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This definitive guide to North American barnyard and wild fowl includes a brief history of each breed, detailed descriptions of identifying characteristics, and colorful photography of more than 128 birds that celebrate the birds’ quirky personalities and charming good looks. If it’s fowl facts and photos you want, you’ll find them all here.

iamcountryside.com/shop/storeys-illustrated-guide-to-poultry-breeds
How to Raise Ducks in Your Backyard
A Duck Farming Guide for Beginners

By Dave Holderrad

If you want an economical and steady supply of homegrown eggs that are nutritious and tasty, you’ll need a flock of chickens, right? Well, not necessarily. You might want to consider learning how to raise ducks in your backyard. No doubt about it, chickens have proven their worth as fine producers of savory eggs and should not be discredited. However, during the last decade, a growing number of us North Americans have been discovering what many Asians and Europeans have known for a long time: under many circumstances, ducks have advantages over their cackling relatives as producers of eating eggs.

Facts & Figures

Relatively few people in the Americas realize that, on the whole, ducks are more proficient layers than chickens. While poultry researchers in North America have spent the last 100 years and countless millions of dollars on improving the productivity of chickens, ducks—for all practical purposes—have been ignored. Despite all the attention chickens received, it’s unusual for a commercial flock of Leghorns to average over 250 to 280 eggs per hen in a year’s time. On the other hand, Campbell ducks of good strains often average 300 or more eggs per bird during the course of 12 months.

Duck eggs also weigh five to eight ounces per dozen more than chicken eggs. In spite of the fact that some literature on the subject states otherwise, practical experience and tests conducted by institutions such as the University of Nebraska clearly show that duck eggs retain their freshness during storage considerably longer than those of chickens. On various occasions, we have refrigerated well-cleaned duck eggs for four months and longer with no detectible change in flavor.

It is true that, when raised in confinement, a 3-1/2 to 4-1/2 pound duck will consume 20 to 30 percent more feed than a similarly sized Leghorn. But, due to the larger size and greater number of eggs produced by ducks, trials have shown that with proper management, ducks are still more efficient when the quantity of feed to produce a pound of eggs is calculated. Since ducks are considerably better foragers than chickens, the efficiency of ducks is further enhanced when they are allowed to rustle free foods in bodies of water, pastures or grassy yards.

There are a few duck diseases to watch for, but generally ducks are also incredibly resistant to disease as well as and cold and wet weather. The average mortality rate in home flocks is significantly lower with ducks than with chickens. Due to their greater hardiness, ducks require less elaborate housing than chickens—yet another advantage. And, because egg-type ducks are not accomplished high jumpers, they are easily confined with a two- or three-foot high barrier.

What About Disadvantages?

When first exploring how to raise ducks in your backyard, you’re probably asking, “Okay, what are their drawbacks?” After raising and comparing all species of domestic poultry over the course of the last 20 years, I’ve yet to run across a major disadvantage in ducks under most small flock conditions.
Waterfowl do like to wash their bills and heads frequently, so their drinking water should be changed at least several times weekly—and preferably daily. If crowded in a small pen with a dirt floor during wet weather, they will turn their quarters into a muddy mess. But, adequate bedding (such as sand, straw or wood shavings), larger pens or the use of wire floors takes care of this problem.

People who have close neighbors are sometimes concerned about noise. On the whole, ducks of the egg breeds are no noisier than chickens, especially when raised in small flocks consisting of six to eight birds.

“But aren’t duck eggs strong-flavored?” is a common question. The flavor of eggs is controlled by the diet of the producing birds. If ducks (or chickens) are fed a ration containing fish products or the birds are allowed to feed in bodies of water or pastures where they can pick up pungent natural foods, the eggs can be tainted.

When duck and chicken eggs are produced with similar feeding and management, the taste of the end product is virtually indistinguishable. Over the years, we have served thousands of scrambled, fried, poached, deviled, soft boiled, souffled and creped duck eggs to meal guests and at potlucks, picnics, wedding buffets and youth camps. In my recollection, not once has anyone suspected they weren’t dining on chicken eggs until we told them otherwise. Interestingly, before being told that they were eating duck cuisine, we’ve had numerous people mention that the eggs were exceptionally good.

The shells of duck eggs are slightly more difficult to crack and are pearly white rather than chalk white as in chicken eggs—but I can’t see these as disadvantages. The albumen of duck eggs is somewhat firmer and usually takes slightly longer to whip up for meringues and angel food cakes than the white of chicken eggs.

