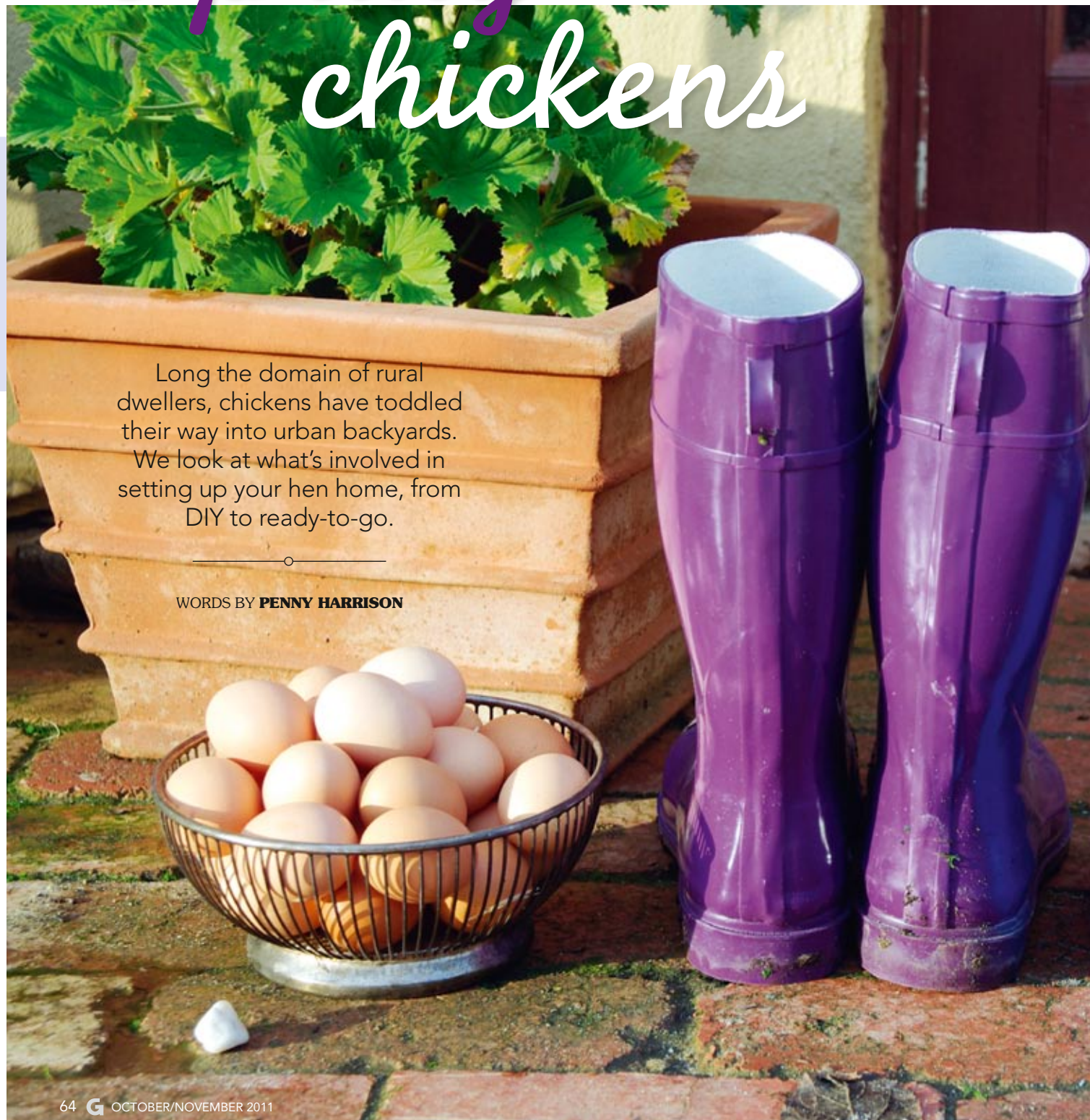


# Spring chickens

Long the domain of rural dwellers, chickens have toddled their way into urban backyards. We look at what's involved in setting up your hen home, from DIY to ready-to-go.

