

Raising Guinea Fowl

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Guinea fowl, often referred to as guineas, are gamebirds that are increasingly popular among keepers of small and backyard flocks. Guineas are vigorous, hardy, and largely disease-free birds.

There are many reasons people raise guinea fowl. The birds sound an alarm whenever anything unusual occurs on the farm. While some people find this noise to be a nuisance, others find it to be an effective tool for protecting the farm and make guinea fowl the farmyard "watch dogs." The loud noise of the guineas has also been shown to discourage rodents from invading the area.

Keeping guinea fowl is also an effective means of pest control. Flocks of guineas kill and eat mice and small rats. In addition, guinea fowl can be used to control insects. Wild guineas eat mainly insects, and domestic guineas can consume large amounts of insects without affecting garden vegetables or flowers. Guineas have been used to control wood ticks and insects such as grasshoppers, flies, and crickets. Guineas can reduce keepers' risk of Lyme disease by consuming deer ticks, which carry the disease. Guinea fowl also eat slugs, and flocks have been known to attack snakes.

Guinea fowl can also be raised for meat and egg production. The meat of young guineas is tender and tastes like that of wild game. The meat is lean and rich in essential amino acids. Guinea eggs can be eaten just like chicken eggs (and should be collected daily if not used for hatching purposes). During the laying season, it is common for a **guinea hen**—an adult female at least one year old—to produce an egg a day.

There are three main varieties of guinea fowl raised in the United States: pearl, white, and lavender. The pearl variety is the most popular and typically the one that people recognize most readily. Feathers from the pearl variety are often used for ornamental purposes.

Preparations before Starting a Flock

Before starting a poultry flock, you must check local zoning regulations to make sure that raising poultry is permitted. This is particularly important when raising guinea fowl because guineas will range and cross the boundaries of a small lot. Although guineas are typically quiet, they can be very noisy if disturbed. Guineas are more active than chickens and not as easily tamed—they seem to retain some of their wild behavior.

Housing

Guinea fowl are often left to fend for themselves, but it is best to provide a shelter to protect them from high winds, rain, cold, sun, and predators. The shelter can be a purpose-built facility specifically for guineas or a room allocated in the barn.

If you confine your guineas (as you might wish to do for meat and/or egg production), it is important to provide the birds plenty of room (2 to 3 sq. ft. per guinea). The more room the guineas have, the less likely they are to become stressed. The floor of the pen should be covered with an absorbent bedding material such as wood shavings or chopped hay or straw. If the litter is kept dry, it can stay in place for several months. Guineas prefer to roost, so it is important to provide perches. If the barn is unheated, it is best if you do not insulate the shelter or space where the guineas are kept. Insulation tends to keep moisture in more than it keeps cold out, and allowing moisture to accumulate in a poultry house can lead to respiratory problems among birds.

If you want to keep your guineas from wandering in a specific area, you must keep them in covered pens. Guineas are able to fly at a very early age, and they become strong fliers able to fly 400 to 500 ft. at a time. Guineas are also very good runners and prefer to move on foot, including when escaping from predators.

Under most conditions, you should not confine male guineas with chickens if there are roosters in the same flock. When male guineas are housed with roosters full-time, the guineas will chase the roosters, keeping them from food and water. If your flock is allowed to range freely during the day and is locked up only at night, it is safe to keep guineas and roosters in the same barn. It is also safe to house them together in a short-term emergency such as a blizzard or other bad weather.

If you are keeping guineas for egg production (for hatching or human consumption), you should provide nest boxes. Nest boxes designed for chickens are usually acceptable. To reduce the likelihood of hens laying eggs in hidden nests outside, keep guinea hens confined to a hen house until noon each day so that they will lay eggs inside.

Bird selection and purchase

If you are raising guinea fowl to control ticks and insects, you are better off purchasing adult guineas because they are easier to care for than young guineas and do well on their own. It takes guineas a while to get settled into a new home. It is best to keep them confined for a week or two to let them become accustomed to their new home. If you let them out right away, they could run away. The guineas should be confined in a pen where they can see the area where they will be living. After the initial couple of weeks, let one guinea out. Guineas hate to be alone, so the single guinea will not go far and will learn its way around the area. After a few days, let a second guinea out to run with the first. If they stay near the pen, it is usually safe to let the rest out.

Keets are guinea fowl offspring that are younger than 12 weeks old. If you wish to start with day-old keets, you can purchase them from a local breeder or feed mill. If local facilities do not have any keets, you can purchase the birds online with delivery through the U.S. Postal Service. Newly hatched birds, including keets, can survive for 48 hours on the nutrients they take in when they absorb the yolk during hatching. This allows a window in which birds can survive shipment without supplemental nutrition.

Nutrition

Adult guineas forage for themselves and are able to meet most of their nutrition requirements on their own. They consume a variety of insects and arachnids (mosquitoes, ticks, beetles, and so on), weed seeds, slugs, worms, and caterpillars. Guineas need to consume some greens in order to maintain good digestion, and so they eat grass, dandelions, weeds, and other vegetation. Because the birds are consuming vegetation, it is important to make sure grit is available for the birds, and the birds also benefit from having oyster shell available. Provide clean water at all times. Guineas do

enjoy a little scratch feed on the ground. They like wheat, sorghum, or millet grain and will ignore whole corn kernels. If you are keeping the guineas for pest control, restricting their feed will encourage them to spend more time eating insects.

