



Chapter 6

Happy Chickens

In this section, we'll discuss:

- Keeping your chickens happy
- Dust Baths
- Perches
- Treats
- Exercise and boredom reduction
- Taming chickens

Why did the chicken cross the road? It may have been bored. Chickens need activity to keep them energized and healthy. Moreover, those who keep backyard chickens, don't just want healthy chickens, they want *happy* chickens! Fortunately, these birds are pretty easy to please, but they do have some needs that will keep them more content and active. Here are some ways to create an environment that will ensure your chickens are cheerful, chipper and content.

Dust Baths

Chickens love to take a good dust bath! They will dig a hole into dry soil and immerse themselves in it until they are covered with dirt. This is not only fun but necessary for chickens as a defense against mites and lice. If you don't have dry soil they can readily use, put together your own "dust" bath. Dusting powder is available at poultry supply to use in lieu of real soil. This can be put directly on the ground or in a shallow bin or even a small kiddie pool. Others have tried fireplace ashes, fresh shavings, dry soil from a garden shop and sand.

Perches

Chickens like to perch above the ground, so build a perch or more (based on the number of birds you have). Wooden dowels, usually about 2 inches by 2 inches work well, but other perch materials include smoothed off tree limbs, broom handles and ladders. Perches should be at least two feet off the ground and fairly high in the coop because chickens like to perch as high as possible. Allow about 10 inches of space per bird and install your perch to allow space from the wall to accommodate their tails.

Although some chicken coops have staggered heights for multiple perches, if you have room you might want to consider keeping them all the same height to keep the hens from fighting to get the highest perch. Be sure to have a waterproof board or tray below each perch to make it easier to collect and clean up excrement.

Treats

Just like the rest of us, chickens love to get special treats, and it is easy to please them with such items as lettuce, raw corn on the cob, grass, any "greens," vegetable peelings, table scraps, bugs, mealworms and earthworms. Worms especially are considered a good food for

the birds to make eggs even healthier. Some chicken owners even “grow their own” worms, a simple process using “worm trays,” which gives their birds unlimited access to this special food. More information on growing worms is available on the Internet.

Treats can be offered at any time or left with the chickens to eat as they want. Some people stick rotted wood branches in through the fence to give chickens access to any bugs or worms inside. You can stuff lettuce or other leafy greens into the holes of the fence to provide your chickens with their own salad bar whenever they want to snack. These treats given out at certain times of the day will keep your chickens occupied and exercised, and they are also good to “tame” your chicken (which is discussed later).

Exercise and Boredom Reduction

Like people, chickens can get bored in a sedentary lifestyle, but they are easy to incite into action. Throwing out some grass clumps, bugs or even their regular feed can give your chickens some excitement and get them moving as they quickly scramble and peck to get as much as they can. Be sure to gather up any leftover feed so rats and mice won’t be attracted at night. Worms are considered a special delicacy, so pour some water on some soil or turn over a shovelful to give them access.

Switch around your boredom cures to keep them interesting. Here are some other innovative ways to provide exercise and alleviate monotony (both theirs and yours):

- Hang a head of cabbage or watermelon rind so the chickens can reach it but may have to jump or fly. This “piñata” can keep them occupied for a long time and keep you laughing as well.
- Hang old CDs from the top of the coop so they catch the sunlight. These give your birds a fun focal point to peck at.
- Set up a radio and give them some mood music. (Some people even sing to their chickens!)
- Throw them a small ball and watch them start up their own team.
- Provide seed toys you can buy at any pet store for birds.

Taming Chickens

Yes, it is possible to train chickens to come to you and let you pet them and pick them up. Similar to dog training, use treats to get their attention and reward them when they do what you want. You need to sit with them every day and talk quietly to help them get used to you. Gaining their trust may take a while, so don’t get discouraged. Patience is the key.