
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 152 Getting Started With Backyard Chickens with Melissa Caughey

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/152

Melissa: Chickens are really easy to care for. They don't require a lot, they don't get sick a lot. As long as they have good food and nutrition and housing and all of that, they're just absolutely a joy. And I think that's the biggest thing for people to know.

Theresa: This is the Living Homegrown podcast, episode 152.

Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast, where it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle, is your host national PBS TV producer and canning expert Theresa Loe.

Theresa: Hey there everybody, welcome to the podcast. I'm your host Theresa Loe, and this podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without a farm. Now that includes organic small space food gardening, canning, and fermenting the harvest, and artisan food crafts like baking your own bread. It's all about the different ways that we can live closer to our food, and take small delicious steps towards living a more sustainable lifestyle. If you would like to learn more about any of these topics, or my online courses, my coaching, or my Living Homegrown Institute ... which is my membership site, then just visit my website, livinghomegrown.com.

Before I dive in to today's episode, I just want to thank those of you who have taken the time to leave me an iTunes review. So, if you don't know this already, when you're a podcaster, it's very difficult to move up in the rankings for podcasting in iTunes unless people are actively leaving reviews for your podcast. Now, my podcast has been out for a couple years now, I have like 1.4 million downloads. So I love my audience, and I know that you guys are super engaged. Many of you have listened to every single episode, and I so appreciate that. And one of the things that can help me grow and expand my audience so that more people are learning how to live farm fresh, is if you go to iTunes and leave me a review.

So I just wanted to acknowledge one of the reviews that was recently on my podcast, and it's from AlanNon77. Now it's so funny because on iTunes, you like can give yourself this weird name, it's not like your regular formal name, it's always some weird name. So this is the review that I got from AlanNon77. "I love this informative podcast as gardeners at all levels, we benefit greatly from each others experience. Thank so much for all you do." Well thank you, for leaving a five star review. I really do appreciate that because every time I'm

reviewed, it bumps me up in the rankings, so that more people will see and learn about this podcast. And that allows me to continue with this work. So, thank you so much. And if you have a moment to ever go onto iTunes and leave a review, I just want you to know that I read every single one of them. So thank you so much.

Okay, so what we are going to be covering in today's episode is how to get started with backyard chickens. Now I've covered the topic of backyard chickens in several different ways on this podcast. And what we're going to focus on a lot today is, if you have a family, or if you have children, and you are thinking of getting some backyard chickens. But I want you to know that you don't have to have kids to start having backyard chickens. We're just going to be coming from that perspective, but everything that we talk about would relate to anyone wanting to start with backyard chickens. Like how do you get started? What are some of the considerations that you need to have? What are some of the things that you will be doing with these backyard chickens in order to keep them safe and happy?

So I brought on Melissa Caughey, who we've had on the show before. She was on episode 129 and we were discussing how to understand backyard chicken behavior. Because chickens have different quirky things that they do, and if you know how to read those signs, you can actually enjoy your chickens a whole lot more. So that was episode 129. But Melissa has also written a book called, *A Kid's Guide to Keeping Chickens*. And we are going to talk today about how to start with backyard chickens, especially if you have children. So that's going to be the topic of today. So what we're going to go into is everything that you need to consider, what things you need to check out first, what you should have in place before you bring those precious little baby chicks home, all of that.

So let me tell you a little bit about Melissa. Melissa Caughey is a nurse practitioner, backyard chicken keeper, a bee keeper, a master gardener, a crafter, and a cook. She obviously is one of us. I know you guys can relate to just about everything on that list. Now, she contributes to HGTV, DIY Network, *Grit* magazine, *Community Chickens* magazine, and *Keeping Backyard Bees*. She travels the country presenting on chicken keeping, bee keeping, gardening, and crafting. Especially at the *Country Living* magazine fair, and the *Mother Earth News* fairs. Her first book, *A Kid's Guide To Keeping Chickens*, and her website have won multiple awards. Like many, many awards. And her second book, *How To Speak Chicken*, came out last November 2017 to rave reviews as well. Now that was the book that we chatted about for episode 129, when we were talking about understanding chicken behavior. And it was a really fun episode, so I'll be sure to link in the show notes.

