

I recently heard a term that made me laugh - "the Urban Chicken". I envisioned a rooster with sunglasses, a latte in hand, sitting in traffic and waiting for the light to change. This term means something slightly different than I had imagined.

In today's world, there is an increasing consciousness about where and how our food is grown. Here in Montana, most of us know someone that raises wheat, barley, or beef. The largest chicken laying and meat production operations don't reside in Montana. States like Georgia, Arkansas, and Alabama lead the nation in broilers - or meat birds. Iowa, Ohio, and Indiana are the leading states for egg production. Most of the locally grown chicken or egg products are grown on small operations that we might find here around the front - often called backyard chicken coops.

I have heard of two claims about raising backyard chickens that I believe are not entirely true. The first is that backyard-raised eggs are healthier for you. It all depends, but typically, they are very similar in nutritional value to commercial eggs. Secondly, I have heard that eggs raised in backyards are less expensive. In the majority of cases, this is not true. In fact, I have found that it is much more expensive to raise the eggs myself. In the end, people just want to have more control over the foods they eat.

I will admit that the Major household is starting to go to the chickens. We decided (more like I decided) to get a few chickens for eggs in the backyard. I began my process of constructing a chicken coop by calling the city and asking about local ordinances regarding the housing and raising of chickens. I called the Choteau city office to get the exact wording. I won't include it here, but I read it to say, "It's okay to have some chickens, as long as you don't get crazy and let them roam the streets!" There is another section on swine, which basically says "your neighbors don't want you to have pigs".

The second step, as a resident of Choteau, was to secure a building permit for the construction of the chicken coop. This was done for the nominal fee of \$7, with the worst part having to sketch it out on paper. It was at this point I realized I had no idea what I was doing.

I began my construction efforts for the "run" by acquiring some railroad ties. These, I placed in the ground, with the top of the ties at ground level. These handy devices are designed to prevent the coyote or marten that will seek to dig under the wire fencing. Predator control with chickens is best accomplished by exclusion. Don't let them in! I also included my plans to put a roof on the chicken run. I would hate to worry all night that owls, hawks, and eagles would find a quick meal.

Chickens are as sensitive to changes in temperature as much as people are. They are especially temperamental as small chicks, so you will need a brooder lamp to keep them warm for the first few weeks. They need a temperature of 95° F for the first week. Decrease the temperature by 5° F each week. They will also need some feed specifically for small chicks. Once they grow to adulthood, they will eat layer food (assuming you have layers). Feed, waterers, and other materials can be found locally in Choteau at Front Range Supply and in Fairfield at Mountain View Coop. You can also ask at your local Co-op or farm store for a variety of products.

With any livestock projects, one important consideration is which breed you start with. I was going to follow my father's advice and "get the black ones". This seemed to work for him in cattle, but chickens are much different. I consulted books, online resources, and folks who had chickens. Chickens are basically divided into three categories: layers, broilers (or meat producers), and dual purpose, which do both. In the egg industry, White Leghorns are king. They can lay up to 280 eggs per year. Most backyard chickeners don't enjoy their less than social demeanor. We opted to go with a dual purpose breed called Sussex. They are a little smaller, but tend to have great dispositions. Other common dual purpose breeds include: Orpingtons, Rhode Island Reds, and Plymouth Rocks. Common meat birds include breeds based off of the Cornish Hens.

A good online guide to help you determine the breeds you would be interested in is found at <http://www.ithaca.edu/staff/jhenderson/chooks/chooks.html>. Egg color, production, size and feed requirements all go into selecting the right birds for your flock.

Our chickens will be arriving soon. With people wanting fresh, local foods more and more, this may be one option for Montana residents. I would encourage you to find out all the information you can *before* you let your kids talk you into a cute chick from the farm store. Like any animals, chickens are susceptible to disease, temperature changes, parasites, and coyote bites. There are many good resources out there, but I would recommend the book *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens* as I found the information the most current and up-to-date. I'd also like to thank Tracie Roeder for all her help in selecting a good species for our family and all the advice she has given. There are several people around the county that are raising chickens and I'd encourage you to talk with them about what has worked and what hasn't.