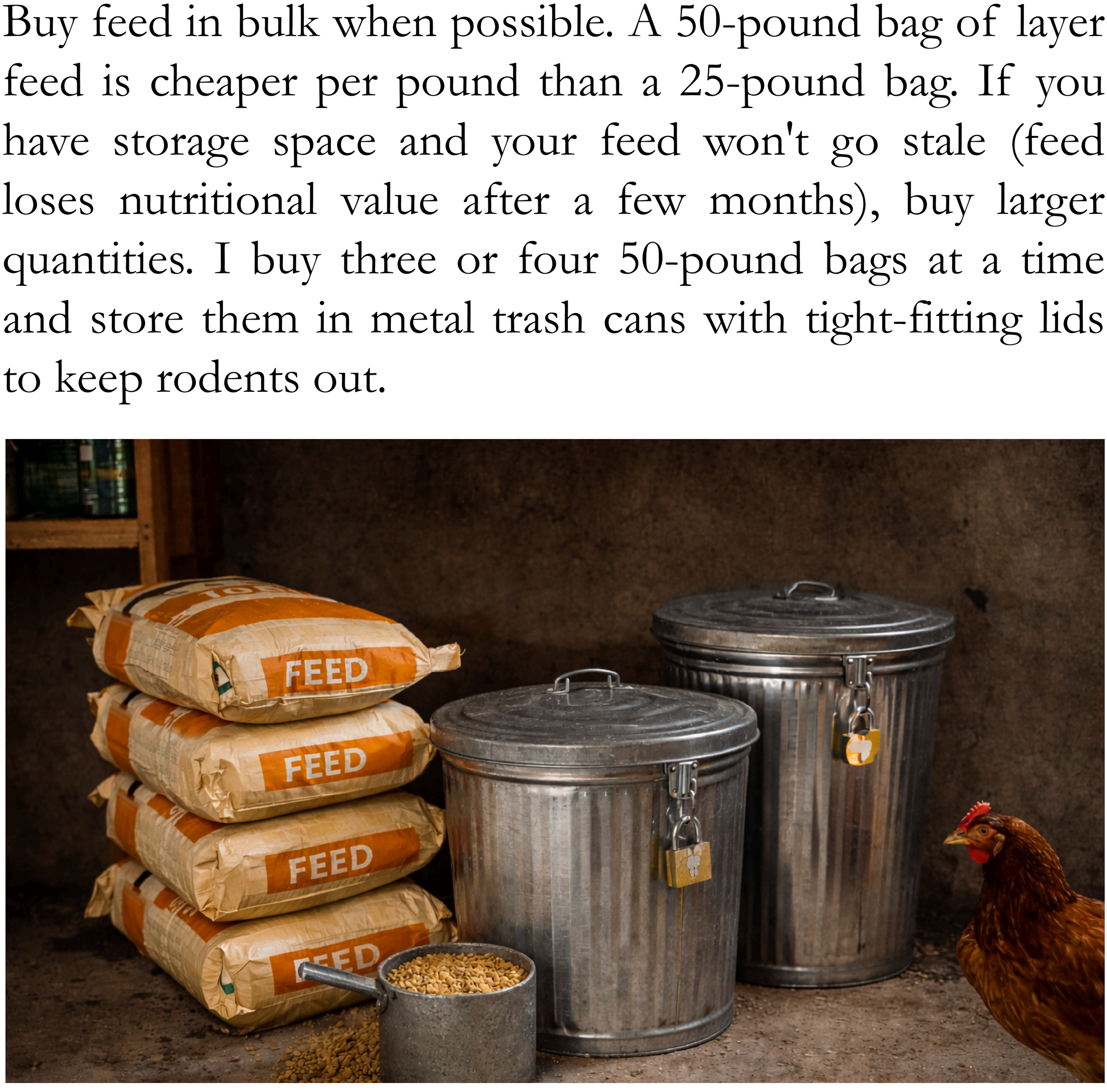
*Assuming good layers



- **$162** per year

The goal with feed management is to minimize costs without sacrificing production or bird health. You can do this through smart purchasing, supplementation, and free-ranging. I'll cover each of these.

Buy feed in bulk when possible. A 50-pound bag of layer feed is cheaper per pound than a 25-pound bag. If you have storage space and your feed won't go stale (feed loses nutritional value after a few months), buy larger quantities. I buy three or four 50-pound bags at a time and store them in metal trash cans with tight-fitting lids to keep rodents out.



Choose appropriate feed for your birds' life stage. Chicks need starter feed, which is higher in protein. Pullets need grower feed. Laying hens need layer feed, which contains added calcium for egg production. Meat birds need a high-protein finisher feed. Using the wrong feed won't kill your birds, but it will reduce production or growth rates.



Avoid cheap, low-quality feed. I learned this the hard way. Cheap feed often contains fillers and lower-quality grains, which means birds eat more to get the nutrition they need, and production suffers. Spend a little more on decent feed and you'll get better results. I use a local mill's layer feed that costs about $18 per 50-pound bag. It's not the cheapest option, but my hens lay consistently and stay healthy.



Supplementing with Kitchen Scraps and Garden Waste

Chickens will eat almost anything, and supplementing their diet with kitchen scraps and garden waste can reduce feed costs by 10-20% while also reducing your household waste. But not all scraps are appropriate, and supplementation should never replace a balanced layer feed.





Chickens love vegetable scraps—lettuce, kale, carrot tops, squash, pumpkin, melon rinds, and greens of all kinds. They'll eat fruit—apples, berries, watermelon—though too much can cause loose droppings. They'll eat cooked rice, pasta, oatmeal, and bread in moderation. They'll eat meat scraps, though I avoid giving them anything that's spoiled or heavily seasoned.

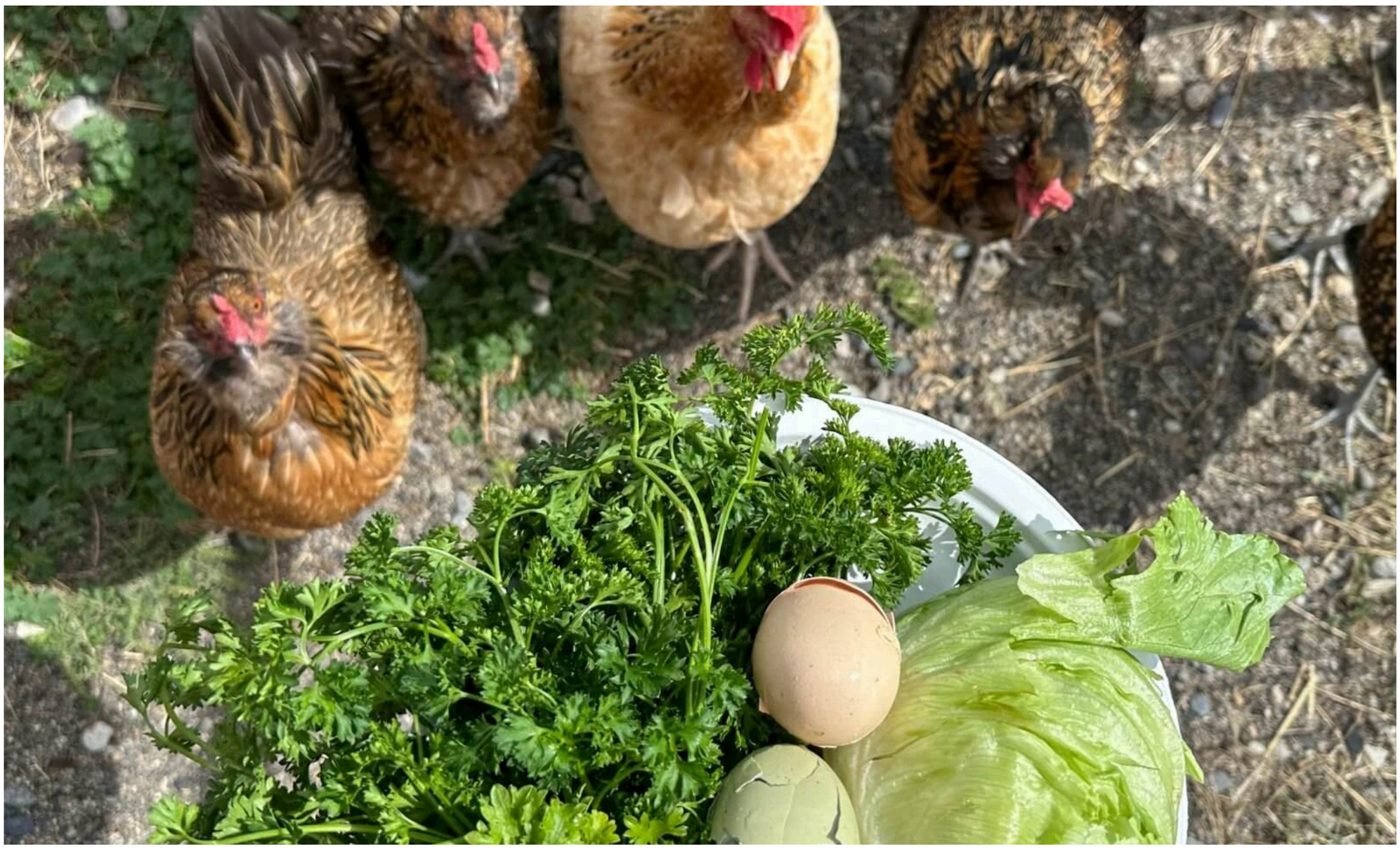


What chickens should not eat: avocado (toxic), chocolate (toxic), raw beans (toxic), onions and garlic in large quantities (can affect egg flavor), and anything moldy. Stick to fresh, wholesome scraps and you'll be fine.