**Choosing A Breed**

How to raise ducks in your backyard starts with breed selection. There are a variety of duck breeds that make adequate layers. However, for top efficiency and year ’round production, Campbells, Welsh Harlequins, Indian Runners, Magpies and Anconas from strains selected for egg production are usually the best choices. Pekins are good seasonal layers of jumbo-sized eggs, but due to their large size and corresponding hearty appetites, they require nearly twice as much feed to produce a pound of eggs when compared to the above mentioned breeds.

Campbells, and their close relative the Welsh Harlequin, are generally considered the best layers of all domestic poultry. Individual females have been known to produce 360 or more eggs in a year’s time, although flock averages are nearer 275 to 325.

For egg-laying needs, a Khaki Campbell duck is an excellent choice (there is also a white variety). Khaki Campbell drakes (males) have iridescent greenish-bronze heads and khaki bodies, while ducks (females) are varying shades of khaki brown with dark seal-brown, silky white plumage, orange feet and legs and bills that range from pink to yellowish-pink in color.

Along with their fine laying prowess, the graceful Indian Runners are some of the most entertaining of all domestic ducks. Tall and slender, they have often been referred to as “Penguin ducks” due to their nearly vertical carriage. Mature weights of the ducks and drakes are similar to that of Campbells—in the four- to five-pound range.

With proper care, Runners, Magpies and Anconas from good laying strains can produce 200 to over 300 white or blue eggs yearly that average approximately two ounces larger per dozen than Campbell eggs. Runners are bred in a rainbow of colors, including White, Fawn and White, Penciled, Solid Fawn, Black, Blue, Chocolate, Buff and Gray.

**Feed**

You’re probably wondering what do ducks eat? To keep ducks laying the year around, they must be supplied an adequate amount of laying feed that provides a minimum of 15 to 16 percent crude protein. Most chicken laying rations prove satisfactory, although those that are medicated have been suspected of causing illness—even death—in ducks, especially when birds are raised in confinement and cannot dilute the potency of the medications through foraging. To reduce waste and prevent ducks from choking, pellets are preferred, but course crumbles normally work out okay. Fine, powdery feeds should be avoided.
Feed can be left in front of the birds at all times in a trough or hopper feeder, or it can be given twice daily in quantities that the ducks will clean up in 10 to 15 minutes. The first method insures that the ducks are never deprived of feed, while the second system helps prevent feed loss to rodents and encourages the fowl to forage during the day. However, laying birds cannot be expected to continue laying consistently, particularly during cold weather, if their intake of concentrated feeds is inadequate.

To produce mild-flavored eggs, feed containing marine products should not be utilized. Dr. George Arscott, formerly head of the Oregon State University Poultry Science Department, also urges that cottonseed meal not be used in breeding or laying rations since this protein supplement contains a toxin that can reduce hatchability and produce strange coloration in eggs, especially if the eggs are stored several weeks before being eaten. You might also want to keep in mind that feed stuffs such as corn and dehydrated or fresh greens cause bright-colored yolks, while wheat, oats and barley result in pale yolks. While producing, ducks are very sensitive to sudden changes in their diets. To avoid throwing your birds into a premature molt and drastically reducing egg production, it's wise to never change feeds while ducks are laying. If the brand or type of feed you've been using must be altered, do so gradually, preferably over a span of at least a week or 10 days.

**Water**

When exploring how to raise ducks in your backyard, it's important to understand waterfowl's critical relationship with water. High-producing ducks need a constant supply of reasonably clean drinking water. Both the number and size of eggs will suffer if birds are frequently allowed to go thirsty.

Water containers do not need to be elaborate, although I do suggest that they be at least four to six inches deep to permit the ducks to clean their bills and eyes. For just a couple of ducks, a gallon tin can will suffice—and is easily cleaned. For a larger number of birds, a three- to five-gallon bucket placed below a slowly dripping faucet or outfitted with a float valve works well. Larger containers—such as a child's wading pool or an old hot water tank that has been cut in half—will be enjoyed for bathing by ducks, but can be a nuisance to clean out regularly. Ducks do not need bathing water to remain healthy.

To prevent unsanitary mud holes from developing around the watering area, it's advantageous to place all watering receptacles on wire-covered platforms or locate them on the outside of the pen where the birds must reach through fencing in order to drink.

During cold weather, when drinking water freezes, an electric water warmer (a variety of such devices are available from the larger poultry and game bird supply dealers) can be used or lukewarm water should be provided a minimum of two or three times daily.
Housing

With their well-oiled feathers and thick coating of down, ducks are amazingly resistant to cold and wet weather. For ducks in general, a windbreak that is bedded on the protected side with dry litter usually provides sufficient protection in areas where temperatures occasionally drop to 0º F. However, for laying ducks, feed conversion and egg yields can be improved if ducks are housed at nighttime whenever temperatures regularly fall more than 5º to 10º F below the freezing level.