If for any reason guinea fowl are not allowed to forage, they can be fed a commercial poultry diet. It is important to use an unmedicated feed. Guineaes need a higher protein feed than chickens, but do quite well on regular poultry diets. Keets need a 24% to 26% protein ration as the starter feed. The protein level should be reduced to 18% to 20% for the fifth to eighth weeks. After eight weeks, the keets can be fed a 16% layer mash. If your feed mill does not sell feeds in the proper protein levels, you can mix a higher protein feed with a laying-hen mash to get the proper protein level. Guineaes should be fed mash or crumbles. Pelleted feed is not recommended for guineas.

You should also provide supplemental greens, such as leafy alfalfa, for the guineas to peck. They will eat the leaves. It is important to remove any leftovers daily to prevent a mold problem.

Brooding and Rearing

Guinea fowl are native to Africa, and as such, are very susceptible to dampness during the first two weeks after hatching. (The moisture keets encounter when following their mother through dewy grass can kill them.) After those initial two weeks, guineas are widely considered the hardiest of all domestic fowl.

Keets can be raised in the same type of brooder houses and brooders as chicks or poults (baby turkeys). Temperatures should be started at 95°F for the first two weeks after hatching and then lowered by 5°F per week thereafter.

Infrared lamps are a convenient, easy-to-use heat source for brooding. Use porcelain sockets approved for these lamps and hang the lamps with chain or wire. Heating lamps should *not* be hung with the electric cord. Make certain lamps are secured so they cannot fall to the litter and create a fire hazard. The lamps should hang so that the bottoms are 18 to 24 in. above the litter. Lamps can be raised or lowered depending on temperature conditions. The use of more than one heat lamp is often recommended, especially during cold weather, so the keets will not be without heat if a bulb burns out.

There are two-bulb units that come with a thermostat that can make it easier to control the temperature in the room. It is important to remember, however, that you are heating the keets and not the air, so measurements of air temperature may not be the best guide when using infrared lamps. If the keets are piling up under the heat source, they are too cold. If they are trying to get as far away from the heat source as possible, the temperature is too hot. If the keets are evenly dispersed throughout the brooding area, the temperature is just right. After the keets are fully feathered, they are typically able to tolerate extremes in weather fairly well.

Hatching your own keets

In the wild, guinea fowl mate in pairs. This tendency also exists among domesticated guineas if there are equal numbers of males and females. As the breeding season approaches, pairs of guineas will wander off in search of hidden nesting sites. It is not necessary, however, to have equal numbers of females and males to obtain fertile eggs. For most flocks, one male is usually kept for every four to five females. When guineas are kept in close confinement, one male may be mated with six to eight females.

Guineas usually start laying in March or April and may continue to lay until October. A hen from a carefully managed flock may lay 100 or more eggs a year. Breeders generally produce well for two or three years. They can be kept four to five years in small farm flocks. In such flocks, hens usually lay about 30 eggs and then go broody.

The incubation period for guinea eggs is 26 to 28 days, similar to the incubation period for turkeys. If available, broody chickens can be used to hatch guinea eggs. Typical bantam chicken hens can sit on 12 to 15 guinea eggs, while a large chicken hen can sit on 20 to 28 guinea eggs. Guinea hens do not always make good mothers. Chicken hens tend to be much better mothers, and a large chicken can brood up to 25 guinea keets.

When allowed to incubate eggs naturally, guinea hens normally do not go broody until the nest has around 30 eggs. A healthy guinea hen will lay an egg a day. If the eggs are removed from the nest, she will most likely make a nest somewhere else. If all but four or five eggs (marked for identification) are removed, she may return to the same nest and continue laying. Eggs from confined guineas, however, can be collected daily with no problems—you do not have to worry about going on a scavenger hunt every day in search of new nest sites.

Guinea eggs are smaller and have thicker shells than chicken eggs. As a result, it is difficult to candle the eggs until 10 days of incubation. Otherwise, incubating guinea eggs is similar to incubating chicken eggs.

Sexing Guineas

One of the most frequent questions about poultry of any species is how to tell males from females. It is very difficult to sex young guineas (those 12 to 52 weeks of age) because **pullets** (young females) and **cockerels** (young males) look exactly the same. When the guineas are older, there are two ways to tell them apart:

- **Listen to the sounds they make.** The hen makes a two-syllable noise that sounds like she is saying "buckwheat, buckwheat," "put-rock, put-rock," or "qua-track, qua-track." These are the only sounds that the hen makes that the **guinea cock** (male at least one year old) does not. When excited, both the hens and cocks emit one-syllable cries, but the cock does not emit sounds similar to the two-syllable noise of the hens. (The young keets start making one-syllable cries at six to eight weeks, but some females do not start calling until much later.)
- **Look at the size of the helmet and wattles.** The **helmet** is the protuberance on the top of the head of a guinea fowl. The **wattles** are fleshy appendages that hang from the sides of the head. The helmet and wattles of the male are much larger than those of the female.

For More Information

Keeping guinea fowl. Jacquie Jacob, Tony Pescatore, and Austin Cantor, University of Kentucky.

Guinea fowl management. Michael Darre, University of Connecticut.