



Photographs: Bryan McCay

Jan Brett's chickens

Bestselling author and illustrator gives her tips on raising fancy fowl.

By Betsy Freese

above right:

Bestselling children's author-illustrator Jan Brett is passionate about her chickens.

above:

Each of Brett's 60 chickens has a name, and they are named based on the book she is writing at the time. "That way I can remember when they were born."

Jan Brett's books have sold 35 million copies, but a pile of books is not what she unloads from the hatchback of her car at the American Bantam Association National Meet – it's a trio of prize-winning Polish chickens. Brett, one of the nation's foremost author illustrators of children's books, is a chicken fanatic and the winner of many awards for her fancy fowl.

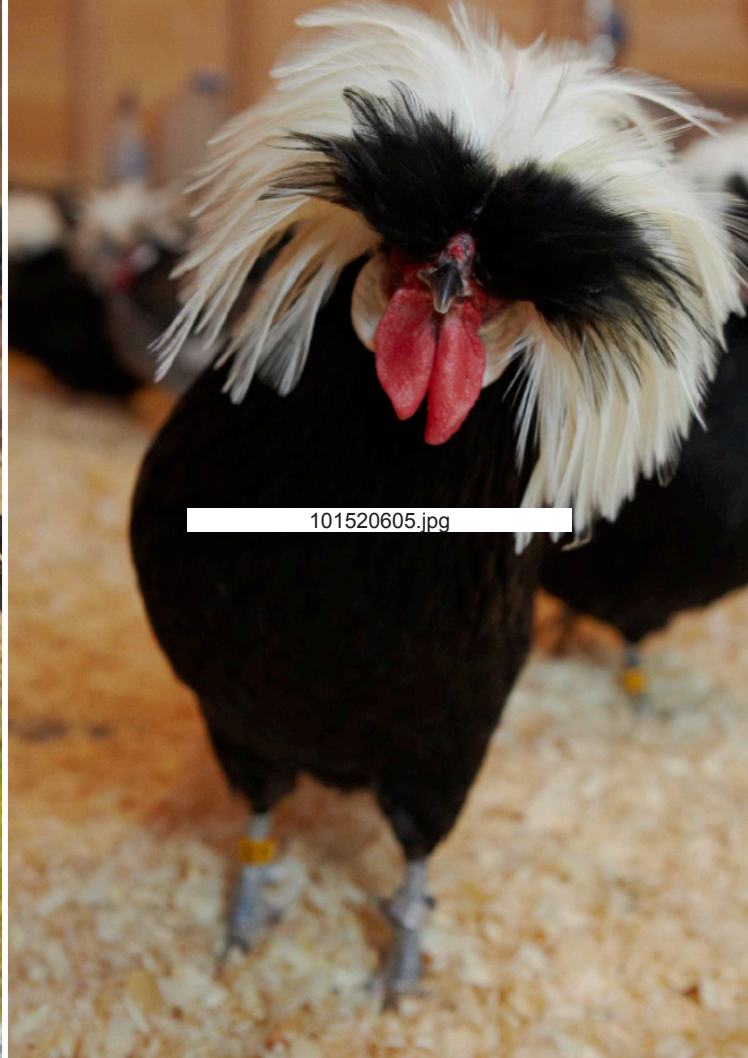
Best known for her Ukrainian folktale *The Mitten*, featuring a mole, rabbit, badger, bear, and a tiny brown mouse, Brett now incorporates chickens into many of her beloved books.

The love of animals started early for Brett. She grew up in a suburb of Boston and had a horse, guinea pigs, donkeys, and chickens. "I had