Now Melissa currently lives in Cape Cod, with her husband, her two children, and a menagerie of animals. Now as always, I will have in the show notes, for today's episode, everything about Melissa, her website, and her blog. All of that information will be in the show notes for today's episode. And to get to the show notes, you just go to livinghomegrown.com/152, and everything will be there for you.

Now before we dive into the interview, I want you to know that today's podcast episode is brought to you by my Living Homegrown Institute, which is my monthly membership site. Now in my membership, you can get access to an entire library of monthly master classes, that help you live farm fresh without the farm. Now, this means we cover everything from how to grow epic heirloom tomatoes, to raising chickens, and how to make your own homemade cheese, and even ferment vegetables. Now I believe that living an organic farm fresh lifestyle, is really just a journey and learning. And we have different stages of growth in that learning. We start out as curious, and then we move into experimentation, and eventually we grow into mastery of these different skills.

So if you're looking to create a farm fresh lifestyle for yourself, and you're curious where you may fall on the growth scale for the different types of skills, well I have a free resource for you. It's my Farm Fresh Success Path, that my students use inside my learning institute. And it will help you decide where you are on your own journey, the characteristics of that stage, and I've thrown in few action steps and information to take you to the next level. Now to get to the Success Path PDF, you just go to livinghomegrown.com/path, that's P-A-T-H. And you can download it there for free.

Okay, now with that, let's dive into my conversation with Melissa Caughey, the author of, *A Kid's Guide to Keeping Chickens*.

Hey Melissa, that's so much for coming on the show.

Melissa: Oh, thanks for having me back Theresa, I'm excited to be here.

Theresa: Yeah, I love talking about backyard chicken with you.

Melissa: It's always fun isn't it?

Theresa: It is. I love turning people on to the idea of having backyard chickens because they're wonderful pets for us. And our family just absolutely has adored every minute of being chicken owners. And so I think this will be a great way, for people if they either have kids, and want to introduce their kids to raising chickens, or even if they're just starting out themselves. I mean you don't even have to have kids to have chickens, you can have them all on your own. So I want people to realize, you don't have to have kids even though we're talking a lot about children, and families, and having chickens with kids. So alright, first of all, I would love for you to tell everybody a little bit about how you got into backyard chickens. Because in the introduction, you know I talked about your books, and what you do. But I would love to know what got you started with backyard chickens?

Melissa: Well I think you know, really for us it was more about kids journeying into their first pet. Nobody was sleeping through the night at my house, and everybody wanted a puppy. And I thought, oh, you know puppies are like having a newborn again. And the kids were really little. So I said maybe these chickens are kind of interesting, as I started seeing them popping up in a lot of gardening magazines that I used to get through the winter time. Because we live on Cape Cod and we get snow, and four seasons and so I like to research things in the

winter a lot. And I started learning all about chickens, and then the following spring I started seeing chickens popping up everywhere. It's kind of like when you start thinking about something, like you start driving a certain model of car, all of a sudden you start realizing how many people drive that car. I was exactly like that, and realizing how many people actually kept chickens around me.

And so when I found out that the chickens put themselves to bed at night, it was kind of like, that's pretty cool. In addition to eggs and making good companions, and teaching kids responsibility, and all those things, I thought that they would be a really good introductory pet, prior to getting a dog.

Theresa: So how old were your children when you first started with the chickens yourself?

Melissa: So they were three and six.

Theresa: Oh wow.

Melissa: So they were really little.

Theresa: Yeah. I think my kids were about, I guess six and eight was about when we got backyard chickens. So they were a little bit older, and they definitely like, pitched in from the beginning. So even though your children were younger, they still like were in the whole process with the chickens.

Melissa: Oh, definitely. And you know, colossal fights over who was going to gather the eggs. I mean, thank goodness they lay more, right?

Theresa: Yes. Yes, that's a good point, oh my goodness.

Melissa: You know, of course you know, it just starts with basic things like that, topping off feeders, filling the waterers, gathering the eggs, making sure that everybody looks okay and they're all getting along, basic things. And as they get older, their responsibilities grow. But kids, they want to learn, and they want to nurture things, and they ... it's so important these days that they can get out what they're putting in. The effort in comes out. Does that make sense?