The duck house can be a simple shed-like structure (approximately three feet high) and does not require furnishings such as raised nests, perches and dropping pits. When ducks are housed only at night, a minimum of three to five square feet of floor space per duck is recommended. If you anticipate keeping your ducks inside continuously during severe weather, providing each bird with eight to 15 square feet helps keep bedding reasonably dry and sanitary.

Because ducks roost on the ground at night, they are susceptible to predators. Under most circumstances, ducks should be locked up at nighttime in a yard that is tightly fenced with woven wire or netting at least four feet high. In areas where thieves such as weasels, raccoons and large owls are known to roam, it is much safer to lock ducks in a varmint-proof building or pen at nightfall.

Lighting

For consistent winter egg production—especially in cold climates—ducks, like chickens, must be exposed to a minimum of 13 to 14 hours of light daily. Therefore, during the short days between September and April, laying birds need supplemental lighting in most areas of the Northern Hemisphere. Small flock owners often ignore this requirement and end up being disappointed with their birds’ performance. However, day length is extremely important since it is the photoperiod that automatically turns the reproductive organs of poultry on and off.

The intensity of light required is low. One 25-watt clear or white bulb located five to six feet above floor level will provide sufficient illumination for approximately 100 square feet of ground space. Probably more important than intensity is consistency. It is paramount that the length of light never decreases while birds are producing heavily, or else the rate of lay can be drastically curtailed or brought to a sudden halt.

One method is to leave a light burning all night, which helps in keeping the birds calm. However, ducks exposed to 24 hours of light daily seem to have a tendency to go broody after several months. A better system, and the one we have used extensively, is to purchase an automatic timer switch (small, dependable models are available for about $10 from most hardware dealers) that can be set to expose the birds to 13 to 16 hours of light daily by turning the lights on before daybreak and off after night fall. To prevent premature broodiness and molting, 16 to 17 hours of light each day seems to be the upper limit for ducks.

One Last Word

Now that you know how to raise ducks in your backyard, I want to leave you with this thought. One reason egg-laying ducks have been rather slow catching on in this country is that high producing stock has often been difficult to locate. Sad to say, the productivity of many breeding flocks has been allowed to degenerate, and much too frequently, any ducks even slightly resembling Campbells or Runners have been sold as the real article.

I would like to emphasize that if you decide to raise ducks for the production of eating eggs, by all means make sure you acquire birds that have been selected specifically for high egg yields. Fortunately, there are several breeding farms and hatcheries in the U.S. today that are working with, and distributing, fine laying ducks.

Dave Holderread is the author of several books including Storey’s Guide to Raising Ducks and The Book of Geese, a Complete Guide to Raising the Home Flock, available from the Backyard Poultry bookstore, see page 15. Visit the Holderread Waterfowl Farm & Preservation Center at www.holderreadfarm.com. They have enjoyed raising and studying domestic geese and ducks continuously since 1961, specializing in purebred waterfowl that possess a unique blend of superb production and exhibition qualities. Their breeding program encompasses more than 20 heritage goose varieties and 40 heritage duck varieties, including some of the world’s rarest and most unique breeds.
A Quick Guide to Buying Ducks

Where to Buy Ducklings

BY LISA STEELE

Whether you are expanding your duck flock, adding to your chicken flock or are brand new to backyard duck keeping, buying ducks is fairly straightforward, but there are a few things to keep in mind. Before you start looking around for a place to buy your ducks, you’ll want to figure out which breeds you want. I have found most duck breeds to be very similar in temperament and laying consistency, so your choice might very well be based on the breed’s appearance and how easy it is to find. Duck eggs only come in a few colors – namely white, cream, pale green or black – so you won’t get the colorful egg basket like you will from chickens. To make things more complicated, within a breed, some ducks will lay white, others pale green, and there’s no way to tell beforehand, so choosing a breed based on egg color isn’t really possible. The one exception is the Cayuga ducks that lay charcoal gray or blackish eggs.

There are some breeds that seem to excel in different areas however. For egg production, think about Khaki Campbell, Silver Appleyard or Welsh Harlequin. Good foragers include Ancona, Cayuga, Runner or Magpie ducks. They are all super active and will be best for weed and bug control in your yard. If you’re thinking about hatching duck eggs in the future, consider Dutch Hookbill, domestic Mallard or Rouen ducks.