WORDS BY PENNY HARRISON



A hen emerges from her nesting box for a morning forage.

This simple A-frame chicken coop is easy to make.



**C**hickens clucking in the garden and children hunting for eggs before breakfast... Who needs a tree-change when you can enjoy the good life in your own urban backyard? Once considered the domain of farmers, chooks are finding their way into city and suburban gardens, and they're proving more suited to urban living than most pets.

Really, very few animals compare to the humble chook. They are full of personality and make great pets for children. They happily peck around gardens, getting rid of pests and weeds, and providing organic fertiliser. They are the most environmentally sustainable pets around, turning your kitchen scraps into fresh eggs. They

are also really low-maintenance pets – most will even put themselves to bed at night; all you have to do is close the door.

Jackie French, author of *The Chook Book*, has been a fan of the chook for many years and agrees that nothing beats the joy of owning chooks. "There are the good-morning clucks, the call of triumph as they lay an egg; the glow on a kid's face as they collect it, and eat it," she says. "And backyard chook-keeping makes sense. Everyone can keep hens. Even if you haven't optimum conditions, they will still be better than those that battery hens experience. Anyone who eats eggs or hens from the battery poultry industry helps keep this system going. Instead, have a brood of 'cluckers' pecking by your back fence."

French says chooks will give you "the sort of egg you can rarely buy, meat that

hasn't been seen commercially for 30 years, manure for your garden and infinite pleasure".

If you still aren't sold on the idea, you can now try before you buy through companies such as Rentachook or BookAChook, which offer rental packages of chooks and a coop, with the option of buying or returning them at the end of the rental period.

"Most of the people we deal with are young families living in the city, who want to get back to basics," BookAChook owner Fleur Baker says.

"Most of the time, we turn up and they have tiny little gardens, but they have taken the lawn out and turned it into a food-production area. Chooks are really just the next step. It's all part of the green revolution, knowing where our food comes from and reducing food miles." >>



## Setting up home

Chooks aren't too fussy about what their digs look like and they don't need a lot of room, but they do need a safe, clean and dry place to roost and nest.

Whether you build your own hen house, buy a flat-pack kit or hire the complete package, there are a few elements to consider.

The main thing, Baker says, is protection from foxes, dogs, eagles and other predators. Predators will jump on, dig under or chew at hen houses to get access to them, so your coop needs to be made from sturdy materials. The frame should be timber or metal, and the mesh a strong metal wire. Make sure your sides are attached to a timber or concrete floor, or that the wire is buried up to 50 cm under the ground and flared outwards. This will prevent wily foxes from digging under the coop.

Sustainable Gardening Australia (SGA) recommends including a strong, natural-timber stick for your chickens to roost on at night and nesting boxes with straw for egg laying. Ideally, the SGA website states, the chook house should allow about half a metre of floor space per hen and 23 cm of perch for each bird.

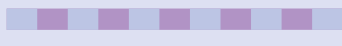
There should be one nest box for every three chooks, to "minimise congestion come laying time", and nest boxes should be off the ground, with access via a ramp. The coop needs to be well ventilated, with good shade for hot summer days and warm, dry conditions for winter nights.

If your backyard is suitable, let your chickens have free range of it during the day, otherwise you will need an enclosed mesh run with plenty of space, shade and dirt for them to scratch around in.

An automatic feeder and a water container are other essentials for your coop, but keep them above the ground and away from the perch so they don't become contaminated.

To minimise the risk of disease and vermin, clean your pen regularly and change the straw (the old straw is often full of droppings and is a wonderful addition to your compost).

If you're handy with tools, it's easy to build your own hen house, but check with your local council first, as there are often regulations on size, location and how many hens you can keep without a permit.



Right: BookAChook rents out coops with hens. Below: A children's cubbyhouse has been turned into a chook pen. Below right: Raising day-old chicks is wonderful fun for children.



Below far left: Many chooks will take themselves off to bed in the evening – just be sure to close the door. Below centre: This DIY pen was made from scraps of recycled timber and tin, and an old cupboard door.