I keep a small bucket in my kitchen for chicken scraps. Vegetable peelings, ends of lettuce heads, apple cores, leftover oatmeal, stale bread—it all goes in the bucket. Once a day, I take the bucket to the coop and scatter the scraps in the run. The chickens devour it, and I've reduced the amount of feed they need.

Garden waste is another good supplement. Bolted lettuce, overgrown kale, weeds (as long as they're not toxic), spent plants after harvest—all of this can go to the chickens. They'll eat what they like and scratch through the rest, which aerates the material and speeds composting.



One caution: don't rely too heavily on scraps. Chickens need a balanced diet to lay well, and scraps alone won't provide that. Use scraps as a supplement, not as a replacement for layer feed. I estimate that scraps and garden waste reduce my feed costs by about 15%, which translates to $25-30 per year for my small flock. That's not huge, but it's enough to be worthwhile.

Free-Ranging Economics: Does It Actually Save Money?

Free-ranging—allowing chickens to roam freely and forage rather than keeping them confined to a coop and run—reduces feed costs, improves egg quality, and gives birds a more natural life. But it comes with tradeoffs, and whether it makes sense depends on your space, your predator situation, and your tolerance for mess.



When chickens free-range, they eat grass, bugs, seeds, and whatever else they find. This reduces the amount of feed they need, and it improves the nutritional quality of their eggs (free-range eggs typically have darker yolks and higher omega-3 content).

I've found that free-ranging reduces my feed costs by about 25-30% during the growing season when there's abundant forage.

The downside is predators. Free-ranging birds are much more vulnerable to hawks, foxes, dogs, and other threats. You can mitigate this with livestock guardian animals (dogs, geese), by providing cover (shrubs, low trees, or brush piles where chickens can hide), and by limiting free-range time to daylight hours when you're home. But you will lose birds if you free-range. It's not a question of if, it's a question of how many and how often.











The other downside is mess. Free-ranging chickens will scratch up your garden beds, dig holes in your lawn, and poop on your porch. If you care about a pristine yard, free-ranging is not for you. I free-range because I value the reduced feed costs and the quality of the eggs, and I'm willing to accept the predator risk and the mess. But it's a trade-off, and you need to decide what works for your situation.

If you can't free-range safely, consider a middle-ground approach: a movable run or chicken tractor that gives birds access to fresh ground without exposing them to predators. This provides some of the benefits of free-ranging with less risk.

The Calcium Question: Preventing Soft Shells

Laying hens need a lot of calcium to produce strong eggshells. If they don't get enough, they'll lay eggs with thin, weak shells or soft, malformed shells. This is bad for the hen (calcium deficiency can lead to health problems) and bad for egg quality.









Layer feed contains added calcium, and for most hens, that's sufficient. But some hens—particularly heavy layers or older birds—need supplemental calcium. The easiest way to provide this is with crushed oyster shell, which is available at any feed store. Put it in a separate feeder so hens can eat it free-choice. They'll take what they need and ignore it when they don't.



Another option is feeding crushed eggshells back to your hens. Save your eggshells, bake them at 250°F for 10 minutes to sterilize them, then crush them into small pieces and offer them to the hens. This works fine, though some people worry it encourages egg-eating behavior (hens pecking and eating their own eggs). I've never had that problem, but if it concerns you, stick with oyster shell.

Do not add calcium directly to feed or water unless a vet recommends it. Too much calcium can cause kidney problems, and hens regulate their calcium intake naturally when it's offered free-choice.



Seasonal Feeding Adjustments

Chickens' nutritional needs change with the seasons, and adjusting feed accordingly can improve production and bird health.



In winter, hens need more calories to stay warm. If your winters are cold, consider switching to a higher-energy feed or supplementing with cracked corn in the evenings. Corn is high in carbohydrates and generates heat during digestion, which helps birds stay warm overnight. I give my flock a handful of cracked corn per bird on cold winter evenings, and it makes a noticeable difference in how well they handle low temperatures.

In summer, hens eat less because they don't need as many calories to maintain body temperature. Make sure they have constant access to cool, clean water—dehydration is a bigger threat in summer than hunger. If heat is extreme, you can supplement with frozen treats like watermelon or frozen vegetable scraps to help birds cool down.



During molt—the period in late summer or fall when hens shed old feathers and grow new ones—protein needs increase. Feathers are made of protein, and growing new ones is metabolically demanding. Consider switching to a higher-protein feed (18-20% protein instead of the standard 16%) during molt, or supplement with high-protein treats like mealworms, sunflower seeds, or cooked eggs.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common feeding mistake is running out of feed. Chickens need consistent access to feed, and if they run out, production drops immediately. Keep at least one extra bag of feed on hand so you're never in a position where you've run out and the feed store is closed.

Another mistake is storing feed improperly. Feed that gets wet or moldy is dangerous—it can cause illness or even death. Store feed in sealed, rodent-proof containers in a dry location. I use metal trash cans with tight lids, and I've never had a problem with spoilage or pests.

A third mistake is overfeeding treats and scraps. Treats should make up no more than 10% of a hen's diet. If you're giving too many treats, hens will fill up on those and eat less layer feed, which means they're not getting the balanced nutrition they need for laying.

Finally, watch out for feed that's past its expiration date. Feed loses nutritional value over time, particularly vitamins. Don't buy more than you can use in 2-3 months, and check the milling date on the bag before you buy. Fresh feed produces better results.

Chapter 4: Egg Production Mastery

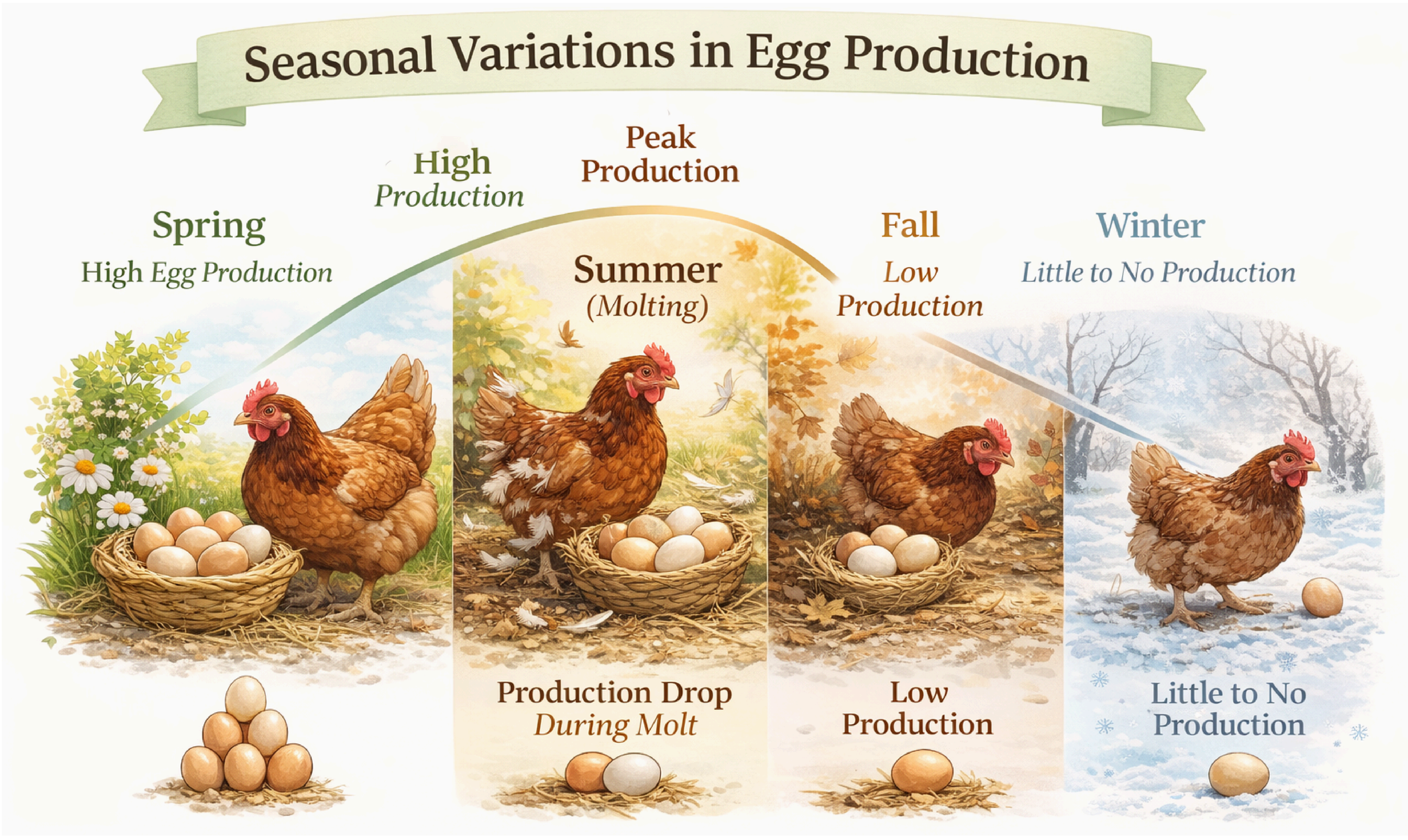
Realistic Egg Expectations by Breed and Season

If you're keeping chickens primarily for eggs, you need to understand what realistic production looks like. A lot of beginners expect their hens to lay an egg every day, year-round, indefinitely. That's not how it works.