But basically any breed duck will lay you delicious, rich eggs, provide you tons of nutrient-rich fertilizer in the form of manure and provide hours of entertainment. Other breeds widely available include Buff Orpington, Pekin, Saxony and Swedish ducks.

The Livestock Conservancy has wonderful duck breed information on their site (www.livestock-conservancy.org) as does Metzer Farms (www.metzerfarms.com), so spend some time looking at the breed photos and reading up on some of the different breeds that interest you.

Metzer Farms also sells ducklings. If you are starting your flock of ducks to be pets as well as layers, I highly recommend buying ducklings instead of adult ducks. While there are many rescue organizations that have adult ducks that need good homes (and I greatly support them and their efforts) unless you raise a duck from hatch, you likely won’t end up with very friendly ducks that you can handle or pick up. Starting ducklings and sitting with them, talking to them, offering them treats and handling them often is the best way to let them get used to you. Hatching duck eggs is also a great way to ensure your ducklings are comfortable with you and friendly as adults. But for now, let’s stick with buying ducks.

Where to Buy Ducklings

As I mentioned, Metzer Farms sells ducklings. They are the largest source for ducklings in North America, and a good place to start. They will ship as few as two or three ducklings, almost year round, across the country. Ducklings are pretty hardy and not as sensitive to the cold as baby chicks and do quite well being shipped. However, if you don’t want to go that route, your local feed store will likely sell ducklings in the spring. Many state laws require a minimum of six ducklings to be purchased at a time (to prevent impulse Easter sales), so keep that in mind. Most feed stores also have a limited selection.
of breeds, although if you ask, they might be able to special order some different breeds for you. Your local Craig’s List is also a good place to find ducklings for sale in the spring.

Note: If you aren’t concerned about your ducks being ‘lap ducks’, then rescuing or buying older adult ducks is a wonderful idea. Ducks often lay well for 5-6 years, often several years past your average chicken, so an older duck might still be a decent layer for you. If you are buying ducks mainly for the weed and bug control – and entertainment value- a flock of all drakes would be perfect for you. Drakes don’t quack, so a flock of drakes will be quieter and not annoy your neighbors. There are lots of unwanted male ducks available both from shelters, rescues and online, either free or very inexpensively, so think about going that route if a “pet” duck isn’t your goal.

No matter why you are buying ducks, where you buy them, and at what age, remember that ducks are very social and flock-oriented animals and I recommend a minimum of at least two, and preferably three, as a starter flock.

### How to Raise Ducks in Your Backyard

Once you’ve decided on a breed (or breeds), and found a place to buy your ducks, you may wonder how to raise ducks in your backyard. You’ll want to be sure they will be happy and safe there. Since ducks don’t roost like chickens and don’t really use nesting boxes either (they will just lay their eggs in a bed of straw on the floor), it’s simple to convert a doghouse, playhouse or shed into a duck shelter. Be sure there is a door with a predator-proof latch and plenty of ventilation and windows – all covered in 1/2″ welded wire for protection from predators.

Ducklings will need to be kept in the house (or in a shed or garage) under a heat lamp for the first 6-8 weeks before they can go outside, so be sure you have a brooder set up, similar to a chick brooder, with heat, bedding, feed and water, that is safe from family pets and children.

### What to Feed Baby Ducks

Wondering what to feed baby ducks? If you are buying ducks to add to your chicken flock, you’ll be happy to know that ducks can eat chicken layer feed. If you are only raising ducks, there is commercial waterfowl feed available that you can feed them instead. Ducklings can be fed unmedicated chick starter feed. Ducklings aren’t susceptible to Coccidiosis like baby chicks are, so they don’t need the medicated feed. Ducklings do need a bit more niacin than chicks do, so I add a sprinkle of Brewer’s yeast over their feed and also add some raw rolled oats to cut the protein levels a bit to prevent my ducklings from growing too fast and putting undue strain on their legs and feet.

If you’re thinking of buying ducks , I hope this has been helpful to you. Raising ducks is a very rewarding, enjoyable past time that I certainly can’t recommend enough.

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Ducks can be charming companions in suburban backyards. As someone who never raised so much as a parakeet on her own, the idea that I could look out the window and watch our five full-grown, food-producing, bug-eating, fertilizer-creating waterfowl would have been pure fantasy only two years ago. Actually, it was a fantasy—a dream of my young daughter’s and mine when we moved to comparatively yard-rich Westchester County, New York from the land of tiny lawns, Westside Los Angeles. Like many urban and suburban families, we saw the cute pictures of folks with their A-frame chicken coops and their adorable backyard chickens and said, “That’s what we want!” My husband thought we were flat-out nuts but he loves fresh food and so humored us when we presented my latest eat-local scheme. (I mean, eat really local scheme.) Then, on our way to chicken ownership, we fell in love with another species altogether and decided to start keeping ducks.