Theresa: Yeah, and it totally makes sense. And you know, to me, I find backyard chickens to be easier than our dog. I think they're much easier. So if anyone is thinking about this, I definitely ... like if you think, well I could handle a dog, well then you can handle backyard chickens as well. Because they do take care of themselves in a lot of ways, and you can still take a vacation. You don't have to board your chickens like you do ... you can just have someone be checking in on them. But definitely you can have a backyard chicken if you can have a pet like a dog or a cat. So why do you think backyard chickens are such great pets for kids?

Melissa: Well I think the thing that surprised me the most, and I still, after all these years, get emails and responses on social media about, wow, I had no idea that chickens all have their own personalities. And I think that's something that

shocks a lot of people. Well, why wouldn't they? We all have personalities. Dogs have personalities, and things of that nature. And we just think to ourselves, well, I think it just comes from not really thinking or having anybody hanging out with chickens. And I think, when you start realizing that these chickens have personalities, and they come when they're called, they enjoy sitting in your lap sometimes, they follow you around. Why wouldn't they make good pets? You know, and they lay eggs, which is really cool. It's pets with benefits, really. I mean, your dog can't lay an egg, not the good kind anyway.

Theresa: No, absolutely.

Melissa: So I think it's somewhere between having a cat and a dog.

Theresa: Yeah.

Melissa: I think that's kind of where they lie. And they're curious, they're entertaining, they're fun, and they're just really, really neat. And I think coming with any type of pets, comes responsibility. I think that knowing how to care for animals is a good thing. Being compassionate, being patient and building up that trust with the animals. They're not going to come to you right away, until they trust you, until they know who you are, until they know that you're the one who's kind and taking care of them, things like that. So you know chickens on average live five to seven years. And so you don't have the time you do with dogs and cats. And I think sometimes that's what hurts your heart the most, is when that circle of life comes about, it's so soon. It's just a blink.

Theresa: Yeah, and the other thing is that with the personalities ... like we've become very attached to our chickens. Just like we would with our dog. But we do have two chickens right now that are both ten years old. So they can live even longer, and you just never know, it all depends on the breed and the luck of the draw really. And so-

Melissa: And genetics, I think too, just like us, and diet, and exercise.

Theresa: And genetics, yep. Exactly yes, and making sure you are protecting them from predators and things like that. So I agree with you though, each one does have a different personality. There's some that are super docile and sweet, and there's always a few that are a little snotty, that happens too.

Melissa: I say mean girls are everywhere, you can't escape them, when you a chicken or a little girl in elementary school, or middle school, or even adults. They just are part of life, and I think that's another good lesson too. Like there's just going to be some mean girls or mean people out there, that just can't get along with anybody. And how do you deal with that, what are some tactics, what can you do, and talking about that. And sometimes those things open your children up to telling you what's going on at school, and what's going on when you're not there. And I think that's really important, is that animals can form a bridge in families. It's something that's been very helpful for my kids.

Theresa: It takes down the barrier for communication, I agree with that, absolutely. Well if someone is thinking about starting with backyard chickens for their family,

what are some of the things that they should consider before running out and bringing home baby chicks?

Melissa: Oh gosh. I think it's like anything. You first need to check your local laws, and you need to see if you're allowed to have chickens even where you live. There are some towns that permit chickens, some towns that don't. Some that have restrictions as to particular numbers of chickens that you can keep, whether you can have a rooster or not. There's also people who live in homeowners associations that have specific laws preventing you, so even though your town may allow you to keep chickens, sometimes your homeowners association doesn't. So I think that's the very first step, because there's nothing like getting chickens and having to get rid of them. Especially after you realize how great they are. And then I think really looking at the breeds you're interested in, and how many do you need?

I usually tell people, four to six hens are perfect for a family of four. You'll get a couple dozen eggs per week. And you don't need a rooster, because you don't need a rooster to get eggs. And then keep in mind, like how much room do you have for the chicken coop, which is the house, the enclosure ... like the shed, like a little house for them. And then the run is the enclosed wired portion, sometimes covered ... I recommend covered ... space where the chickens can forage outside, but protected as well.

And that also takes some space. So really about 10 square feet of space per bird, is what people recommend. And based where you live ... if you live in beautiful sunny California ... you know it's beautiful and sunny every single day, so you don't need a larger coop. Probably would like more outside space. But if you live up in Maine, or near the Canadian border, or Michigan, or somewhere in the northeast where it snows a lot, then they're going to need a bigger space in the coop because they're going to be spending more time in there when the seasons change.

