

# Department of Animal Science

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## Backyard Chickens Are Not the Answer to High Egg Prices

March 2025

**Tom Tabler**, *Professor and Extension Poultry Specialist, Department of Animal Science, University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture*

**Tannah Christensen**, *Extension Instructor, Department of Poultry Science, Mississippi State University*

**Eric Medley**, *Poultry Program Coordinator, Tennessee Department of Agriculture*

**Pramir Maharjan**, *Assistant Professor and Extension Poultry Specialist, Department of Food and Animal Sciences, Tennessee State University*

**Tanner Thornton**, *Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Animal Science, University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture*

The USDA recently predicted that egg prices will increase 41.1 percent in 2025, double the previous projection from January 2025. This is disheartening news with Easter on the horizon (a time when egg prices always tend to spike) but, to anyone considering getting backyard chickens to offset the high cost of eggs these days, take heed, backyard chickens are NOT the answer! With egg prices reaching an all-time high in the U.S., the dream of having a few chickens roaming around the backyard, grazing on grass, bugs, worms and grasshoppers (it's still winter so you'll have to wait a while on that) and producing all those farm fresh, tantalizingly delicious free eggs (which aren't really free) is becoming increasingly appealing and perhaps even a bit dreamily nostalgic to many potential future chicken keepers. However, before this goes any further and the dream becomes a nightmare, please consider these words of advice from Cher in *Moonstruck* and... **“Snap out of it!”**

Backyard chickens are not the budget-saving salvation to high egg prices that they may seem at the moment. Eggs may be expensive, but backyard chickens are even more expensive, difficult to care for and a high-maintenance investment, especially if you are new to the world of agriculture and know little or nothing about caring for livestock. To shine the harsh light of reality on your “eggspectations,” raising your own flock of backyard laying hens will not be cheaper than buying eggs at the store, regardless of the price. You want to get backyard chickens for the joy and pleasure they can provide you and your family (for a price), not for the disappointment when they turn out to be more work than you expected and cost more money than you had planned. If high egg prices are your only reason for considering backyard chickens, then reconsider now, before it's too late. Some homework is in order here. Let's look at why.

### The Facts

Before we consider the negatives, let's consider the positives. There are multiple reasons to invest in backyard chickens, none of which have anything to do with saving money. If you want to get backyard chickens for pure enjoyment, to be entertained by their various antics and unique personalities, to teach your kids or grandkids responsibility and caring for livestock,

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to experience small-scale agriculture firsthand, as a 4-H/FFA Chick Chain project or to show your birds at the county fair, that's fantastic! These are all wonderful reasons that offer numerous benefits and enjoyment for the entire family, but they will not save money.

If you are thinking about getting backyard chickens to offset the recent onslaught of high egg prices (Figure 1), you should re-evaluate that line of thinking. Raising backyard chickens will not be cheaper than buying eggs at the store, despite the current high price of eggs. Plus, backyard chickens are a lot of work. Chickens are not like cows that you can turn loose in the pasture and as long as the fence stays up and the gate stays closed, they will most likely be fine even if you don't check on them for a few days. Chickens require constant care and protection. In addition, if you are starting from scratch, it will likely take years to recover your initial investment in the birds and all the accessories you will need, so understand going in that backyard chickens are likely not going to be a money-saving adventure, even with current and future high egg prices. They will, however, be much more work and require much more of your time than driving to the grocery store for eggs.



**Figure 1.** Graph of U.S. egg prices over the last 45 years. Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Let's think about this and take a long, hard look at some of the time, money and effort you will need to invest in your backyard chicken project.

First, you'll have to make a trip or call downtown to see if you can even have chickens where you live. While many urban areas have changed their laws since the COVID-19 pandemic to allow backyard poultry, it's wise to check. Some municipalities still do not allow backyard chickens, and those that do likely have restrictions on the number of birds and possibly the gender. Can you tell a rooster from a hen? If you plan to buy baby chicks from an online hatchery, do you know to tell the hatchery that you only want female chicks? Roosters are often not allowed because roosters crow and make lots of noise. To avoid noise complaints, the town council may outlaw keeping roosters. In addition, there may be county restrictions as well, so regardless of where you live, check before you invest time and money only to suffer disappointment later when you are told by officials that you can't have chickens.

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If you can have chickens, and you are still interested, now let's consider the cost. Baby chicks bought online can be \$5.00 each and up (perhaps \$50 to \$60 each) depending on the breed. A coop can be several hundred to several thousand dollars depending on size and design. Additional costs must also be considered. In addition to the birds and housing, you'll need feeders, drinkers, bedding material (pine shavings aren't cheap), medical supplies and feed. Long-term, feed will be your biggest expense, accounting for ~70 percent of the cost of flock keeping after the initial investments are made.

Keep in mind that, unless you provide supplemental light to equal 16 hours per day during late fall and winter, due to lack of daylength, the chickens will stop laying eggs and go through a molt that can last for weeks or months. During this time, they are freeloading. You must still provide feed, daily care, housing and predator protection, but you are getting no eggs in return for your generosity. Also, chickens lay at their best from the time they start laying (at about six months of age) until they reach about 2 years of age. Egg production declines after two years, and those hens will need to be replaced. If you replace them with chicks, you will have to raise those chicks for six months before they reach sexual maturity and start laying eggs. Again, during this time they are freeloading, you must feed them, provide housing and predator protection and care for them daily with no eggs in return.