**Why Start Keeping Ducks?**

I’m not sure that Groucho ever gave Chico a satisfactory answer but when people ask me, I give it to them straight: Why not a duck? Nothing against chickens—I like chickens, my mom kept chickens, I eat chickens—but in our particular case, ducks made more sense. As beginning poultry owners, we wanted the easiest option and our research kept suggested we start keeping ducks. Ducks are less prone to disease, more weather-hardy and easy(ish) to herd. The male is actually quieter than the female so if you want a mixed gender flock, you don’t have the same No Rooster issues that you might have with chickens. Now, please note, this means the female is louder, so if you’re in this for the eggs, keep that in mind. Certain breeds are noisier than others and, of course, more ducks make more quacks so factor that in as well.
Why Keeping Ducks & Suburbia Go Together

Even though I didn’t know this when we started, I’m sort of amazed at how simpatico the duck is to our cul-de-sac residing, SUV-driving lifestyle. For one thing, ducks are more like feathered dogs than you might imagine. They listen, they learn, they let you direct them where they need to go. Even at barely eight-weeks-old, our teenaged ducks figured out how to leave their temporary home in the garage then waddle across the driveway to the backyard play area. We showed them once and the second day, with very little motivation, they managed it on their own, without scattering or hiding. Try that with five cats!

Getting them out of the pen is easy, you might say, and that’s true—breakfast is a great motivator—especially for me! But even though we sometimes have to pick up a straggler, most nights, bedtime is also straightforward. Often our group even put themselves to bed—it’s hard work foraging among the hydrangeas all day and they can’t always wait for me to finish the dishes.

In practical terms, this tractability means you can share waterfowl supervision with others. Even my husband, a life-long cat person, can handle pen-up duty from time to time. Some folks strike deals with their neighbors, swapping duck eggs for duck-sitting. For those longer-term situations, however, i.e. vacation, I prefer to get professional pet-sitters who come twice a day while we’re gone. “Easier than dogs,” one of our regular caregivers pronounced after his initial stint. And dogs can’t give you breakfast!

How Many Ducks is Just Enough?

Ducks love company. A minimum of two—ducks seem to be happier in groups. Also, if you’re having ducklings shipped to you, most companies won’t send fewer than two or three. Ducks need adequate space. On the Cornell Duck Research Lab’s website, William F. Dean, Ph.D., and Tirath S. Sandhu, DVM, Ph.D. write that laying ducks need 3.02 square feet of floor space per duck. Holderread’s guide describes a “triplex duck run” consisting of secure sleep area and covered outdoor space within a fenced, grassy yard of at least 50 square feet per bird.

How Many Eggs Do You Want?

Some breeds can produce several hundred eggs per year. Multiply that by each female to determine your possible output—you may have way more than you need (or want.) Remember, however, that although domestic ducks can live 7+ years, productivity peaks then declines over time. Also, sexing ducks is not 100% accurate—you might get an eggless drake (or even two! That would be us.) What’s your plan if you get Donald instead of Daisy?

Laying the Groundwork for Keeping Ducks

Before your first duck lays her first egg, though, it’s a good idea to do a little nest prep of your own. Probably the single most important item of research is making sure your local laws permit keeping ducks or any poultry farming, if they do, what are the parameters (how many birds, how big a property, etc.). On one hand, living on the edge of a city might mean you have enough space to raise ducks in a healthy and wholesome manner. On the other hand, even if you have the room, your town might prefer swing sets to barnyards.

In the other good news/possibly bad news department, you might well consider soil testing before you order your birds. Many suburban lawns would in no way qualify for organic status and, for all their pretty greenness, were neither zoned nor built for food production. If your ducks are roaming, digging, eating and drinking from the products of your yard, they are ingesting whatever nutrients and less-nutritious elements may be found there. It pays to know in advance whether you’ll be able to enjoy the daily egg bounty or whether that dream will be, er, scrambled.
Last, but certainly not least, it’s a great idea to acquaint your neighbors with the news of your plans of keeping ducks before the hatchlings show up at the post office. Although you’re not starting a rooster factory (I hope), you’ll find when keeping ducks that they do make some noise from time to time. For instance, they might feel moved to send out a powerful quack when you show up in the morning with a bowl of kibble. The girls will be happy to see you at 7:00 a.m. but the fellow next door might not feel the same.