So definitely some planning ahead. And there's so many great wonderful resources out there now, as chicken keeping has become more popular. There's websites where you can get free chicken coop plans. There's places where you can get some coops delivered, and then if you're handy, why not build your own or you can even order one that will be shipped on a pallet to your house. So I think there's lots of opportunities and options out there, the sky really is the limit. The main thing with chickens is they need to be kept dry and protected from the weather. So kind of looking at that, but there's so many options out there and I think that that's super exciting.

Theresa: It is exciting, and that's actually ... I did mail order my coop because I have a ... you know I only have three chickens right now, and so I just ... my coop, it looks almost like a large dog house. But then they have a large run area. They have a whole section in my backyard. Because you're right, we don't have snow, we don't have anything like that. I just have to watch out for predators like hawks. But if they have a roof over them, and I can enclose them at night, then they are safe from the raccoons, and possums and things like that.

Melissa: Exactly.

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- Theresa: Definitely predator proofing, is super important. I've seen many people make the mistake of not even realizing. They're like, oh we're in the city, we don't have anything ... but yeah, there's a lot of raccoons and possums in the city. Even if ... when you're out in the country, you're thinking, oh, coyote's, and hawks and things like that, but no matter where you live, definitely you have to consider the safety of them. And they do go in at night ... so you mentioned how they put themselves to bed, so tell everybody about that. Because I think that's kind of ... it's a cool thing, like it goes by the light of day.
- Melissa: Exactly. When it starts getting dark or dusk and they're outside or foraging about. They just one by one tend to walk into the coop. There's always one chicken that is the last one in. Maybe you would call her or he the rotten egg. But usually their job is making sure that the rest of the flock is in. And sometimes ... most times it's the head hen, or the one on the lower of the pecking order. And they just kind of make sure that everybody gets in and everybody's got a space on the roost, where they sleep inside. And then you can simply just go out and lock the door ... and like you said, the predator proofing is so key. And I think another thing to add for city folks is there's also rats. And rats will come and eat small baby chicks and also the eggs, and can do some harm. So definitely the predator proofing is important, and making sure you lock them up at night. But it's so easy because they just go right in ... like as if they were marching onto Noah's ark.
- Theresa: They really do, it is funny.
- Melissa: Right up the ramp.
- Theresa: Yeah, right up the ramp. And we do, we call it farm TV, because sometimes we'll be outside in the evening because it's cooler and we'll be watching them and then right as the sun starts ... someone starts, and then everyone just follows right along. And they're like oh, time for bed. Wish my kids were that easy.
- Melissa: I know, right?
- Theresa: Yeah. Well some of the chores, you know we're talking about the responsibility that a kid could have. So if someone has kids and there's chores that go along with taking care of the coop ... and you kind of hit on it. So what are some of the things that a child could help with, if you have backyard chickens?
- Melissa: Well I definitely think the first thing that we should mention is hygiene. So it's important if you're going to be entering the chicken area to have designated chicken coop shoes for anybody who's going to be taking part of that. And those shoes for us stay in our garden shed, but we always make sure that we switch out our shoes. Because we don't want to be tracking any of ... chicken droppings or anything else into the house, so that's super important. And then always to wash your hands with soap and water after you're done handling your chickens. And if your clothes get soiled, you just want to change your clothes, because sometimes things happen. But for the most part, any child who can follow simple commands can go in. And one of the best things is harvesting the eggs, and looking for the eggs. Sometimes there's a hen sitting on the eggs and

that will make little kids nervous in the beginning, but you can reach right under there and take those eggs. Usually with a little bit of squabbling but certainly that's really fun.

And then giving them a small scoop, larger pale with the food and they can scoop it in one by one if they want to. It might take a little bit longer. But a small little half cup measuring cup ... they can alternate, so they can both fill the feeder. Filling the waterers is another really good thing. They can open up the door in the morning, or close the door at night. And then as they get older, then some of the responsibilities of doing some of the maintenance ... it's really not that difficult.

I should point out that chickens don't urinate, they don't pass urine. Instead they put their urine on top of their droppings, it's the white part of ... whenever you see any type of bird dropping, that the urea. And so there's nothing wet involved, so it's just chicken manure which is pretty easy to take care of. Because if you're using something like kiln dried pine shavings, it really just dehydrates itself. And you would just take that manure out.