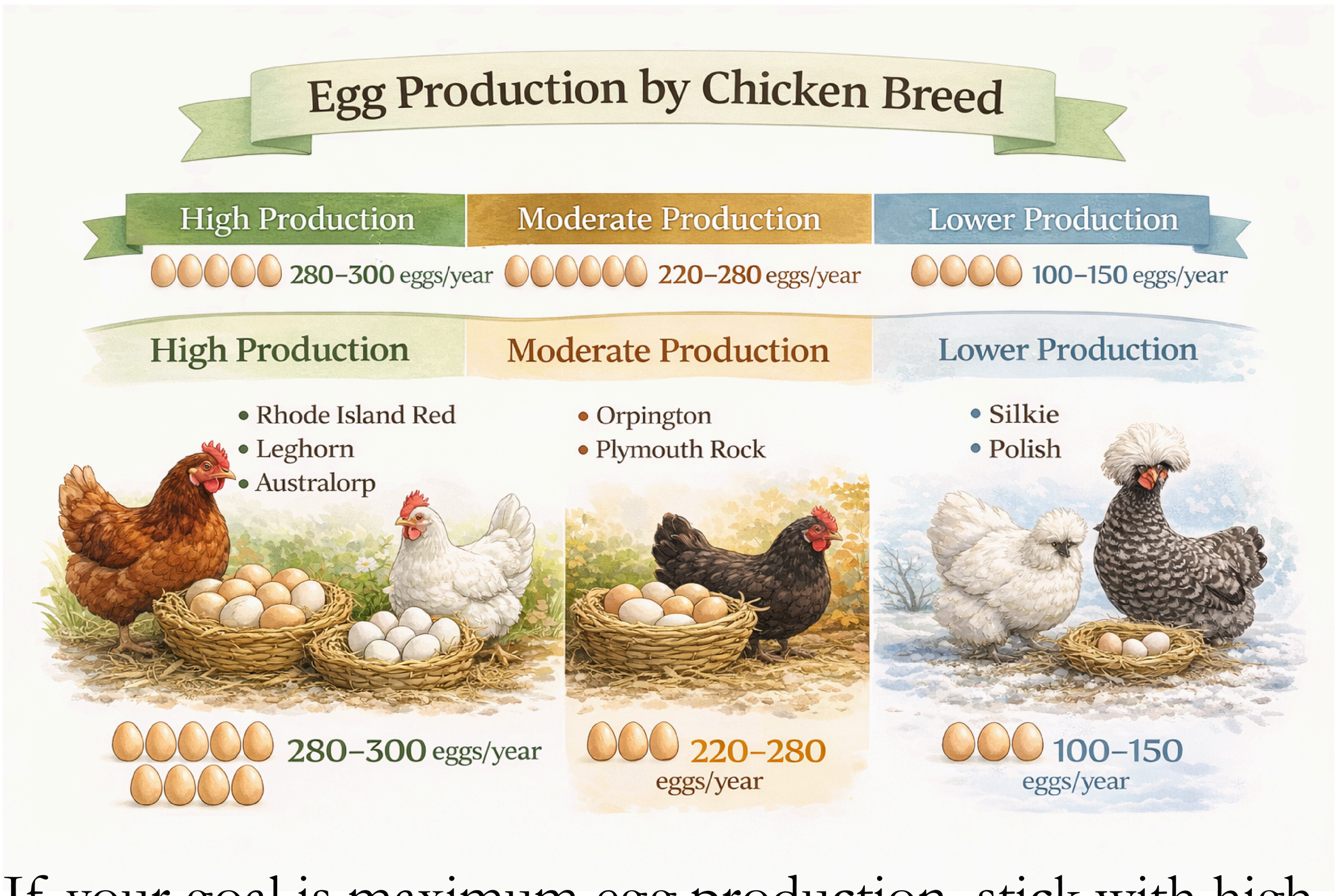


A good laying hen will produce about 250-300 eggs per year, which averages out to roughly 5 eggs per week. Production is highest in the first year of laying and gradually declines each year after that. By year three or four, most hens are laying 3-4 eggs per week instead of 5-6. By year five, production often drops to 2-3 eggs per week or less.

Production also varies by season. Hens lay most heavily in spring and early summer when days are long and temperatures are moderate. Production drops in late summer during molt, and it slows or stops entirely in winter when daylight hours are short (unless you're using supplemental lighting). This is normal and expected.



Some breeds lay more than others. Rhode Island Reds, Leghorns, and Australorps are high-production breeds that will consistently give you 280-300 eggs per year. Breeds like Orpingtons or Plymouth Rocks are slightly lower—220-280 eggs per year. Heritage breeds and ornamental breeds like Silkies or Polish chickens lay even less—100-150 eggs per year or fewer.



If your goal is maximum egg production, stick with high-production breeds and use supplemental lighting in winter. If you're more interested in dual-purpose birds or low-maintenance systems, accept that production will be lower and plan accordingly.

The Lighting Trick That Extends Laying Through Winter

I've touched on this already, but it's worth explaining in detail because it's one of the simplest ways to maintain egg production year-round.

Hens lay based on daylight hours. When daylight drops below about 14 hours per day, their bodies interpret this as a signal to stop laying and conserve energy for winter. This is a natural, healthy response, and many people choose to let their hens take a winter break.



But if you want eggs in winter, you can trick hens into continuing to lay by adding artificial light to the coop. The goal is to provide 14-16 hours of combined natural and artificial light per day.

I use a timer and a low-wattage LED bulb (a 40-watt equivalent is plenty). I set the timer to turn the light on early in the morning—around 4:00 or 5:00 a.m.—so that by the time the sun rises, the birds have already had several hours of light. The light turns off once it's fully daylight outside. This gives the birds 14-16 hours of total light without requiring evening lighting.



Why morning light instead of evening light? If you use evening light and the timer shuts off suddenly, the hens are left in total darkness and may not be able to find their way to the roosts. Morning light allows them to settle naturally at dusk when the sun goes down.

Not everyone agrees with using supplemental lighting. Some people argue that hens need a winter rest period and that year-round laying is stressful or unnatural. I understand that perspective, but I've never seen evidence that supplemental lighting harms hens as long as they're getting adequate nutrition and care. I've been using winter lighting for over a decade, and my hens remain healthy and productive for years.



If you decide to use lighting, introduce it gradually. Don't suddenly add several hours of light all at once. Add 15-30 minutes per week until you reach the desired 14-16 hours. This prevents shock and helps hens adjust.

Troubleshooting: When Hens Stop Laying

When hens stop laying or production drops suddenly, there's usually a clear cause. Here are the most common reasons and how to address them.

Molt: Hens molt once a year, usually in late summer or fall. During molt, they stop laying and focus energy on growing new feathers. This is normal and temporary. Production will resume once the molt is complete, usually after 8-12 weeks. There's nothing you need to do except ensure they're getting adequate protein (18-20% during molt).



Stress: Hens stop laying when they're stressed. Common stressors include predator attacks, moving to a new coop, introduction of new birds, illness, or changes in routine. If your hens suddenly stop laying and there's no obvious physical cause, look for sources of stress. Minimize disturbances, keep routines consistent, and give them time to settle.





Broodiness: Some hens go broody—they sit on eggs and refuse to leave the nest because they're trying to hatch them. Broody hens stop laying. If you're not hatching chicks, you need to break the broodiness by removing the hen from the nest several times a day, blocking access to nesting boxes, or confining her to a separate cage with no bedding for a few days. This sounds harsh, but it's the only way to get a broody hen back to laying.





Age: Older hens lay less. If your hens are 3-4 years old and production is dropping, it's likely just age. You can keep older hens for the eggs they do produce, or you can cull them and replace them with younger birds.





Nutrition: Poor nutrition or lack of calcium will reduce laying. Make sure hens are getting high-quality layer feed and free-choice calcium. If you've been feeding too many treats or scraps, cut back and make sure they're eating their regular feed.

Illness or parasites: Sick hens or hens with heavy parasite loads won't lay well. Check for signs of illness (lethargy, discharge, abnormal droppings) and treat if necessary. Check for mites or lice and treat with poultry dust or permethrin spray if you find them.









Lighting: If you're not using supplemental light and it's winter, low production is normal. Either accept reduced production or add lighting to extend laying season.

Egg Handling, Cleaning, and Storage for Maximum Shelf Life

Fresh eggs are coated with a natural protective layer called the bloom that keeps bacteria out and moisture in. If you wash eggs, you remove this layer and shorten their shelf life. For eggs you're using yourself, there's no need to wash them. Just brush off any dirt or debris with a dry cloth or fine sandpaper and store them in the refrigerator.