On a similar note, good fences make good poultry neighbors, especially in the ‘burbs. At our house, we went through the laborious but necessary process of surveying, permitting and installing a deer fence months before our ducks put one webbed foot on the lawn. Now, though, we can rest assured that our ducks won’t wander and friendly dogs can’t conduct unscheduled visits. Better for both sides of the fence.

**Just Add Ducklings**

Once you’ve determined that keeping ducks will work for you, time to figure out where to put ‘em. If you’ve got a typical suburban set-up with attached garage, you already have the perfect housing. Actually, the more attached the better because it’s important to stay in tune with the hatchlings’ needs and the closer, the easier. Although, I’d draw the line at the guest bedroom, please.

In our garage, we began with the typical starter kit—a cardboard pen with brooder lamp and stand—but our birds quickly outgrew those tight quarters. We started raising ducklings with their food and water into a large kiddie pool frequently re-stocked with clean bedding. And I do mean “frequently.” Because as any duck person will tell you, waterfowl are messy creatures, their big floppy feet tailor-made for toppling bowls of crumble. They also produce wondrous amounts of wet poop. And five ducks, I have to admit, make an awful lot of poop. Something to think about, by the way, when calculating your property’s total waterfowl capacity.

In addition to supplemental heat, baby ducks need constant access to clean water. The tricky part is that in the early weeks, you can’t use too big a bowl as they may fall in and not be able to get out unassisted. They are waterfowl but before their adult plumage comes in, ducks can get chilled or even drown if not monitored. We used age-appropriate waterers but these had to be refilled frequently, especially since the rambunctious ducklings often knocked them over. This means—and parents of all ages will recall these days—you can’t leave the little ones alone for long stretches of daytime. For suburbanites whose primary occupation is not animal husbandry, a plan for this aspect of duck-minding will be necessary.

**Making Your Backyard Duck-Friendly**

Even though you have about two months from hatch to outside living, it’s wise to have your ducks’ adult needs in mind from the get-go. Basically, it comes down to this: Where are they going to sleep? And what I mean by that is, where can they sleep where they won’t end up as duck dinner? Many homeowners already know about the relentless cunning raccoons employ to get into trashcans but the outcomes could be much worse when they’re after your Pekins and Cayugas. Do not underestimate their ability to get through fencing and undo latches! Furthermore, in your part of the country, other varmints may come take a look. Do some research and secure accordingly.

When we entered the poultry housing market in early 2012, there didn’t seem to be any duck-specific coop options for sale in the U.S. (There were a few British models but think of the shipping costs!) Most of what I found on this side of the pond was more suitable for raising chickens than keeping ducks and different fowl have different habits. Ducks, for example, don’t use chicken roosting bars, won’t necessarily fit into a small coop and can’t use those nifty nest boxes built for hens. In the end, we purchased the stylish and easy-cleaning Yolk System but as the weather warmed up, decided that the coop itself would be too cramped and hot for overnight duck use. Instead, we took advantage of the
extra-long pen and, with some reinforcing of the wire enclosure, used it exclusively for sleeping quarters. The plan now is to try keeping ducks in the coop this winter but we’re still not perfectly sure if it’ll be too small (or just right) for frigid conditions. We also don’t know if the ducks will be able to navigate a chicken-friendly ramp or whether we’ll have to “assist” them. In a nor’easter, of course, they might not mind a little help.

If you don’t want to jury-rig chicken housing, you can plan on keeping ducks in a general-use structure such as a shed or even build something custom. Just remember that cleaning is a huge part of owning duck real estate. We like an outdoor pen option because it drains easily onto the lawn and can be hosed or scrubbed down as needed. Our set-up does need to be lugged around every few days to avoid creating mud bogs and it is a bit awkward getting to the eggs if the ducks won’t cooperate by laying them near a door but so far it’s a reasonable trade-off. This year, we’re also going to experiment with a deep litter system, parking it for the season once the lawn dies back. One of our neighbors pens her birds this way and then turns the fertilized space into a garden plot in the spring.

To Pond or Not to Pond

Almost everyone who finds out we have ducks asks us the same thing, do you have a pond? Our answer is, well, no. Pools not ponds are more common in suburban areas and at this point we’re not interested in the cost and maintenance of either. Still, it’s a reasonable question. In Storey’s Guide to Raising Ducks, Dave Holderread says “ducks can be raised successfully without water for swimming.” Nonetheless, ducks are waterfowl and still need plenty of water for drinking, bathing and playing. In our backyard, we use a couple of different sources—an automatic waterer, a sheep dip for daily baths and an oversized kiddie pool for the occasional swim treat. We drain all of these overnight to avoid encouraging mosquitoes. Not that they need much encouragement.