Still want to try backyard chickens? You must develop a plan before you get your chickens. Visit your neighbors and let them know you are thinking about getting chickens. Do not blindside them where one day you have no chickens and the next day you do. Consider the time commitment that chickens will take. Who will be the primary caregiver, the backup caregiver? Who will care for the birds if the entire family is on vacation?

The flock must have protection from the weather and from predators. Chickens are prey animals, and there are numerous predators that will kill and eat chickens if given the opportunity. Predators are plentiful in the city just as they are in the country.

Do you know basic husbandry skills and how to care for poultry? If not, who can teach you what temperature chickens need at various ages, what type of feed they need based on their stage of production, how to recognize if they are sick, and whom to call if they are sick? Where will you get feed? Is there a feed store in your town or is the nearest feed store two towns away? What will you do with the manure? What will you do if birds get sick? What will you do with birds that die? Chickens are living creatures and eventually, some will get sick and some will die. How will you handle that?

### More Facts

Chickens need adequate space for inside and outside the coop. Do you know how much space to allow per bird? Do you know the difference between a laying hen, a meat-type chicken and a dual-purpose chicken? Smaller laying hens (Leghorns and Sex-link birds) need about 1.5 sq. ft./bird inside the coop and 8 sq. ft./bird in an outside run. Larger dual-purpose breeds (Rhode Island Reds, etc.) need 2-3 sq. ft./bird inside the coop and 10 sq. ft./bird in an outside run.

You must consider the climate. Some birds do better in cold areas, others in hotter areas. The Mediterranean breeds tend to perform better in hotter climates while the American breeds do better in cooler areas. Birds with large, spiked combs on their heads do not do well in colder climates. These large, spiked combs are at risk of becoming frostbitten in colder regions.

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Are you familiar with the six basics of brooding:

1. Pre-placement set up
2. Feed management
3. Water management
4. Light management
5. Air/ventilation management
6. Temperature management

Can you successfully manage the FLAWS of backyard poultry keeping...Feed, Light, Air, Water, Sanitation, Space, and Security? If not, how will you acquire these skills?

We have yet to touch on avian influenza and biosecurity. Eggs are expensive because avian influenza has depleted the table egg laying hen population by roughly 100 million birds since February 2022. Supply and demand explain why egg prices are high. The egg supply is low, the demand for eggs is high, and as such, the price of eggs is up.

If you invest in backyard chickens, do you understand biosecurity well enough to protect your flock and keep it safe from disease? Can you practice Isolation...Traffic Control...Sanitation well enough to prevent avian influenza from reaching your flock?

Avian influenza will not just appear in your flock. It must be put there. Are your biosecurity skills good enough to prevent that from happening? Do you understand the need for and importance of dedicated or disposable footwear for the coop area, footbaths for the coop area, hand sanitizer, changing clothes and boots and taking a shower before visiting your flock after you have been off the farm to high-risk areas...the feed store, the local café, visiting friends or neighbors that may also have chickens?

If something goes wrong and your birds get sick, can you recognize respiratory symptoms such as sneezing, coughing, swollen sinuses, nasal discharge and watery eyes in your chickens? There is no cure or treatment for avian influenza, and avian influenza is a reportable disease in the U.S. Should avian influenza strike your flock, the Tennessee State Veterinarian must be notified, your premises will be quarantined, your flock will be euthanized, and the premises must be cleaned and disinfected before you will be allowed to get more birds. This process could take months. Are you prepared for such consequences should they arise?

Do you know how to get help if your flock should fall ill? Help is available across Tennessee if you know where to look:

- Your local county Extension agent
- Your local veterinarian
- Tennessee State Veterinarian's office (615-837-5120)
- TN Department of Agriculture Poultry Program Coordinator (615-361-4997)
- C. E. Kord Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory (615-837-5125)
- Tennessee State University Extension Poultry Specialist (615-963-5823)
- University of Tennessee Extension Poultry Specialist (931-486-2129)

Managing a flock of backyard chickens is more than just buying a coop and ordering chickens. It takes a great deal of knowledge and talent to be successful. If you are new to agriculture, and specifically to backyard chickens, the learning curve is steep in the beginning. Carefully consider all the time, energy and money it will take to start and maintain a flock of backyard chickens and determine if you are willing to do everything necessary to be successful. A flock of backyard chickens can be a rewarding and enjoyable experience. However, you need to be well informed and have a clear picture of all expectations to avoid disappointment. The goal is not to dissuade you from backyard chickens but to make you aware of the challenges that come with backyard chickens so that you know from the beginning what you will face.

### Summary

If you are contemplating getting backyard chickens soon to offset the high price of eggs, and you answered “No” or had no answer to many of the questions above, backyard chickens may not be the best option for you. Backyard chickens are work, lots of it. They must be protected from predators and bad weather. They must be cared for daily, provided with fresh clean water, fed an appropriate diet (they can’t survive only on bugs and worms and grasshoppers), eggs must be gathered, coops must be cleaned, manure must be properly disposed of, etc. Backyard chickens are expensive. Expenses will include the initial birds, their coop or housing, feeders, drinkers, biosecurity and medical supplies, replacement birds over time and feed.

There are many worthwhile reasons to invest in backyard chickens...enjoyment; entertainment; showing; teaching youth about responsibility, caring for livestock, and agriculture; etc. Saving money on egg prices is not a good reason to invest in backyard chickens. Backyard chickens will not save you money; backyard chickens cost you money. Individuals with backyard chickens do not have them to save money. They have them for more valuable reasons. If your only reason for considering backyard chickens is the high price of eggs, save your money. Egg prices will come back down one of the days. Backyard chickens are NOT the answer to high egg prices.



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