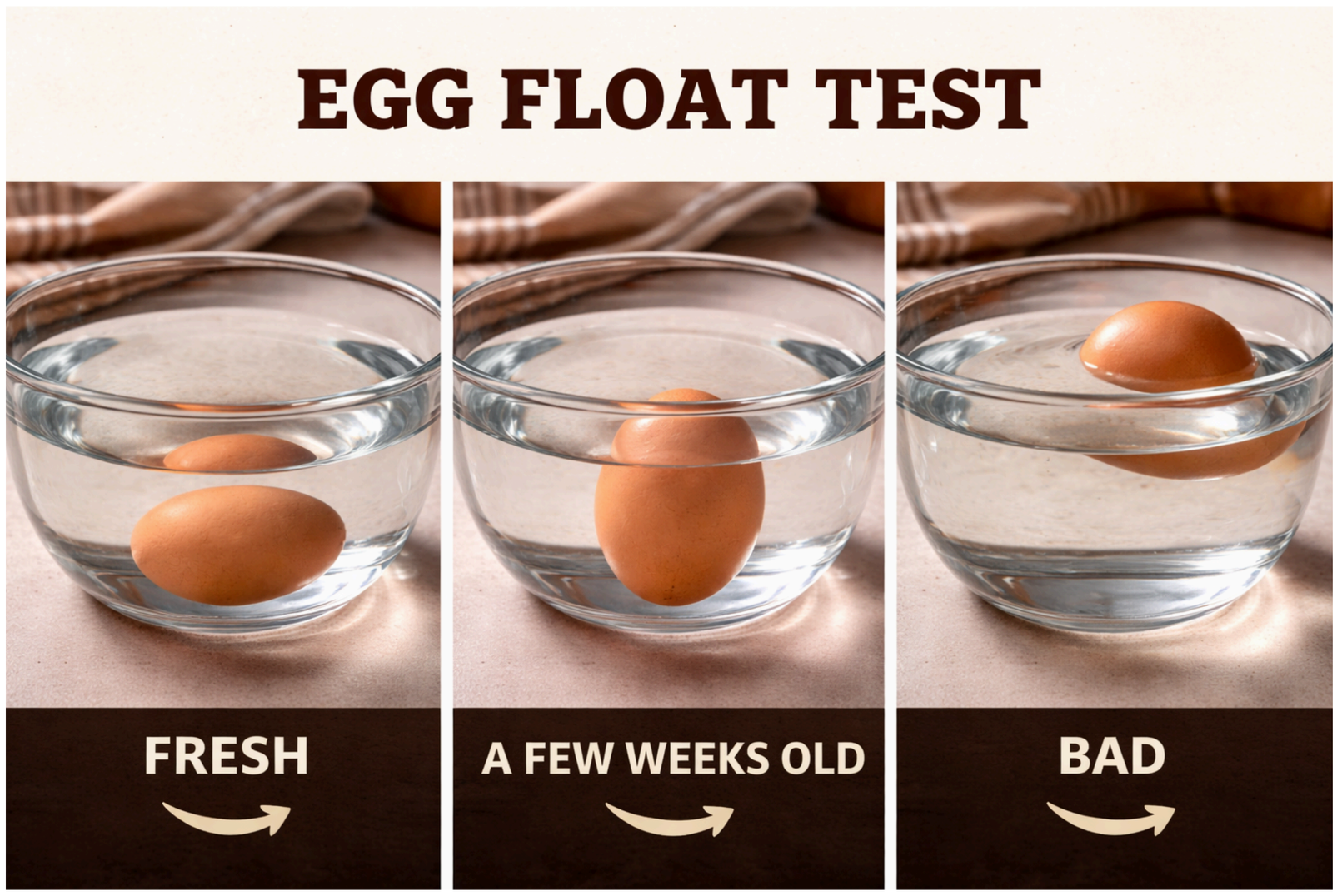




For eggs you're selling, regulations vary by state. Some states require eggs to be washed, others don't. Check your local rules. If you do need to wash eggs, use water that's warmer than the eggs (this prevents bacteria from being drawn into the shell), rinse quickly, and dry immediately. Store washed eggs in the refrigerator.

Eggs should be collected daily, ideally twice a day in hot weather. Eggs left in the coop too long are more likely to get dirty, cracked, or eaten by the hens. I collect eggs every morning and again in the late afternoon if I'm home.

Unwashed eggs stored at room temperature will keep for 2-3 weeks. Refrigerated unwashed eggs will keep for 2-3 months. Washed eggs should always be refrigerated and will keep for 4-5 weeks.



To test whether an egg is still good, use the float test. Fill a bowl with water and gently place the egg in it. Fresh eggs sink and lay flat on the bottom. Eggs that are a few weeks old will sink but stand upright. Eggs that float are old and should be discarded. This test works because as eggs age, moisture evaporates through the shell and is replaced by air, making the egg more buoyant.

Selling Eggs: Pricing, Regulations, and Finding Customers

Selling eggs is the simplest way to offset feed costs or generate modest income from a backyard flock. But before you sell a single egg, you need to understand the regulations in your area.



Egg regulations vary widely by state. Some states allow small-scale producers to sell unwashed, ungraded eggs directly to consumers without any licensing or inspection. Others require licensing, labeling, refrigeration, or grading. The penalties for selling eggs illegally can be significant, so check your state's ag department website or call them directly to find out what's required.

In my state, I'm allowed to sell up to 250 dozen eggs per year directly to consumers without a license as long as the eggs are ungraded and I include my name and address on the carton. Other states have different thresholds or different requirements. Know the rules before you start selling.



Pricing depends on your local market. Check what organic or pasture-raised eggs sell for at farmers markets, co-ops, and grocery stores in your area. In most areas, backyard eggs sell for $4-7 per dozen depending on quality and whether they're organic or from free-range hens. I sell mine for $5 per dozen, which is less than the co-op charges for organic eggs but more than the grocery store charges for conventional eggs.

Finding customers is straightforward. Start with neighbors, coworkers, and friends. Mention that you have fresh eggs available and see who's interested. Once you have a few regular buyers, word of mouth will bring in more. You can also post on Facebook Marketplace, Nextdoor, or Craigslist, though be cautious about inviting strangers to your home if that makes you uncomfortable.

I have about a dozen regular egg customers who buy 1-3 dozen per week. They either pick up at my house or I drop off when I'm running errands. This generates about $80-100 per month, which covers my feed costs and then some. It's not life-changing income, but it's enough to make the flock self-sustaining.

One thing I've learned is that customers who buy farm-fresh eggs are loyal if the quality is consistent. Make sure your eggs are clean, fresh, and properly stored, and your customers will keep coming back.



Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The biggest mistake people make with egg production is expecting too much. Hens don't lay every day, and production drops with age and season. If you're planning to sell eggs, make sure you have enough hens to meet your commitments even when production is lower than average.

Another mistake is not collecting eggs frequently enough. Eggs left in the coop get dirty, cracked, or eaten by the hens. Collect at least once per day, more often in extreme temperatures.

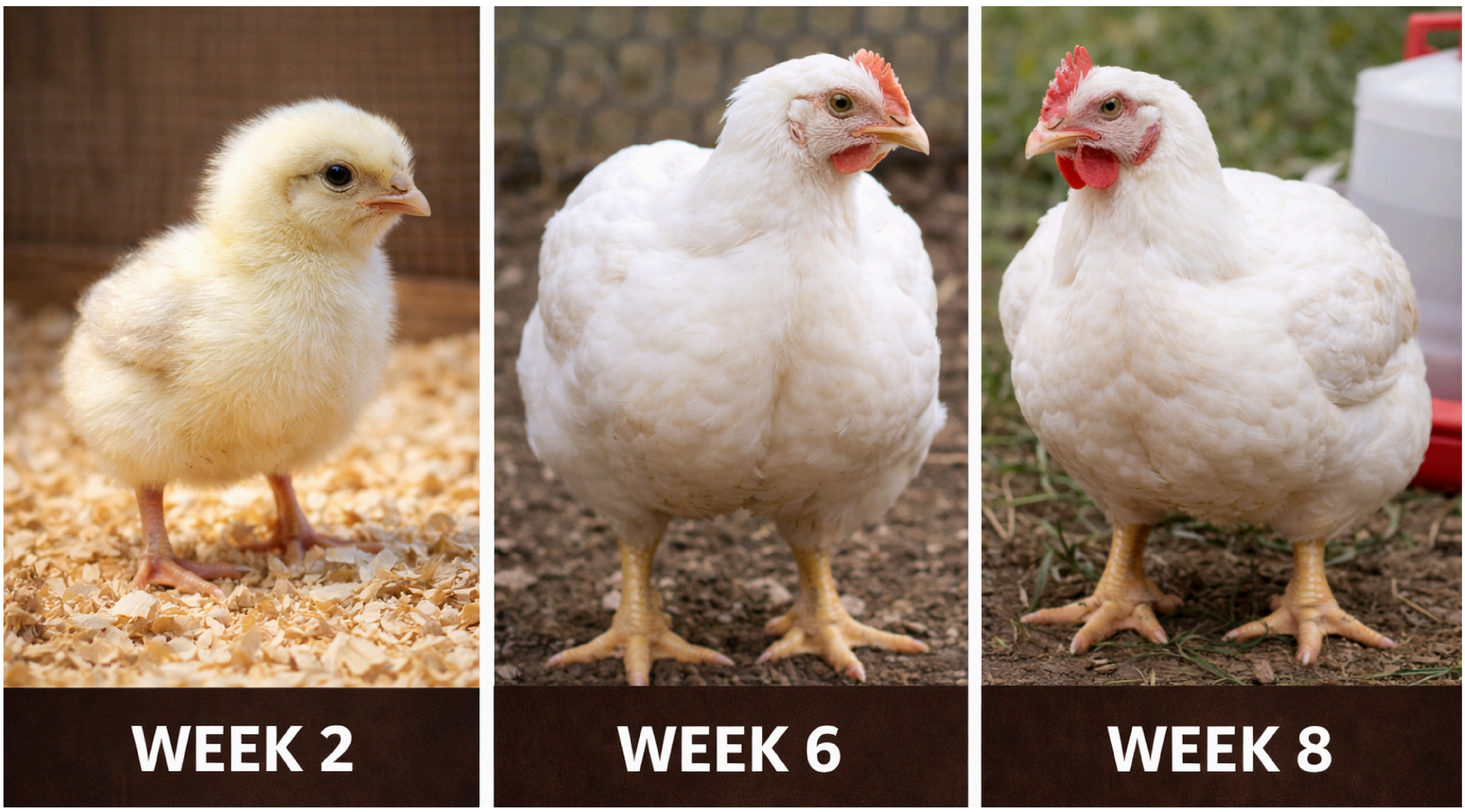
A third mistake is selling eggs illegally. Know your state's regulations and follow them. The fines for illegal egg sales can be steep, and it's not worth the risk.

