



Want to keep ducks?

Ducks are the comedians of the bird world. Spending time in the company of ducks will have you laughing along with them as they quack and waddle about. Breeds, such as the Campbell, will lay just as many eggs per year as chickens, and continue longer laying well into their third year, with the added benefit that ducks are waterproof.

Ducks are becoming more popular because they are so versatile. They lay delicious eggs, consume garden pests and are generally good pets. They are naturally very resistant to disease. Ducks are great for the garden as they will clear it of slugs and snails. They are very messy if kept in small areas and may reduce your garden to mud if it is too small. Ducks are social birds and need to be kept in pairs, trios or small groups. Two ducks or two ducks and one drake are the ideal number for gardens. Most breeds do not need a large pond to keep healthy, but they enjoy a good splash. A child's plastic pool, baby bath or large shallow tub will be fine if you do not have a pond. It is easy to waste hours watching them splashing about. With a little preparation they can live very happily in your garden.

As you can tell we love ducks at Moon Ridge Farm.

How many should I keep?

You should never keep just one duck as it will get lonely. You can keep just females or just males. However if you want to keep both you should only have one male to every 3/4 females as during the breeding season the male will be very active and a single female will suffer.

Do I need water?

Ducks need access to water; in its simplest form a child's paddling pool. This should be deep enough for them to submerge their head and splash around. You will need to refresh the water regularly. A still pond is not good as their droppings will quickly turn the water green and you will need to pump the water out to clean it. It is worth covering the area under and around the pond with shingle/slabs/woodchip so that they don't make the area muddy.

What size garden to I need?

For a small ducks 10m² (and for a couple of larger ducks double that) per duck is recommended.

Will they be noisy?

Ducks don't quack all the time but can be vocal if something surprises them. Generally though they talk to each other throughout the day. The amount of noise a duck makes depends on the breeds. Call ducks are the loudest, hence their use as decoys to catch other ducks. Pekins come in a close second on the quack scale. If noise levels are important, the Muscovy duck is the quietest of the ducks and if you aren't so fussed about eggs then male ducks are also much quieter than their female counterparts.

What type of housing?

Basic is best for ducks and if they are in a fox proof enclosure most ducks prefer to sleep outside as long as shelter is provided. A simple wooden dog kennel with ventilation and secure door is an ideal duck house. Ducks do not take themselves to bed but need to be herded or given a simple gesture to encourage going to bed. Once one goes they all tend to follow. Ducks like routine and order, if you move the duck house to a new area be prepared for confused ducks!!

I want tame ducks?

Ducks tend not to like being handled and cuddled like chickens, if you want tame ducks be prepared to spend time with them; ideally getting them as young as possible, feeding by hand and spending time with them in their enclosure / garden will get them used to you. Ducks do enjoy human company you will often have audience when out in the garden especially if a free worm or slug is on offer.

Can ducks be kept with chickens?

Ducks have different requirements to chickens yet they can share the same space if large enough, as ducks make an area muddy very quickly and chickens do not fare well in damp conditions. We recommend separate housing with a large area that they can free range together in, ideally both the chickens and ducks would have a separate area where they can be shut away from each other when not able to free range.

Housing made for hens can be used with simple modification, the door size needs to be able to accommodate the size of the duck, the house does not want to be raised too far off the ground and there is no need for perches. Domestic ducks do not readily use nesting boxes or perches, except the Muscovy (perches.) Eggs will have to be collected from the duck house floor.

Take into account, space per bird, type of floor, bedding, ventilation and access. Large breeds need a minimum of ½ m² floor space per bird in the duck house. The floor should be rat and fox proof. A solid concrete or paving slab floor is good as long as plenty of bedding is provided for warmth. This floor can be washed and disinfected easily.

Bedding can be a variety of materials. Dry straw we find is the best material. Bedding soon becomes mucky, so regular cleaning out is necessary. They should also have clean straw on which to lay their eggs. The door must be large enough to give easy access or, for a low duck house, the roof can be hinged. The door should be wide, as ducks tend to stampede out in a bunch when let out in the morning. Wait until they have laid, because they do not return to the house as hens do; around 8am is the usual release time.

Fencing Fence in your ducks, unless electrified you need fencing that is at least 6 feet high to stop the fox. Call ducks and bantams will be capable of flying – other breeds are unlikely to fly over even quite low fencing.

Feeding Ducks are excellent foragers and will find a lot of their own food if they are given plenty of range, particularly in the summer months. They are very good at eating slugs and snails. It is advisable, however, to supplement this.

The feed should be layers pellets (mash is not suitable for duck bills and is therefore largely spilled and wasted.) Wheat, barley or mixed corn can be fed as a treat in the afternoon or early evening this feed should be at least half an hour before dark.

As a guide to quantity, a duck of one of the large breeds such as Silver Appleyard may need up to 200g of dry food a day. The only accurate way is to judge from the birds' behaviour. If food is left after an hour you are giving too much.

Ducks running on grass will not need extra green stuff but during the winter it helps general good health if you give your birds fresh greens such as lettuce. Grit aids digestion and should be supplied in a separate container. Oyster shell is helpful in providing extra calcium for the production of strong egg shells, but may not be necessary if layers pellets are used.

Water Ducks need to be able to wash their eyes and nostrils and give themselves a splash-wash in order to keep their plumage in good condition. A small fibreglass garden pond could be used but be sure the ducks can get out without harming themselves. Surround this 'bath' with concrete or paving slabs it will prevent the adjacent ground becoming excessively muddy due to trampling and rooting. A daily bath is particularly important in the winter, as the feathers must be in top condition to insulate the birds' bodies against the cold.

Enclosure Ducks should not be kept in small pens. Their webbed feet and watery way of life will quickly turn a small pen into a muddy smelly area. Ideally ducks should have as much space as possible, a minimum of 10m² for small ducks and double that for larger breeds. An area which can be rested periodically while the ducks move on to an alternative pens ideal. Shade must be provided as ducks can suffer badly in very hot weather. Uneven ground can be hazardous for the heavy breeds such as the Aylesbury or the Rouen but lighter breeds such as Indian Runners cope well with most terrains. Ducks should never be made to panic, so children and pets should be encouraged to move slowly and quietly when near them.

Breeding Duck eggs hatch quite well in an incubator or under a broody hen. Domestic ducks, apart from Moscovies, do not usually make good mothers, although there can be exceptions. Breeding pens should be set up at least two weeks before saving eggs for hatching. Remember on average, half the ducklings hatched will be drakes and there may not be a demand for these, except for the table! In addition, few of the ducklings are likely to turn out to be show quality or even as good as their parents. It is important to consider how to tackle this, before hatching large numbers of ducklings.