

Raising Ducks for Meat



Pekin Ducklings in an outdoor pen.

Ordering Ducklings

Unless you have breeding stock or a local source for young poultry, it will be necessary to order your ducklings from a hatchery. There are hatcheries all over the world, but it is best to order from a facility close by. The longer the trip, the harder it is on your new ducklings to recuperate from the stress of shipping. Baby poultry hatch with a 3 day supply of nutrition from the egg yolk to sustain them. If the shipping

period is longer than this, you risk losing your little ones to starvation and thirst. Most hatcheries ship by air mail, but delays could cause heavy losses. If you are able to purchase from local farmers or hatcheries, I highly recommend that option.



Many hatcheries have a minimum order of 15 ducklings per customer. If this is too many, you may want to split the order with a friend or sell some on Craigslist. Some feed stores have chick days in the spring when you can order small numbers of baby poultry. Be prepared for prices of \$4 and up for day old ducklings. The best price I found when I searched the hatchery catalogs was \$3.50 each plus shipping for White Pekins.



Pekin ducks raised in a mixed flock. They provide nutritious eggs and meat.

Best Breeds for Meat

Looking through the breeds of ducks in poultry catalogs is fun, and very confusing. There are so many kinds available that it's hard to choose. If your main purpose for raising ducks is for butchering, you will want one of the heavier meat breeds. The most common are Pekins (or Giant White Pekins) and Muscovy.

There are other breeds, such as the Rouen, Aylesbury, and Blue Swedish, that will provide a decent size carcass. These breeds have colored

feather shafts. Although this does not affect the flavor of the meat, it will make it a bit more difficult to get a clean looking carcass.

If you're planning to raise your ducks for both meat and eggs, the Pekins lay a decent number of eggs plus provide a meaty carcass. This is the breed most often raised for market, because the carcass is clean and they are ready to process at such a young age. They are ready to butcher at 7 weeks, a very fast turnaround for livestock...as fast as Cornish X meat chickens. I've read that if you butcher later than 7 weeks, it is more difficult to pluck the carcass. In my experience, it's never easy to get all the downy feathers off ducks.



Ducks, skinned, vacuum sealed, and ready for the freezer.

Ducks have more oily skin and meat than chickens, since they are adapted to life in water. If you don't care for the greasiness of most duck meat, try Moscovies. Their oil gland is not as well developed as most ducks and their meat is lighter. Be aware that Moscovies are prone to flightiness and you may need to cover their pen or clip the feathers on their wings to keep them at home. They are also quieter than most ducks and make reliable brooders and mothers. If you wish to keep a breed that will raise future generations without an incubator, the Muscovy may be your best bet. They will

often raise several clutches of ducklings each year. For the self reliant homesteader, this is an important consideration.

Caring for Your Ducklings

Before your ducklings arrive, you will need to prepare a brooder pen for them. They need a heat lamp to keep them warmed to 95 degrees F for the first week. Each week afterwards you will reduce the temperature by 5 degrees. If they are crowded under the lamp, they are too cold. If they are as far from the lamp as they can get, it's too warm. Be sure to check on them often to prevent fatalities from overheating or exposure to cold.

Provide clean water and non-medicated starter feed at all times. For the first few days, you may want to put a tablespoon of sugar in each quart of water to provide them with extra energy. Electrolytes can also be added to their water, especially if the shipping process was particularly stressful. Ducklings need a higher protein content in their feed than chicks. Make sure there is no mold or rancid smell to their feed, as this is a sign of possible toxins.

What, No Swimming?

Be sure that your little ducklings can't get into their water container and drown. They are curious and playful, but shouldn't swim in their early days, so care must be taken to prevent accidents. Without their mother to provide the necessary oils for waterproofing, ducklings should not be allowed to swim until they are several weeks old and able to produce their own oils. If you are raising them to butcher at 7 weeks, you will not need to have a pond or water source for swimming available.

Raising Them Humanely

The reason I raise my own poultry for meat is to prevent these curious animals from living and dying in miserable conditions. I feel very strongly that if my family is going to consume the flesh of animals, it is our responsibility to ensure that those creatures did not suffer. Although it is always hard for me to kill animals, I feel it is my duty to provide the best life and death I can for them. Larger animals that I can't raise myself, such as pigs and cattle, are ordered from small local farmers who send their animals to family butchers. I like knowing that we are supporting the local economy and the humane treatment of animals at the same time.

Keeping Ducks

Growing up on the farm, we had White Pekins for eggs. My Mom made the most delicious cakes with those large, mint green eggs. I can still remember the fun I had searching for them in the weeds. I've wanted to raise ducks for a long time and recently placed my first order for Pekin ducklings. Most of them are destined for the table, but I plan to keep a few for eggs and for raising more ducklings in the future. As I learn more about raising these ducks for meat and eggs, I will share that information with you here, on The Self Sufficient HomeAcre.

Update:

I've had my Pekin ducks for close to two years now. I've found them to be fairly easy to keep, although they are very messy in the coop, especially over the winter. I hatched some of their eggs out about 3 months ago and butchered all but six of them when they reached 7 weeks old. Their meat is delicious and makes great roast duck and sausage!