Finally, watch out for customers who don't pay on time or who consistently ask for discounts. Set your prices, stick to them, and don't be afraid to say no to customers who don't respect your time or your product. Your eggs have value, and you're not obligated to sell them to people who treat them—or you—as if they don't.

Chapter 5: Meat Production Basics

Meat Birds vs. Dual-Purpose: What Makes Sense for Small Scale

If your goal is to produce chicken meat for your household, you have two options: raise dedicated meat birds, or raise dual-purpose birds and process them when their laying slows.



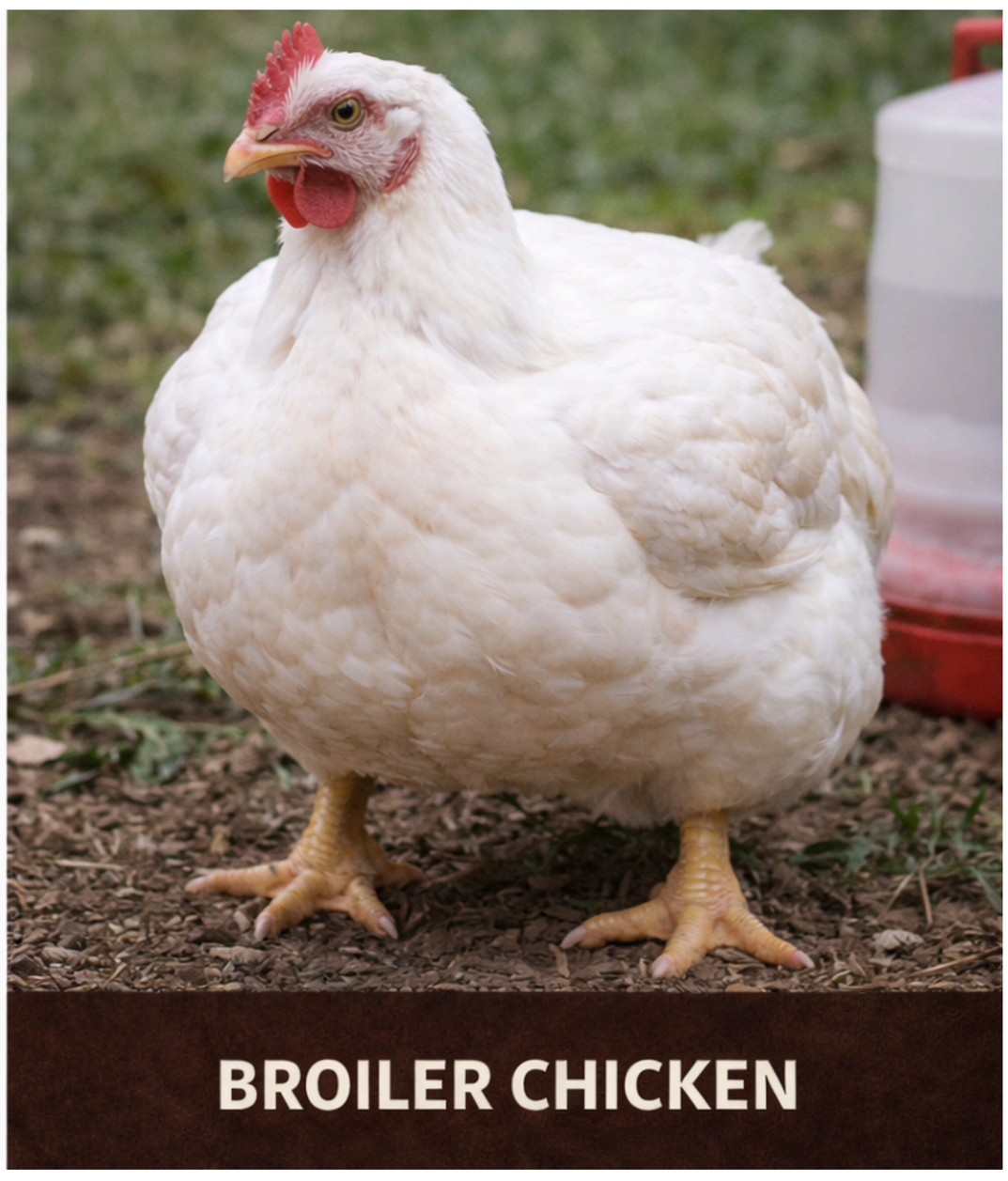
Meat birds—typically Cornish Cross—are bred specifically for rapid growth and heavy breast meat. They reach processing weight (5-7 pounds) in 8-10 weeks, they convert feed efficiently, and they provide a lot of meat per bird.

The downsides are that they're not hardy (they can't handle heat well, and they're prone to leg problems if they grow too fast), they're not attractive (they're white, awkward, and not pleasant to watch), and they're not suitable for anything except meat production.

Dual-purpose birds—breeds like Rhode Island Reds, Plymouth Rocks, or Orpingtons—lay eggs for several years and then provide meat when their production declines. They take longer to reach a good processing weight (16-20 weeks), they yield less breast meat, and the meat is somewhat tougher than meat birds because they're older and more active. But they're hardier, they're nicer to look at, and they serve two purposes instead of one.



DUAL-PURPOSE HEN



BROILER CHICKEN

For most small-scale operations, I recommend a combination: keep dual-purpose hens for eggs, and raise a batch or two of meat birds each year for the freezer. This gives you the best of both options—consistent eggs from hardy, long-lived hens, and high-quality, tender meat from dedicated meat birds.







If you're not comfortable processing birds or you don't have access to a local processor, dual-purpose birds are the better choice. You can keep them for eggs as long as they're productive, and you can process the older hens yourself or take them to a processor when the time comes. The meat won't be as tender as a young meat bird, but it makes excellent soup, stew, or ground meat.

The Processing Question: DIY vs. Finding a Local Processor

Processing chickens yourself is not difficult, but it's physically demanding and emotionally challenging if you've never done it before. You need to be comfortable with killing, plucking, and eviscerating birds, and you need the right tools and setup to do it efficiently and humanely.



The process involves: catching the bird, killing it (usually by cervical dislocation or cutting the carotid artery), bleeding it out, scalding it in hot water to loosen feathers, plucking, removing the head and feet, eviscerating (removing internal organs), and chilling the carcass. For someone experienced, this takes about 10-15 minutes per bird. For a beginner, it might take 30-45 minutes per bird.

If you're processing a small number of birds—say, 10-20 per year—doing it yourself is feasible. You'll need a few basic tools: a sharp knife, a large pot for scalding water, a heat source (propane burner or outdoor stove), a table or workspace, and a cooler for chilling the birds. Total cost for setup is around $50-100 if you don't already have these items.



The alternative is finding a local processor. Many areas have small USDA-inspected or state-inspected facilities that will process poultry for a fee, usually $3-6 per bird. You drop off live birds and pick up packaged, ready-to-freeze chickens. This is more expensive than doing it yourself, but it's faster, cleaner, and easier if you're not comfortable with the process.

The challenge with processors is availability. Many are booked months in advance, particularly during peak season (late summer and fall). If you're planning to use a processor, call early and schedule your processing date before you even buy your chicks.



I process my own meat birds. I don't particularly enjoy it, but I'm competent at it, and I prefer the control and the cost savings. I process 20-25 birds twice a year—once in late spring and once in early fall. It takes me a full day each time, but at the end of the day, my freezer is stocked with chicken for the next few months.



If you're squeamish about processing or you're not sure you can do it, start by watching videos or attending a workshop. Many areas have homesteading groups or extension offices that offer chicken processing workshops. Learning from someone experienced is far easier than trying to figure it out from a book or video alone.



Humane Culling Methods

If you're going to raise birds for meat, you need to be able to kill them quickly and humanely. There are two methods I recommend for backyard flock keepers: cervical dislocation and the killing cone method.

Cervical dislocation involves breaking the bird's neck to sever the spinal cord and cause instant death. This is quick, it doesn't require equipment, and it's humane when done correctly.



The technique is to hold the bird's head in one hand and the body in the other, then pull sharply downward and backward to separate the vertebrae. It takes practice to do this confidently, but once you've learned it, it's the fastest method.