Depending on how large your coop is, some people do it once a week, some people do it once a season, some people do it ones a month. It really just depends how many chickens you have and the space that's there. But also kids can fill oyster shells for the extra boost of calcium, they can fill grit, they can follow chickens around the yard when they're free ranging. Usually I give my kids some tiny little garden rakes ... they can kind of corral the chickens where they want them to go, put mulch or different things that chickens have scratched out. There's just so many different things that kids can do with chickens, and it's really fun.

Theresa: It absolutely is fun and I ... when you mentioned the pine shavings that people use in the coop, I actually ... I do do that and then when I do clean out the coop, those all go into my large composter. And so it's ... you're using something that can then go into the garden. So my chickens might eat some of my scraps, and then that goes into my compost through them, and they are fantastic fertilizers. It is a little strong ... like I wouldn't put it straight into the garden because it's so high in nitrogen, but definitely mixed in with my other compost it makes ... it kind of kick starts my compost pile. If my compost pile is ever kind of slowing down or needs to be heated up, if I just clean out the coop and throw that in there it gets everything started again.

Melissa: Absolutely. And I think composting is a great lesson for kids as well. And then I also think it really is a great segue to take that compost and then put it into the garden with kids, and plant, you know, your vegetables, or your flowers or whatever you want to grow. But showing them how everything seems to work together, symbiotically and everything helps something else. And I think that that's important. Nothing goes to waste.

Theresa: Exactly, right. Nothing goes to waste. It's all like a closed loop system and that totally comes through when they see how everything goes together.

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- Melissa: Right, because we like to feed even the leaves and things from the garden that maybe we would pass up because a bug has gotten into it. We just toss those into the chicken coop or run, and they love it. And for them, finding a bug or a worm in a tomato, that's like a cracker jack prize.
- Theresa: Yes, exactly.
- Melissa: So it all just kind of works together. I think just having sometimes, kids there with you ... they may not be interested but they're still absorbing. They're still watching, and they're still learning. And I like to tell people that you know, with all these types of things whatever you do, to just share it with your children because you're planting seeds. It may be 20 years before that seed decides to grow. It may be until they have children or grandchildren ... but if they have some sort of exposure and experience with something, it makes it less foreign. They're not afraid to try it.
- Theresa: Yeah my sons are 19 and 17, and when people come over to the house for the first time, they still take them out to show them the chickens, which cracks me up.
- Melissa: Oh, my gosh, that's so cool.
- Theresa: Yeah, so I'm like okay. So even as a teenage boy, it's still cool to show people you've got backyard chickens, because everyone always asks about them. So they love to show them off, especially the really friendly ones. Let's talk about breeds for a minute. Are there any specific breeds that you think are better for children, or better for beginners?
- Melissa: Oh definitely. Well I picked my top 10 breeds for kids in the A Kids Guide To Keeping Chickens. And hands down, I think one of the best breeds that you can get are the Buff Orpington's. And I kind of coined the phrase about 10 years ago, that they're the golden retriever of the chicken world, and it kind of caught on. Which is great, because they're so docile and so friendly, and so curious, and so lovable. And they can handle the heat, and the cold, and they're just a really good ... strong egg layer, they can handle confinement, and they like people. They're very docile. So I think they're a great choice. I also happen to be partial to the Black Australorp's, they're really nice. We should point out too Theresa, that chickens come in two different sizes.
- Theresa: Yes.
- Melissa: There's standard size, which is like your traditional size chicken. And then there's Bantam chickens, which are half size chickens I guess. And I like to tell people, they are like the size of a small rabbit, maybe a guinea pig. But they also lay Bantam size eggs. But Bantam sized chickens ... breeds are perfect for kids, especially little kids, because they're smaller to handle. And so even though they're not a good laying ... reliable egg laying breed, I love Silkie Bantams, because they're just so sweet. They're just so sweet. And for those people listening out there, Silkie Bantams are the original Chinese chicken that Marco Polo described in his journals. And they have five toes, and they have all black skin.

