



Beginner's Guide to Raising Meat Chickens

A Simple Homestead Guide to Cornish Cross Broilers

By Sunset Grove – Kearney, Missouri

Raising your own meat chickens is one of the most rewarding parts of homestead life. Cornish Cross chickens grow quickly, are easy to manage, and provide high-quality meat for your family.

At Sunset Grove, raising meat birds is part of producing our own food and living closer to the land. We suggest raising meat birds in late summer when there are lots of bugs on the ground ready for your birds to eat.

Once we tried our own, pasture-raised chicken, we did not want to eat chicken from the store ever again. It is easy for a home of 4 to raise 30 chickens in the summer and have them in the freezer for cooking year round. Once we tried these methods, we began teaching them to our neighbors, and now everyone can raise their own chickens for butchering. The cool part is that you don't need a ton of space to do this, we have friends who have raised their meat birds on less than an acre. That's why the Cornish cross is the ideal breed for small farms. They are finished in just 7 weeks. This quick guide will help you get started on your small hobby farm.



Why Cornish Cross Chickens Are Ideal for Homesteads

Cornish Cross chickens are the most common breed raised for meat on small farms and homesteads. They are bred specifically for efficient meat production, which means they grow quickly and convert feed into meat very effectively.

Many homesteaders choose Cornish Cross because they are simple to raise and produce excellent meat in a short amount of time.

Benefits of Cornish Cross Meat Birds

- Fast growth (ready in about 7–8 weeks)
- Excellent feed conversion
- Tender, high-quality meat
- Easy to raise for beginners
- Perfect for small homesteads

Most families raise meat chickens once or twice per

year to stock their freezer with homegrown poultry.

Typical Growth Timeline

Week 1–2

Small chicks live in a brooder under a heat source.

Week 3–4

Growth begins to accelerate and birds eat more feed.

Week 5–6

Birds move to a coop, tractor, or pasture pen.

Chicken

Breast

\$7/pound

Wings \$5/pound

Thighs and Legs

\$3/pound

Gizzards, Hearts,

Livers \$3/pound

Whole Chickens

\$5/pound

Week 7–8

Most birds reach ideal processing weight.

What You Need Before Your Chicks Arrive

Preparing your setup ahead of time is essential because the brooder should be preheated and ready to go before your chicks arrive.

Brooder Setup

New chicks need warmth and protection.

A basic brooder should include:

- Heat lamp or brooder plate
- Pine shavings bedding
- Chick feeder
- Chick waterer
- Draft-free enclosure

Start brooder temperature around **95°F** during the

first week, lowering the temperature gradually

by 5 degrees each week.



Feed for Meat Chickens

Cornish Cross chickens grow rapidly and require high-protein feed.

Typical feeding stages:

Starter Feed (Weeks 1–3)

High protein small crumble to support early growth.

Grower Feed (Weeks 4–8)

Supports rapid muscle development and supports final growth before processing.

Fresh water must always be available.

Coop or Pasture Setup

Once chicks develop feathers, they can move outdoors.

Common setups include:

- Chicken tractor (mobile coop)
- Pasture pen (chicken netting or electric fencing)
- Permanent coop with run

Good airflow and dry bedding are essential for healthy birds. We use materials that we have on hand first before we buy.

Space Requirements

Cornish Cross chickens need adequate space to stay healthy.

Otherwise, they will get too dirty, peck and fight each other, and cause injury to one another. We have tried many different configurations and usually the simplest solution is usually the best.

Recommended space:

Chicks week 1-4 need less space and stay warm easier in small spaces

- **2–3 square feet per bird in a chicken tractor**
- We don't do more than 25 in a 10 ft x 10 ft space after 5 weeks old

Overcrowding can lead to poor growth, disease, and other health problems.



Daily Care, Growth Tips, and Common Mistakes

Raising meat chickens becomes very simple once you establish a daily routine.

Daily Care Routine for 1-4 week old chicks

Morning

- Check feed levels
- Refill water
- Quick health check of birds

Evening

- Refill feed
- Check water again
- Secure coop from predators

Clean bedding regularly to keep birds healthy.



Daily Care Routine for 5-8 week old birds

Morning

- Check feed levels
- Refill water
- Quick health check of birds and move chicken tractor to fresh grass

Evening

- Refill feed
- Check water again
- Secure coop from predators

Growth Management Tips

Because Cornish Cross chickens grow quickly, a few simple practices help keep them healthy.

- Keep bedding clean and dry
- Encourage birds to move around
- Provide fresh air and good ventilation
- Move tractors to fresh ground daily

This helps improve overall bird health.

Common Beginner Mistakes

Getting too few or too many birds

Many homesteaders find that raising **20–25 birds** makes processing day more worthwhile. It is a lot of work just to set up. We also have had community processing days at our homestead, making it easier for other families to process their small flocks. We use the local chicken processor to process our 400+ chickens, but for small batches of 40 or less, we do this at home.



Overcrowding the coop

Too many birds in a small space can lead to unhealthy conditions. We recommend having 25 6+- week- old birds or less in a 10 ft x 10 ft space

Wet bedding

Moist bedding can cause odor and respiratory issues. When they are in the brooder try to put a fresh layer of bedding on top every other day.

Waiting too long to process

Cornish Cross chickens grow very quickly. Processing around **7–8 weeks** usually produces the best meat quality. If you process after 8 weeks, there could be issues with your chickens and their health.

Why Homesteaders Raise Meat Chickens

Raising your own meat birds allows you to:

- Produce healthy food for your family
- Know exactly how your animals were raised
- Reduce dependence on store-bought meat
- Learn valuable homestead skills

Many families discover that once they raise their own chickens, they never want to go back to store-bought poultry.

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Sunset Grove – Kearney, Missouri

We hope you have enjoyed our free guide to raising meat birds. Thank you for reading and we hope you will follow along!

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