The killing cone method involves placing the bird head-down in a cone-shaped restraint, making a clean cut across the carotid arteries, and allowing the bird to bleed out. This method is arguably more humane because the bird loses consciousness within seconds due to blood loss, and there's less risk of botching the kill.



You'll need to make or buy a killing cone (a simple plastic traffic cone with the tip cut off works), and you'll need a sharp knife. The bird should bleed out completely before you move on to scalding and plucking.

Whichever method you choose, the key is to be decisive and confident. Hesitation or half-measures cause suffering. Practice on your first few birds, get comfortable with the process, and commit to doing it right every time.

You'll need to make or buy a killing cone (a simple plastic traffic cone with the tip cut off works), and you'll need a sharp knife. The bird should bleed out completely before you move on to scalding and plucking.





Basic Butchering and Packaging

After the bird is dead and bled out, the next steps are scalding, plucking, and eviscerating.

Scalding loosens the feathers so they can be plucked. Heat water to 140-150°F (use a thermometer—too hot and you'll cook the skin, too cool and the feathers won't release).



Dunk the bird in the hot water for 30-60 seconds, agitating it to ensure the water reaches all the feathers. Test a feather—if it pulls out easily, the bird is ready. If not, dunk it for another 15-30 seconds.

Plucking is tedious but straightforward. Pull feathers out in the direction they grow. Start with the wings and larger feathers, then work your way to the smaller body feathers.



A well-scalded bird will pluck cleanly in 5-10 minutes. If you're processing many birds, consider buying a plucking machine or building a whizbang plucker, but for small batches, hand plucking is fine.

Eviscerating requires care because you're removing the internal organs without puncturing the intestines or contaminating the meat. Make a shallow cut around the vent (anus), then cut upward toward the breastbone. Reach into the cavity, loosen the organs with your hand, and pull everything out in one piece. Remove the crop (located in the neck area) and the windpipe. Rinse the cavity with cold water.



Packaging is simple. Chill the bird in ice water for at least an hour to bring the internal temperature down. Pat dry, place in a freezer bag, remove as much air as possible, and freeze. Properly packaged chicken will keep in the freezer for 9-12 month**s.**

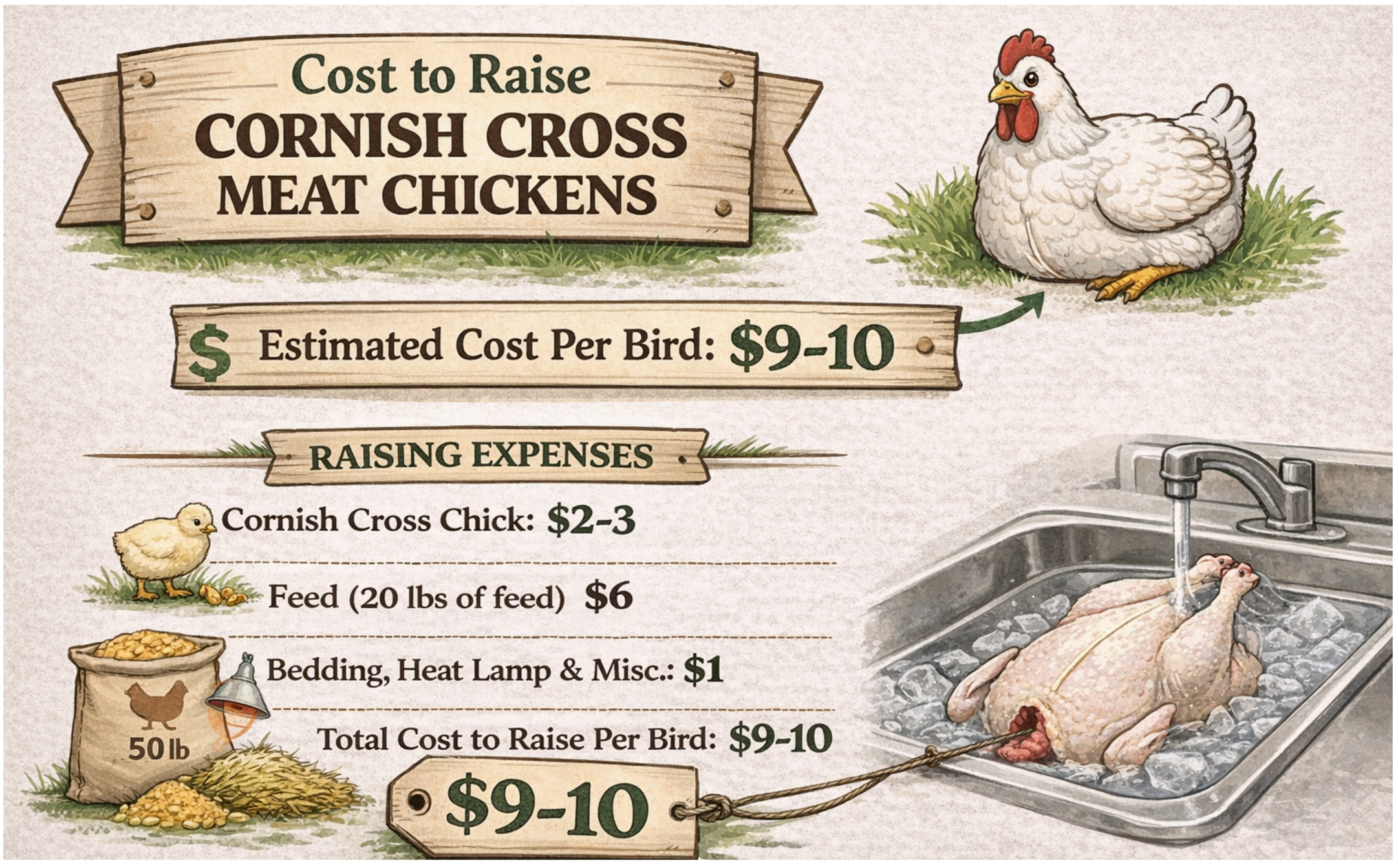


If you're new to butchering, expect your first few birds to be messy and slow. That's normal. You'll get faster and cleaner with practice.

Cost Comparison: Homegrown vs. Store-Bought Chicken

Let's run the numbers to see whether raising your own meat birds makes financial sense.

A Cornish Cross chick costs about $2-3. Feed costs depend on how long you raise the bird, but a meat bird will eat about 20 pounds of feed from chick to processing weight. At $15 per 50-pound bag, that's $6 in feed. Add another $1 for bedding, electricity for heat lamps (if you're brooding chicks), and miscellaneous costs. Total cost per bird: $9-10.



A processed bird will weigh 5-7 pounds, so you're paying roughly $1.50-2.00 per pound for homegrown chicken. Compare that to organic chicken at the store, which costs $6-8 per pound, or even conventional chicken, which costs $3-4 per pound. The cost savings are significant.

If you're using a processor instead of doing it yourself, add $3-6 per bird, which brings your cost to $12-16 per bird or $2-3 per pound. That's still cheaper than organic store-bought chicken and comparable to conventional chicken, but the savings are less dramatic.

The real advantage is quality. Homegrown chicken tastes better, it's fresher, and you know exactly how it was raised. If you value that, the cost comparison becomes even more favorable.



Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common mistake beginners make with meat birds is starting with too many. Processing 50 chickens on your first attempt is overwhelming. Start with 10-15 birds, learn the process, and scale up if you want to.

Another mistake is not planning for processing day. Processing takes time, and you need to block out an entire day to do it properly. You also need a clean workspace, plenty of hot water, ice for chilling, and freezer space for the finished birds. Plan ahead.

A third mistake is raising meat birds past their optimal processing age. Cornish Cross birds should be processed at 8-10 weeks. If you wait longer, they become prone to leg problems, heart failure, and they eat far more feed without gaining much additional weight. Process on time. Finally, watch out for squeamishness that prevents you from doing the job properly. If you're going to raise meat birds, you need to be able to kill them humanely and process them competently. If you can't do that, don't raise meat birds. Either hire a processor or stick with dual-purpose birds and take them to a processor when the time comes.