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- Theresa: They're furry ... we have a Silkie Bantam and the feather is a little bit different, it's split. So it almost looks like fur rather than a feather. So their kind of fluff balls, even when their babies. As soon as their feathers start coming in, they're just this big fluff ball, and the egg is smaller. So I do like the fact that we have regular sized chicken eggs with our other breeds, but with the Silkie, we might use that egg in a scrambled egg dish. But if I was using a recipe, I would probably go more of one of our standard eggs. Or I would use one and a half eggs of the Silkie size. Because they're cute, they're a little bit smaller. They're not like tiny, tiny eggs, but they are a little bit smaller. So if you're baking something it would make a difference. But, you know ... mixes right in with ... if you're doing a scrambled egg or an omelet or something like that, then they're real cute.
- Melissa: Right, I also like the Easter Eggers, if people are looking for colored eggs. They lay just like you would think, pastel pinks, blues, and greens. So those are also beautiful to have in there. I think once you realize that like dogs, there are a lot of breeds of chickens out there. And certainly, how do you even begin to pick? They're are some websites that have lots of information and even some breed selecting tools, which is pretty cool. You can plug in kind of your chicken wish list, and out pop appropriate breeds, so those are neat too. And I think talking to people who have chickens around you, seeing which breeds are their favorites, and maybe visiting, maybe going on some local coop tours and checking out some of the chickens and seeing if it might be something that might be right for you. I can't think of any chicken keepers that aren't proud to show off their chickens, because they're really a great conversation starter. I think about ... you know, your boys, 17 and 19. Well if you've got that ... how old was that chicken, 10?
- Theresa: Yes. Yeah, we have two 10 year olds, yes.
- Melissa: So they were seven and nine years old.
- Theresa: Yes.
- Melissa: So they're still ... they're part of the family. It's like well you've met the dog, you've met the cat, you've met my dad, now you're going to meet the chicken.
- Theresa: Yes, yeah. It makes sense.
- Melissa: Yeah, so ... and they totally get integrated into the family, which is pretty amazing. But definitely I recommend people start with chicks if they want friendly chickens. To handle them a lot, multiple times per day, letting them get comfortable with you, imprinting on you and your family, and really taking them literally, under your wings.
- Theresa: Yes. Well let's talk about that. Let's talk about baby chicks, because I think that's usually how people want to start. And it is a really fun thing to do. But you can't ... I know many people who have gone to the feed store and they fell in love with baby chicks and they brought them home and then they're calling me because they have nothing to take care of them. And they don't even have a coop, and they don't even know if they can have chickens. So before you ever

go to a feed store ... it's like telling someone I'm just going to go look at the puppies, and not bring one-

Melissa: Put the blinders on.

Theresa: Yeah, right.

Melissa: Don't look.

Theresa: Yeah, don't look at the baby chicks unless you're ready because you definitely-

Melissa: Don't walk towards that heat lamp.

Theresa: Yes.

Melissa: Avoid, the light, the red light. Steer clear.

Theresa: Because they are like puppies, they are so adorable. So let's talk about baby chicks. What are some of the considerations people should think about before bringing home baby chicks?

Melissa: Okay, well first of all, people need to realize that they are babies and they can get into trouble, and they need a little bit more care than just chickens. So I think if you're planning to go away, for any extended period of time, it's not a good time to get baby chicks. I think that's the first and foremost thing. Also, that it's a really great idea to do a prep, prior to going to the feed store. So first of all, I ... the very first thing I would do, is research the breeds that you're interested in. And then secondly I would find out from your local feed store, or online, when those particular breeds will be available, and when you can get them. And then the week before you're ready to get those chicks, I recommend setting up the brooder, which is the baby chicks temporary home for the first six to eight weeks. And the brooder keeps them safe from ... say cats, that might want to come in, or weather. It needs to be somewhere enclosed. Some people use their garage, some people use their laundry room, some people use their dining room, and some people use their bathrooms.

The baby chicks will get dusty as they molt. So that means that, they're growing at an insane rate and they're replacing their feathers quite frequently. So they can be a little bit dusty. So I really wouldn't put them in the dining room, or your [inaudible 00:31:31] bedroom. But essentially the brooder can be like a cardboard box, they even have companies that now sell these round brooders. And you want to put in some kiln dried pine shavings ... is what I like to use. Make sure there's nothing slippery on the floor. So just sometimes an extra piece of cardboard will work well. Sometimes you will put a little towel down for the first few days so their legs can get really strong. So you do that, you have the brooder, you put in the bedding, and then they'll need a feeder, and a waterer. And they'll need chick feed, there's specific formulas for baby chicks, just like puppy chow ... and food and water.