We also invested in a few extra-long hoses of varying sizes and made sure they were rated for drinking water—like those used for boating. And, in case you’re wondering, our water bill did go up this summer but not as much as my husband feared. In all fairness, the extreme heat didn’t help but neither did our 10-year-old’s extravagant efforts to keep the ducks happy in muggy weather.

Do You Really Need All That Lawn?

Of course, one of the hallmarks of suburban living is the manicured lawn. Perfect for keeping ducks, right? They roam around, dining on unwanted bugs, looking all decorative and peaceful. Um, sort of. The thing about ducks I didn’t know before keeping ducks is they like to play in mud. OK, right, they’re waterfowl but give them some dirt with that H2O and suddenly, they’re in hog heaven, so to speak. Even on their maiden voyage outdoors, the moment some water splashed from a dish, the ducklings dug holes in that thatch faster than a jackhammer (but, luckily, much quieter!)

Which, however, does not bode well if you’re hoping to retain that manicured lawn. Or, at least not in the same place where your ducks wander. The solution, once again, is fencing. Creating zones where you allow yourself the pleasure of grass cultivation (mowing and weeding, oh joy!) and others where you just accept that there will be less than pristine green space. Or space that is not even green at all, alas!
At our house, we’re in the process of converting the backyard in a scheme I call “anything but lawn.” For instance, we maintain ornamental plantings around the borders, including lots of shrubs where the ducks can hunker down in the hottest weather. We also installed a giant sunflower maze for our daughter and the ducks to play in and (for the ducks) to take shelter. In addition, we have two raised beds for corn as well as a pumpkin patch that, by the end of summer, takes over a huge chunk of grass. We hope to add even more features next year because, let’s face it, the less lawn you have, the less you have to mow!

Whatever you decide to do, you will need to maintain the groundcover (clover counts, right?) because you don’t want those aforementioned mud holes. Sometimes, though, I can’t get around to moving the pen fast enough so I have to mulch the bare spots and avoid those areas for a while. Well, so much for “best laid plans.” Duck shoes, obviously, are in order.

**Home on the Free-Range**

And speaking of fences (again.) Have you thought about the effects of keeping ducks (or chickens for that matter but ducks have bigger feet) on your plants, ornamental or vegetable? It’s fine at the end of the season when they can nose through the post-harvest detritus but ducks love those sweet leaves of plant youth like nobody’s business. We learned straight off that if we wanted our corn, pumpkin and sunflowers to make it to adulthood, we needed to get our plastic poultry fence up as soon as possible. Once secured, we let the birds noodle around the perimeter in hopes they would keep the slugs and other pests in check. We still got some bugs on the cornstalks but not too many. With a no-spray, duck-only deterrent, I actually think we did rather well.

With flowerbeds, it’s a different issue. Covering the sedum with bird mesh and caging the ferns may be effective but it sure defeats the prettifying purpose! Again, it helps to look at this as duck-allowed vs. duck-protected areas. And remember, if there’s no barricade, the ducks will come by and check stuff out. They have absolutely no sense of personal space—yours, that is. I guess it never occurred to me that our ducks would like to come up on the deck and peek into the French doors just to say hey. (Or ask for a snack.) The duck, as it turns out, is a curious bird. So without further impediment, our group goes wherever it likes—around the patio, on the deck, under the deck, along the fences, in the flowerbeds, up by the composter. This is wonderful for two reasons—one, if the weather shifts and you’re not around, you don’t have to worry that they are cooped up (literally) in uncomfortable conditions—they can seek shelter in the rhododendrons or wherever they like. Two, it’s distinctly pleasurable to walk outside and have your ducks waddle out with a quackish greeting or to glance out a window and see them moving around, busy and content. In fact, I find it truly restful just watching them go about their ducky business.

Which, come to think of it, is a perfectly good reason to start keeping ducks.

Domestic duck breeds are generally extremely hardy and don’t often get sick as long as they are fed a healthy diet, given plenty of room to exercise and access to fresh water daily, but there are some fairly common duck diseases that you should be aware of if you raise backyard ducks. Hopefully you will never have to treat any of these illnesses, but it’s always best to be prepared.