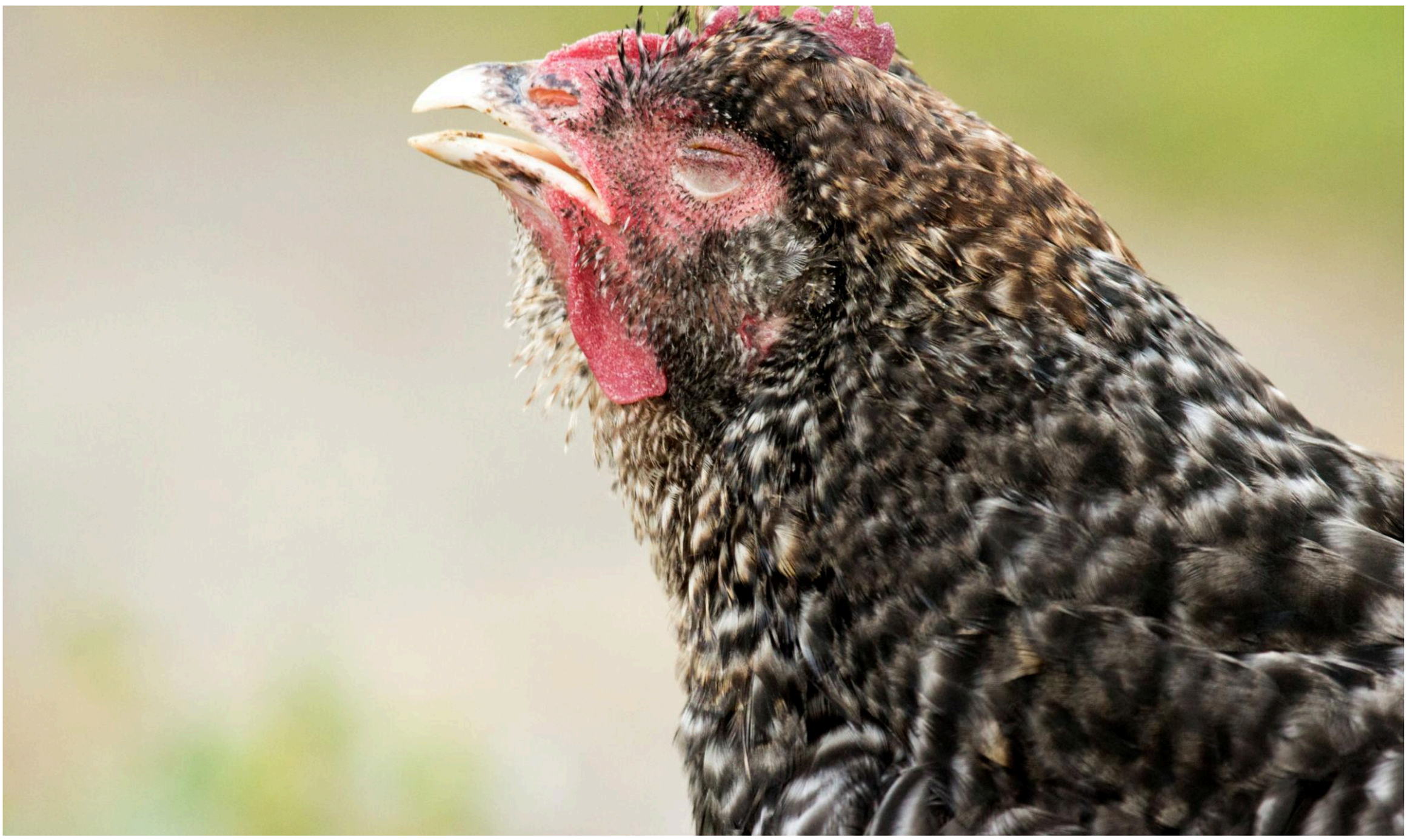
Chapter 6: Health and Maintenance

The 5 Most Common Backyard Chicken Ailments and Simple Treatments

Most backyard chickens are healthy if they're well-fed, properly housed, and kept in clean conditions. But problems do arise, and knowing how to recognize and treat common ailments will save you money, stress, and birds.



1. Respiratory infections are among the most common problems in backyard flocks. Symptoms include sneezing, coughing, nasal discharge, swollen eyes, and labored breathing. Respiratory infections are usually caused by bacteria (Mycoplasma), viruses, or poor ventilation. Mild cases often resolve on their own if you improve ventilation and reduce stress.



Severe cases may require antibiotics (available at feed stores as water-soluble powders like Tylan or VetRx). Isolate sick birds to prevent spread, and improve coop ventilation to reduce future outbreaks.

2. External parasites—mites and lice—are tiny insects that live on chickens and feed on their blood or skin. Signs include feather loss, irritated skin, pale combs, and birds that spend excessive time dust-bathing or preening. Check for parasites by examining the skin under the vent and around the base of feathers.



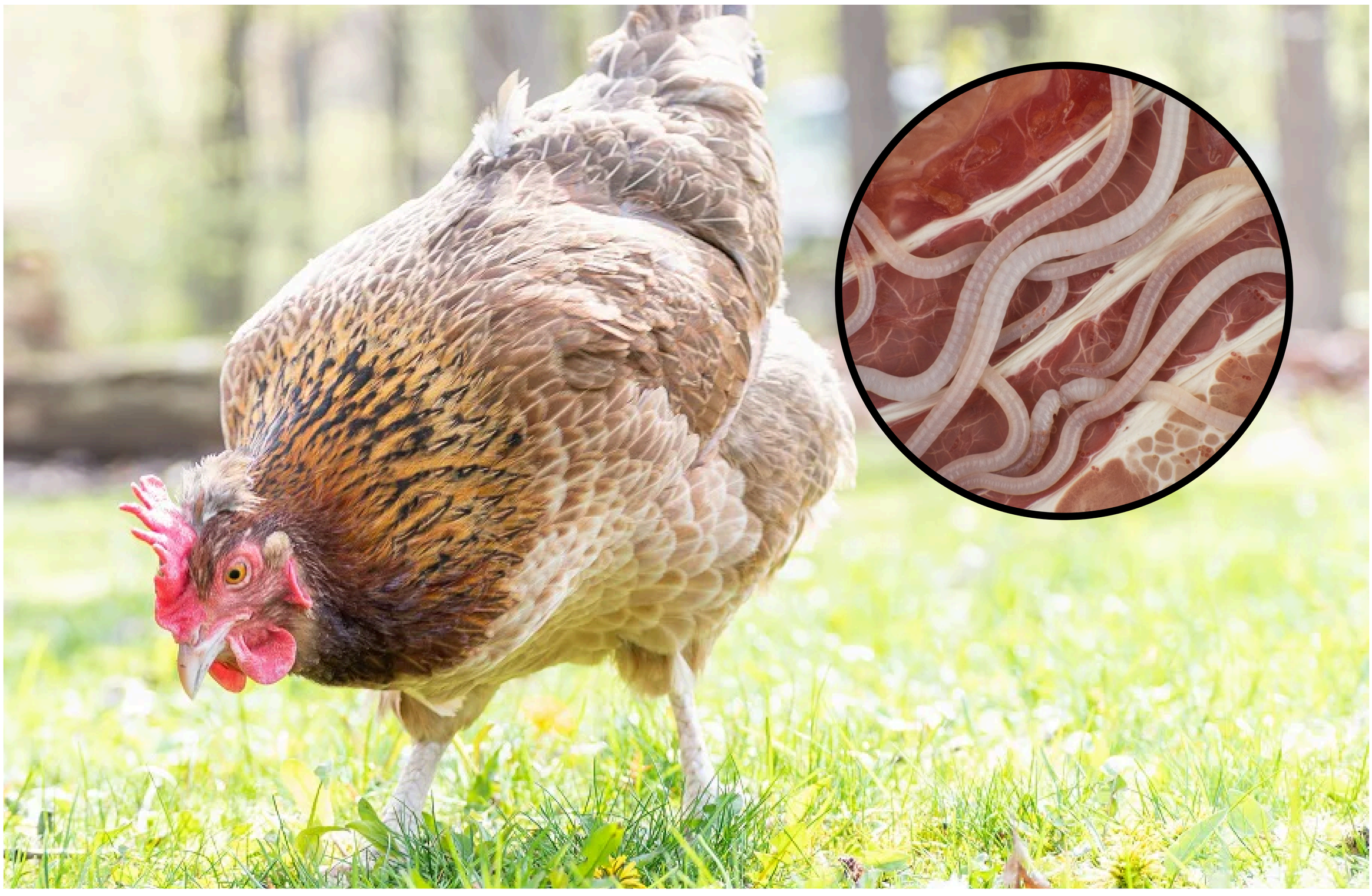
You'll see tiny moving specks or clusters of eggs. Treat with poultry dust (permethrin-based) applied directly to the bird, or use a spray like Poultry Protector. Treat the coop as well—mites live in cracks and bedding. Repeat treatment in 7-10 days to kill newly hatched parasites.

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3. Internal parasites—worms—are common in free-range flocks. Symptoms include weight loss, diarrhea, pale combs, and reduced egg production. Most worm infestations are mild and don't require treatment, but heavy infestations can kill birds. You can deworm using medicated feed or water additives (fenbendazole or piperazine), available at feed stores



4. Bumblefoot is a bacterial infection of the foot, usually caused by a cut or scrape that becomes infected. It appears as a hard, dark scab on the bottom of the foot, often with swelling. Mild cases can be treated by soaking the foot in warm water with Epsom salt and applying antibiotic ointment. Severe cases require minor surgery to remove the infected core. If you're not comfortable with this, take the bird to a vet.



5. Egg binding occurs when a hen is unable to pass an egg. Symptoms include straining, lethargy, and sitting in a hunched position. This is a medical emergency—a bound egg can kill a hen within 24-48 hours. Treat by placing the hen in a warm, humid environment (a bathroom with a hot shower running works), which often helps the muscles relax and pass the egg. If that doesn't work within a few hours, you may need to lubricate the vent with mineral oil and gently assist the egg out. If you're not comfortable with this, see a vet immediately.



Parasite Prevention and Treatment

Preventing parasites is easier than treating them. Here's what I do to keep my flock parasite-free.

External parasites: Provide a dust bath area filled with sand, wood ash, or diatomaceous earth. Chickens will dust-bathe regularly, which helps control mites and lice. Check birds periodically for signs of infestation (examine under the vent and around the vent). If you find parasites, treat immediately.