And then the baby chicks need to be draft free, and kept really warm. Ninety-five degrees for the first week. And the way that you obtain that is either using

a traditional heat lamp ... and I always tell people to not trust the clamp on the heat lamp. Because they can get very, very hot. And sometimes those clamps don't quite work the way you want. Sometimes they can get bumped or jarred. So putting a bungee cord around them works really well, but a heat lamp ... or now they even have these things that are like heating ... elevated heating pads. And I think those are much safer. And if you can perhaps afford one of those, or go in on it with some other people raising chicks, I think that'd be awesome. But they can be a little bit, you know ... costly. In a sense of maybe a heat lamp is \$10, maybe this little heating device is 50. But regardless, they need a place to keep warm.

And then you keep them at 95 degrees for the first week and then each week you'll decrease the temperature by five degrees until they're six weeks of age. And they can ... under your protection, go outside once they're fully feathered and temperatures in the evening are in the 60s.

Theresa: Okay, yeah. And I do recommend also that if ... you do have a thermometer. Because it's kind of hard to judge. But just in case you don't have a thermometer, what they usually recommend that you do is, you put that heat lamp or the heat more to one side. So if they get too hot, they can step away from the heat.

Melissa: Escape it.

Theresa: Yeah.

Melissa: If you see the baby chicks hugging the outside of the brooder, panting then they're too hot. And if you see them huddled together, peeping very loudly, they're too cold. But if they're just wandering around, curious, exploring, eating and drinking, then they're just right.

Theresa: Yeah, perfect, yes. And the special feed is important because I don't think people realize until you actually have them, just how fast they grow. And that food is specially formulated so that their bones and everything will be properly nourished so that they can have the proper nourishment. But also, the point I wanted to backtrack, something that you said which is really important. You mentioned about not having a slippery floor. And a lot of people might be thinking, well why is that? And that's because of the splayed leg problem, right?

Melissa: Right. So just like any little baby ... I guess what I would liken it to, is think of Bambi, the movie Bambi. And Bambi's just standing up and learning to use his legs. Well that's the same for these baby chicks. And the muscles and tendons can slip and cause some issues where one leg jumps out to the side. So that's when you want to make sure that they have nothing slippery, in there. Sometimes newspaper can be slippery ... nothing that would cause their little feet to slide out from under them. That's important.

And that's really for the first week or so, until they get the hang of walking around. Then you can just put regular cardboard or whatever in there. But if it's something ... it's like plastic, if you're using a Rubbermaid tub, you'd want to line the bottom of that with some cardboard. Not the printed cardboard that

has a sheen on it. You want to use just plain brown, nothing that's too slippery. And that's why I suggested a towel. Some people would just take an old towel, and line the bottom of the brooder with it, and then they'll put the pine shavings on top and they'll just toss the towel if you have an old towel that you don't care about anymore.

But you just don't want to have them have the splayed leg because it can be a challenge for people to treat.

Theresa: Yeah, absolutely, and yeah, they grow so fast. It's really the first few weeks that you would even be concerned.

Melissa: Right. But it wouldn't deter me from ever getting baby chicks. There's no way.

Theresa: Yeah.

Melissa: It doesn't happen that often people. So just know that. It's something rare but it can happen and I think the best thing you can do is educate yourself before getting into backyard chickens and just talk to people and find out their experiences. Chickens are really easy to care for. They don't require a lot. They don't get sick a lot. As long as they have good food and nutrition and housing and all of that. They're just absolutely a joy. And I think that's the biggest thing for people to know.

Theresa: I agree. The other thing I want to make sure we say, and you did say it, but I want to say it again is that it's only during this chick phase that they're this much trouble because after that they're so easy, once they're outside. But in the first few weeks of life, yeah, it is like having a newborn. You have to watch them and check on them because they'll tip over the water or they'll get all wet and then they can get chilled. So all of that, but they are absolutely adorable and I think it's really good, like you said, to handle them as much as possible. I think that's one of the reasons why our chickens are so much a part of the family, is because they know us really well. Just like a puppy or a dog. They come running when we make smacky noises to them and they know like oh-

Melissa: Exactly. They know.