Sign of the times – a suburban backyard chicken coop. Bottom far left: Keep your nesting boxes off the ground and provide chickens with access via a ramp. Bottom left: A Royal Rooster chicken tractor can be moved around the backyard.



Another SGA tip is to site your coop away from bedroom windows (and neighbours' bedroom windows) as, even though roosters are generally banned in the suburbs, hens can make a bit of ruckus in the mornings after laying eggs. It also pays to let your neighbours know you will be keeping chooks and that there will be plenty of fresh eggs on offer.

You can download free chook-house designs from the internet, or use your imagination and come up with your own design. It doesn't have to be fancy; people have quite easily converted old garden sheds, kids' cubbyhouses and even dog kennels and recycled cabinets into practical chicken coops. Alternatively you can construct a simple A-frame, a basic box-shape design, or a fancy, two-storey, penthouse look.

Look for non-porous materials that are easy to clean and steer clear of toxic paints and CCA- (copper chrome arsenate) treated timber; anything your chooks ingest could end up in their eggs. If possible, use plantation or recycled timbers for your pen. If you're using corrugated iron for your roof, give the pen plenty of height to avoid overheating in summer.

Depending on your budget, there is an array of chicken coops on the market, from simple A-frame structures to more elaborate palaces. Many Australian companies, such as McCallum Made and Royal Rooster, also offer the alternative moveable pen, or tractor, which allows you to relocate the hen house every few days – great for large suburban back yards – so the chooks can eat insects, grass and seeds, and fertilise your patch at the same time.

Expect to pay anything from \$200 to \$1000 for a pre-built chicken coop.

## Pick your chicks

When it comes to chickens, everyone has their favourites. If you have a large backyard and are looking for reliable layers with placid and quirky personalities, you can't go past the Isa Brown or Light Sussex.

If you have a little less space however, Baker recommends smaller breeds over the Isa Brown, which is a larger chook with big claws that can make a mess of tiny, inner-city courtyard gardens. For small patches, she believes it's hard to beat bantams – a smaller breed of chicken. For the cute and cuddly factor, there are Pekin bantams and Chinese Silkies.

"Pekin bantams have gorgeous temperaments," Baker says. "They are very docile and kids can pick them up and cuddle them."

If you also want good layers, Baker suggests bantam Langshans. "These are good egg layers and will often lay right through winter," she says. "You'll get eggs from your Pekins too, but not as reliably. Some people keep a couple of each."

Starting with day-old chicks is a rewarding option, especially if you have children. You need to keep them in a warm box (preferably with a lamp on them) or 'brooder box' for about six weeks, making sure they are well fed and watered.

Pullets can be aged up to one year old and, if you're looking for fast egg production, the best way to buy them is at 'point-of-lay', when they are about 18 to 20 weeks old. SGA recommends buying 'sexed' chickens so you know you're getting an egg layer, and not a rooster. Also, according to the organisation, chickens are sociable creatures and will stress if they are on their own, so aim to have at least two, and give them lots of pats and cuddles.

## Keeping the home

Our feathered friends need plenty of clean water and a protein-rich diet to help them lay eggs. A daily diet of good quality chicken feed, such as pellets, grain or bran, can be supplemented with kitchen scraps, including leftover cereals, rice, pasta, breads, fruit and vegetables.

Try to keep meat and cheese out of their scraps as this can encourage vermin and other pests into your coop. Hens also need calcium to help them form egg shells, so if it's not included in their feed, give them a regular supply of shell grit (baked, crushed egg shells).

## Egging on

Most people rear chickens for the eggs, which are like none you've ever tasted. Even if you buy your hens at the point-of-lay, it can take up to six weeks for them to adjust to their new surroundings and start laying, so be patient. You can encourage egg production by placing a few 'fake' eggs in the nest boxes, but you'll know they're ready to start laying when their combs are full and red.

Hens will lay, on average, about an egg a day in their first year of laying, with production decreasing each year after that. Many hens will often go "off-lay" during winter, if they are moved too often or become stressed from a barking dog, or the arrival of new chickens. So, to keep the eggs coming, make sure your hens remain healthy and happy.

## For more info visit:

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