Internal parasites: Rotate pasture if you're free-ranging, or clean and replace bedding regularly if birds are confined. Worm eggs accumulate in soil and bedding over time, and rotating birds to fresh ground reduces reinfection. Deworm twice a year as a preventive, or more often if you see signs of heavy worm load.

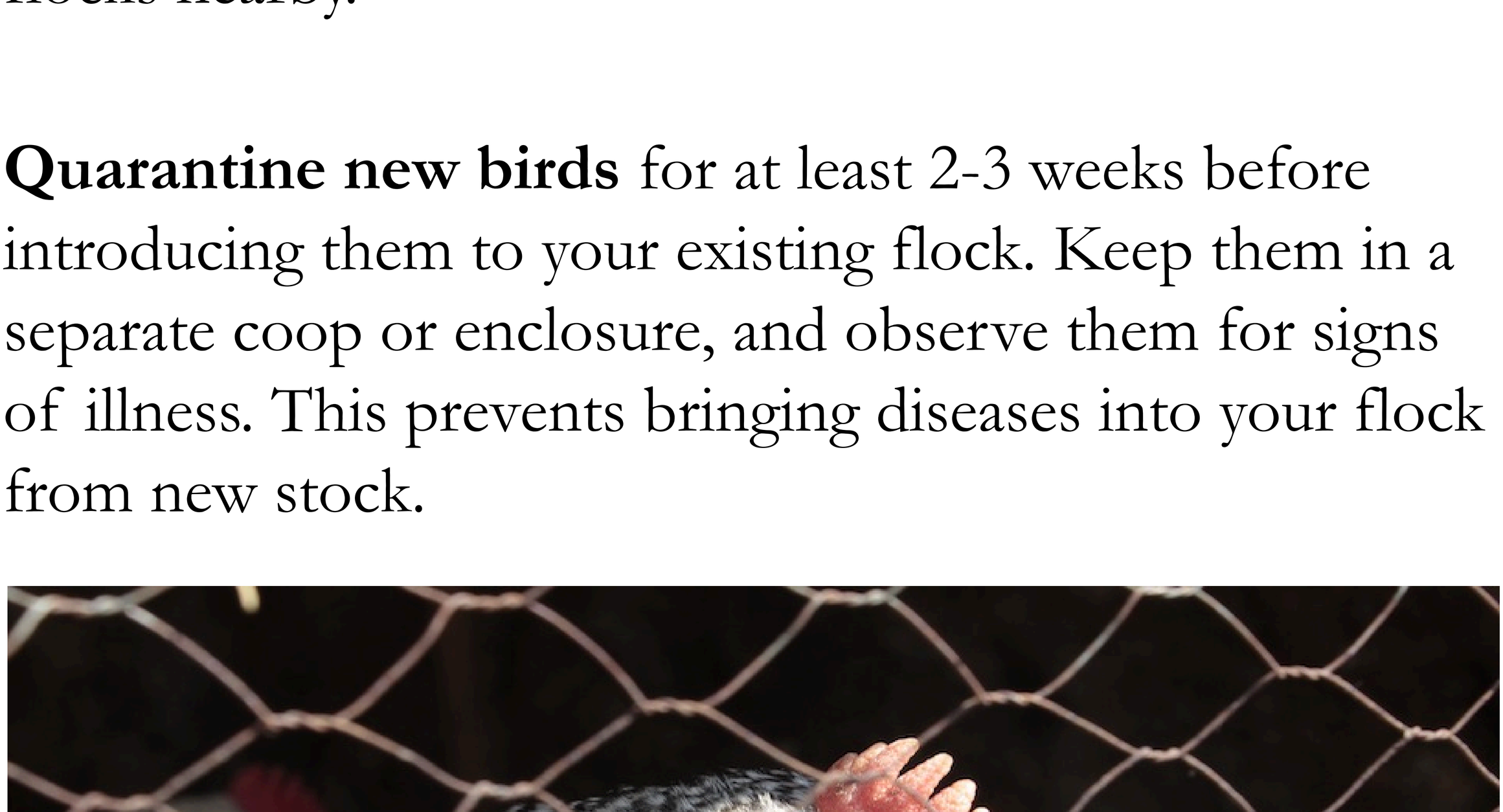


I also use food-grade diatomaceous earth mixed into bedding (about 1 cup per 10 square feet). DE is abrasive to parasites and helps control both internal and external parasites, though its effectiveness is debated. I use it more as a general preventive than as a treatment.

Biosecurity Basics: Protecting Your Flock

Biosecurity means preventing disease from entering your flock. This is especially important if you're buying new birds, attending poultry shows, or if there are other flocks nearby.

Quarantine new birds for at least 2-3 weeks before introducing them to your existing flock. Keep them in a separate coop or enclosure, and observe them for signs of illness. This prevents bringing diseases into your flock from new stock.



Limit exposure to outside birds. Wild birds can carry diseases that infect chickens. Don't allow wild birds to access your coop or feeders. Cover feed and water to keep wild birds out.



Clean boots and equipment if you visit other flocks or attend poultry events. Diseases can be transmitted on boots, clothing, and equipment. I keep a pair of dedicated boots for my coop and I don't wear them anywhere else.

Don't share equipment with other flock owners unless it's been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.
These practices might seem excessive if you have a small backyard flock, but a single disease outbreak can wipe out an entire flock. Prevention is worth the effort.

When to Cull Non-Productive Birds

At some point, you'll need to decide what to do with hens that are no longer laying. Some people keep older hens as pets. Others cull them and replace them with younger birds.

I cull hens when their production drops below about 2 eggs per week, which usually happens around age 4-5. This isn't because I'm ruthless—it's because feed costs don't change based on production. A non-laying hen costs the same to feed as a productive hen, and if I'm keeping birds primarily for eggs and meat, it makes sense to replace low-producers with younger, more productive birds.



The Garden Backyard Flock Profits



I process older hens and use the meat for soup or stew. The meat is tougher than young meat birds, but it's flavorful and perfectly good for long, slow cooking. Nothing goes to waste, and the older hens are replaced with pullets that will lay well for the next 3-4 years.

If you're attached to your birds and you want to keep them as pets, that's fine. But understand that you're essentially paying for their upkeep without any return. For some people, that's worth it. For others, it's not.

The Lazy Farmer's Daily/Weekly/Monthly Checklist

One of the reasons I've stuck with chickens for over a decade is that they fit into a simple, low-maintenance routine. Here's what I do to keep my flock healthy without spending more time than necessary.

Daily (5-10 minutes):

- Check water and refill if needed
- Check feed and refill if needed
- Collect eggs
- Do a quick visual check of the flock—look for limping, lethargy, or anything unusual
- Close coop door at dusk (if not using an automatic door)





Weekly (15-30 minutes):

- Clean waterers and refill with fresh water
- Top off feeders
- Remove soiled bedding from high-traffic areas and replace as needed
- Check for signs of predators (tracks, digging, gaps in fencing)
- Inspect birds more closely—check vents for parasites, look at combs and eyes for signs of illness



Monthly (1-2 hours):

- Full coop cleanout: remove all bedding, scrape droppings, add fresh bedding
- Inspect coop for damage, loose hardware, or wear
- Check and repair fencing, gates, and predator barriers
- Trim overgrown vegetation around coop and run



Seasonal:

- Spring: Deworm, start chicks or add new birds, do major coop repairs
- Summer: Monitor for heat stress, provide shade and extra water
- Fall: Deworm, prepare coop for winter, evaluate older birds for culling
- Winter: Add bedding for insulation, check for drafts, monitor water for freezing





This routine keeps my flock healthy, my coop clean, and my workload manageable. I spend about 10 minutes per day and a few hours per month on chicken-related tasks. That's it.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common mistake people make with flock health is ignoring early signs of illness. Chickens are prey animals, and they hide illness until it's advanced. If a bird looks sick, it's probably been sick for a while. Don't wait—isolate the bird and treat immediately.

Another mistake is overcrowding. Too many birds in too small a space leads to stress, aggression, and disease. Stick to the 3-4 square feet per bird guideline for coops and 8-10 square feet per bird for runs. More space is always better.

A third mistake is not having a plan for sick or injured birds. If you find a bird that's seriously ill or injured and you're not equipped to treat it, you need to either take it to a vet or cull it humanely. Letting a bird suffer because you don't know what to do is not acceptable.

Finally, watch out for the temptation to over-medicate. Not every problem requires antibiotics or medication. Many issues resolve on their own with improved husbandry—better ventilation, cleaner bedding, less stress. Don't reach for medication as your first response. Improve management first, and medicate only when necessary.

Closing Thoughts

Keeping a backyard flock for eggs and meat is one of the most practical steps you can take toward food independence. It's not glamorous, it's not a way to get rich, and it's not without work. But it is a reliable, sustainable way to produce high-quality protein for your household while reducing your dependence on industrial food systems.



Start small, learn as you go, and resist the temptation to overcomplicate things. A small, well-managed flock will serve you far better than a large, chaotic one. Focus on the basics—good housing, consistent feed, daily care, and humane treatment—and you'll find that poultry keeping becomes a routine part of your household that contributes meaningfully to your food security and your budget.

If you do this well, you'll find that you're not buying eggs or chicken at the store anymore. You'll have a freezer stocked with meat you raised yourself, and you'll have the confidence that comes from knowing you can produce your own protein regardless of what's happening at the grocery store or in the broader food system.

That's a valuable form of independence, and it's worth the effort.