Theresa: Yeah. They're like "Oh, my human is here" and they come running.

Melissa: Yes. What do you have for me? Hello, hello. We've been waiting for you all day. Where have you been?

Theresa: Yeah. Exactly.

Melissa: And I think that ... the best time ... I tell people that it goes really fast so by six weeks they're in their awkward teenage stage. So, you know when you're a teenager and you have those pimples and you're just kind of figuring out who you are. Well, chicks are at that age at six weeks. So, I liken these couple week old chicks to toddlers in their terrible two's, where you're having to be on them all the time just kind of watching them. And like you said, not all the time, but certainly checking on them three, four, five times a day and making sure that

their brooder stays dry and the heat source is still in place and making sure that everybody's getting along.

Theresa: Yeah, I remember the very first time when we got chicks and the first morning they had all fallen asleep. And if you've never had chicks before you don't realize that they're kind of like on batteries. It's like they go, go, go and then all of a sudden they'll just go ... and they just like land on the ground and they conk out. So, I opened the door really quiet. We had them in our bathroom. And I opened it up really quietly and they all looked like they'd been squished. They were just all flat out sound asleep. But I, for a second, thought they were dead. And they were not dead at all. And I went ... Like I made that sound and they all jumped up and started-

Melissa: They all jumped up.

Theresa: Yeah. And they're like "What? What?"

Melissa: What happened? What happened?

Theresa: So, just in case anyone ever has chicks, everyone I've ever spoken to, the very first time that they check on them the next morning, that is always how they look. They look like they all died a horrible death in the night. But they're just fine. They're just sound asleep, just like babies.

Melissa: Exactly. And sometimes their little legs are sticking out, sometimes their all piled on top of each other. It's just the sweetest little thing. And if you listen closely you'll hear them making little pleasure trills and that means they're happy. It's like a little purring. It's like ... you know, it's so cute.

Theresa: Yeah. They're all dreaming little chick dreams.

Melissa: Mm-hmm (affirmative). You wonder what they're dreaming about.

Theresa: I know because they have no idea what's going on in the world.

Melissa: Yes. And science has shown us that they do have REM sleep.

Theresa: That's so funny. Yeah.

Melissa: Curious minds want to know.

Theresa: Yeah. Makes sense.

Melissa: Very cool.

Theresa: Well, so what would you suggest, in closing, if someone was thinking of starting with backyard chicks, what would say in terms of encouragement about starting with chickens?

Melissa: Well, I don't think you know if you like it until you try it and I definitely think that life is about exploring new things and trying new things. It was the same

for me. If I didn't take that leap of faith, maybe I wouldn't be where I am and maybe I wouldn't have written books or my kids wouldn't be who they are or me who I am. And I think that life is all about a journey and I think it's better with chickens on that journey. Even if it's temporary, I think that there's just so much to gain from it.

I even see a lot of women after their nests are empty, starting to collect chickens. So, there's something to be said for being part of that big flock. Whether it's a flock of chickens ... it's just so much fun and if you don't like it, there's somebody who will take your chickens. So, I think just go for it. Chickens don't cost a lot of money. They're just a few dollars a piece. The most expensive part of keeping chickens is the coop. And that's only as expensive as you want to make it. And just enjoy. Just keep exploring and trying new things.

Theresa: Love it. Thank you so much Melissa for coming on today. This'll be really super informative for everybody so thanks so much for coming on.

Melissa: Oh, thanks for having me. It's always so much fun.

Theresa: Well, I hope you enjoyed that conversation with Melissa Caughey, the author of *A Kid's Guide to Keeping Chickens*. Now, as always, in the show notes for today's episode I will have everything that we talked about, including links to Melissa's blog, Tilly's Nest, and her books and everything else. So, to get to the show notes you just go to livinghomegrown.com/152 and I'll have everything there for you. And as a reminder, today's podcast episode was brought to you by my Living Homegrown membership. If you'd like to get the free PDF success path that my students use inside my membership just go to livinghomegrown.com/path and I'll have it there for you for free. So that's it for today's episode. I hope you enjoyed learning all about backyard chickens. And until next time, just try to live a little more local, seasonal and homegrown. Take care.

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown Podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown Podcast.