**Hardware Disease/Botulism/Aspergillosis**
What do ducks eat? Just about anything. Ducks love to eat shiny things including spare change, screws, bolts, wire, staples or pieces of metal, which can lead to a duck disease called “hardware disease”, which isn’t really a duck disease at all but rather a type of poisoning. Signs of poisoning, whether it be from hardware disease, botulism, which is caused by bacteria found in stagnant water, or aspergillosis, which is caused by mold spores in wet feed or bedding, include lethargy, diarrhea, decreased appetite/weight, seizures, dehydration, vomiting, drooping wings, unsteadiness or difficulty walking. Toxins can work quickly, so while a visit to a vet is highly recommended in a suspected poisoning situation, feeding some molasses can help flush the toxin, as can charcoal pills, followed by lots of fresh, clean water, and of course removing the offending metal, dirty bedding or water or spoiled feed.

**Bumblefoot/Staph Infection**
The heavier duck breeds including Pekins and Appleyards can be susceptible to bumblefoot, which is basically a staphylococcus infection caused by a cut, hard landing or splinter. It manifests itself as a black scab on the bottom of the foot. Often catching it early enough means it can be treated using Vetericyn or an herbal salve to draw out the infection, but more advanced cases often require surgery to cut out the kernel of infection with a scalpel and then keeping the foot clean and dry until a new scab forms.

**Sticky Eye/Eye Infection**
Debris, a scratch or rough mating can all cause eye infections in ducks. Their sinuses run down the back of their head, so often eye issues and respiratory issues go hand in hand in ducks. Symptoms of an eye infection include a closed eye, bubbling eye, redness or tearing. Cleansing the eye well with saline and then making sure the duck has access to a nice, deep water bowl to submerge her entire head can often clear up the problem, but if it doesn’t seem to get better in a few days, a compress of steeped chamomile tea or goldenseal can help clear up the irritation. A more serious infection might require Vet-Rx, a natural camphor-based solution that can be added to the water or applied to the nostrils.
Impacted Crop

Since ducks will eat practically anything they can get hold of, they sometimes suffer impacted crop if they ingest long pieces of string, twine, plastic or even rubber bands. A crop should be empty in the morning, since ducks digest everything they eat overnight, so if you suspect impacted crop, gently massage the area, then offer grit, some olive oil and plenty of water. Be sure to keep the area your ducks roam in free of any potentially dangerous materials, and if you feed your ducks cut grass or weeds, be sure to cut them into fairly short lengths.

Prolapsed Penis/Vent

A prolapse occurs when a portion of the oviduct pushes outside the duck’s body while she’s laying an egg, or the drake’s penis doesn’t retract after mating. In both cases, it can correct itself on its own, but it’s a good idea to keep the area clean, and apply some coconut oil and sugar for a few days to tighten the skin tissue and keep it soft. For either a duck or a drake suffering a prolapse, it’s a good idea to separate them to prevent mating while the prolapse is healing. You can try to carefully push the prolapse back inside if you don’t see any improvement in a few days. And allowing your flock plenty of room to exercise and a healthy diet can help prevent prolapses in your flock. In extreme cases, a visit to the vet might be in order. A drake’s penis will fall off anyway in the fall and he grows a new one each spring, so that should correct the problem, in a duck’s case, often the prolapse of her vent will recur and not be able to be successfully treated.

Wet Feather

Ducks not allowed regular access to water in which to swim, or ducks in generally poor health or kept in unsanitary conditions can suffer wet feather, a condition where their preen gland, which they use to keep their feathers well-oiled and waterproofed, stops working. This leads to the duck not being able to stay dry in the rain or water, and risking the chance of drowning or getting chilled. If your duck seems to not be waterproof any more, give her a bath in Dawn detergent, then rinse her well and blow dry her. This will remove any dirt and old oil and give her a chance to start over. Only give her a tub of water to drink out of and splash water over herself for a few days and then allow her pool access again to see if she has regained her waterproofing. Severe cases often require the duck to go through a molt and grow in all new feathers before she is waterproof again.

Wry Neck

Wry neck is a condition that normally only affects ducklings. It can be fatal if not treated, since the duckling is unable to hold its head up and will often not be able to walk correctly. Wry neck can be caused by a vitamin deficiency, blow to the head, or ingestion of toxins. Adding B1 and E vitamins, as well as selenium to the duckling’s diet can reverse the condition. You can supplement with vitamin capsules, or add some brewers yeast, bran, sunflower seeds or wheat germ to their diet or some herbs and spices such as parsley, sage, thyme, cinnamon, spinach, dandelion greens, alfalfa, marjoram or turmeric, which contain both Vitamin E and selenium.

Regardless of the duck type, ducks are far more cold-hardy and healthier in general than chickens. You shouldn’t encounter too many issues with duck diseases. It’s easy to research ducks and duck breed pictures. So, why not consider a few for your backyard flock?

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