

CHICKEN CARE

Keeping Chickens as Pets and Producers, Caring for Your Feathered Friends in Fiji



Opinion



Mary-Anne Fiebig

Mary-Anne is a volunteer on assignment with Animals Fiji as part of the Australian Volunteers Programme, an Australian Government Initiative.

Do you have chickens, or are you thinking about getting some chickens so that you can produce your own eggs? Many families keep chickens to produce eggs for their family and some do backyard chicken farming.

Most Fijian chickens have been crossed with imported breeds so that they are adapted to local conditions. Unless you are a commercial grower, what breed you use will probably be what is available and known to be successful locally.

If you have decided to have chickens or already have chickens, you need to decide whether they will roam freely or be kept in an enclosure or a combination of both. Whatever you decide, you will need to secure them in an enclosure overnight to keep them safe from predators such as dogs, cats, rats, mice, and mongoose.

Your enclosure – also known as a chicken coop – will also protect against the weather, so it needs to provide shade from the sun and be well-ventilated so that it doesn't get too hot, as well as protect against the severe winds and rain that Fiji experiences.

It needs to have a “snug”, protected nesting box for the chicken to lay eggs, or if you have several chickens, you will need to provide several nests so that they do not fight about who gets in first. They will still try and cram into ‘their favourite’ nest and you may often see two chickens in one nest. Line the box with straw or wood shavings (bedding), which keeps the eggs clean and easy to collect. Collecting the eggs every day encourages the hens to lay and reduces loss from broken or pecked eggs. It is a good idea to put the date on your eggs (in pencil) so that you know how fresh they are. Clean the nesting box and put fresh straw/wood shavings in when the bedding is dirty.

The enclosure also needs a place for the chicken to roost off the ground; a broom handle or a sturdy tree branch will work. Remember to clean your coop when it has a build-up of manure – poultry manure is good for your garden, but you need



Chickens enjoy eating fruit and vegetable scraps and really like coconut flesh.



Chickens sharing the nest with each other. The white chicken is looking a little unhappy about it though!

to mix it well with soil and do not apply it directly to plant leaves as it may burn your plants.

Chickens also love to have ‘dust baths’ where they roll and flutter in sand, keeping their feathers clean and free from pests. Also, having a sunny spot for them to sit in promotes healthy feathers and keeps them happy and strong.

Because of our hot and humid tropical environment here in Fiji, it is vital to have ways for the chickens to cool down. You can provide shallow pots of water for them to walk in to cool down, lots of shade and lots of ventilation so that the air can move around. On very hot days, check your chickens regularly to ensure they are okay.

Importantly, your chickens need fresh water, so ensure they always have some available. Keeping the water container off the ground will help prevent chickens from scratching soil or dirt into the container, keeping it fresh longer.

Chickens love a variety of food. Commercial pellets include vitamins and minerals, but you can

also feed your chickens chopped-up vegetable and fruit scraps, and ground coconut flesh is also good. Remember to regularly dispose of uneaten food you provide, as it can attract pests and predators.

Chickens also like foraging for food, so if you let them free roam, they will search for worms, insects, green grass and other nutritious morsels. Looking for food also keeps them mentally stimulated and stops them from being bored. Boredom can lead them to peck other chickens, themselves and eat their eggs. However, if you let your chickens roam, try to find a way to restrict how far they go as they will wander a long way away if allowed.

Chickens also do not have teeth, so they need a source of grit, such as coarse sand, tiny stones or crushed egg or sea shells to grind the food they have swallowed.

It is always important to monitor their health regularly, check for mites and fleas in their feathers and skin, coughing, discharge around the eyes and nose, facial or comb swelling, or anything un-

CONTACT US FOR HELP:

- If you are worried about your pet's health, make an appointment with your veterinary clinic. Animals Fiji helps animals all around Fiji, with clinics in Savusavu, Labasa, Nadi and Lautoka, and they also hold outreach clinics in other areas.
- If you want to support Animals Fiji in their work or to find out more about Animals Fiji's services, contact their Savusavu Clinic (+679) 998 6253 or Nadi Clinic (+679) 993 6647 or visit their website at www.animalsfiji.org.

usual as some of these symptoms can spread through the flock. Some of these symptoms can be fixed so call your local vet if you have any concerns. It can benefit chickens to have beak and nail trims - check with your vet for their advice.

Remember, every chicken is unique, with their own personality. They are social animals and love being with other chickens. Always check with your local authorities before you start your chicken flock.

Source: Animals Fiji



Definitely a chicken with attitude.