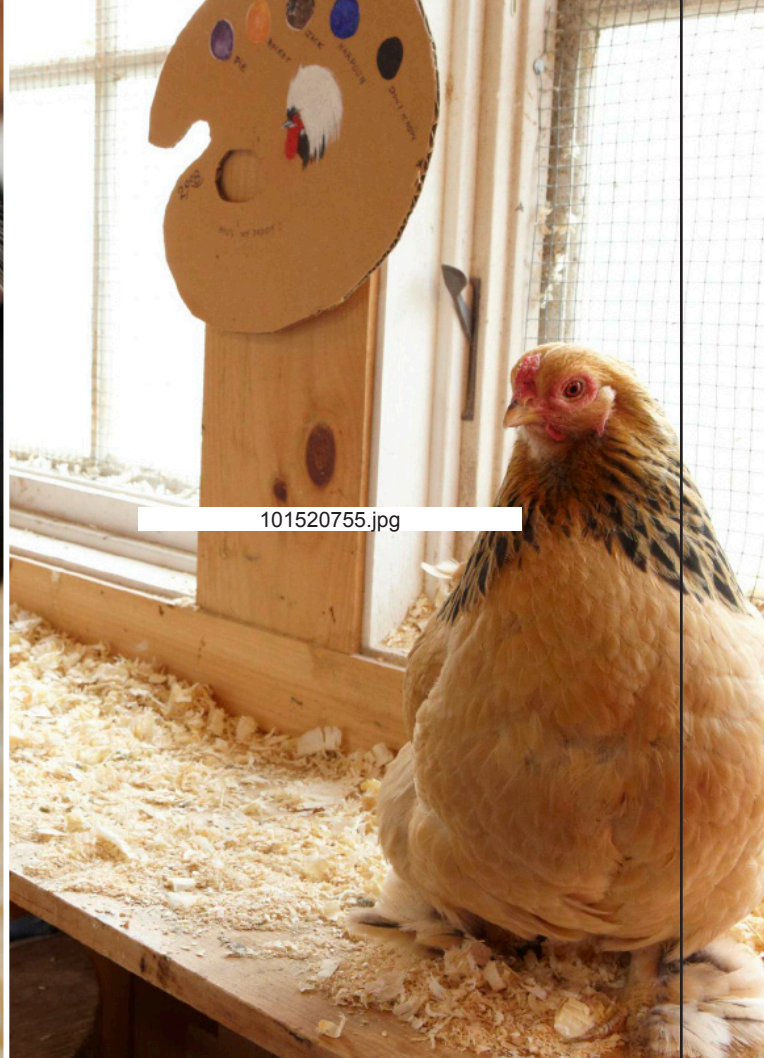
chickens that rode on the handlebars of my bike," she says. When she wasn't playing with her own animals she was riding down the road to visit the neighboring farm to see the calves. "I've always loved animals, it goes way back in my family. We had so many animals."

Chicken paradise

Today, Brett raises about 60 chickens and 10 ducks on her acreage near Norwell, Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband, Joe Hearne, a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She bought her first chickens, a batch of Wyandottes, 11 years ago at a feed store. Those hens lived for 10 years and became dear pets.



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Since then she has added fancier birds to her flock, making improvements as she goes.

“Chickens take a bit of a learning curve,” says Brett. “I bought my first Silkies from a dairy farmer and would call him when I had questions or concerns.” Once she thought a hen had a stuck egg and called him in a panic. “She’s just broody,” he told her.

At chicken shows she bought Cochin and Polish birds. “I’m intense, so I got into the Polish breed,” she says. “It is a high maintenance breed.”

Today she exhibits her poultry at shows all over the country and gives demonstrations to youth. “I’m involved with the 4-H clubs here, and show them how to wash and groom the Polish for show.” Brett says she has figured out what makes a winning show chicken, and it is mainly about nurturing and attention to detail.

Best feed on earth

No run-of-the-mill chicken feed, for one thing. Brett’s fowl are fed flax seed, wheat, whole oats, sunflower seeds, green onions, mealy worms, and more. “They like kale, so I chop it up and

tie it with twisty ties,” she says. One room in the barn has grow lights positioned over 4 inches of soil where seeds sprout and the chickens graze.

Breeding and egg laying

Her chickens live in family groups and “the males even make nests for the females,” says Brett. She keeps one pen of broody birds, Buff Brahma and Silkie crosses, that love to be mothers. Each hen sits on up to six eggs. (If Brett wants more eggs to hatch she puts them in an incubator.) “The hens like to nest in tandem, so when one gets off her nest to get water, the other



Jan Brett with...tional Meet.jpg

above left: Polish chickens need checked daily for eye infections and crest problems, says Brett. “I make the crest into a ponytail if they are molting or the other chickens will peck at it.”

above right: Brett uses hens like this Buff Brahma as models for her book illustrations.

left: Brett has a custom box for her chickens so they can travel in the hatchback of her car. “They are very tame. I carry four on each arm when I walk into the show barn.”



Illustration: Jan Brett

top right: Jan Brett's latest book is *The Easter Egg*, featuring this delightful illustration of Cochin hens pulling a cart.

moves over." Brett candles the eggs at three days to see if they are fertile, then at 10 and 15 days to make sure the chick is alive.

Barns and coops

The birds are housed inside sound-proof barns except for an hour a day in the summer when they go outside with Brett while she does chores. A free-range chicken is a dead chicken, she explains. "I have handouts for people listing all the animals that kill chickens. A fox can dig under a pen in 10 minutes. A great horned owl once followed me to the pen when I had a Wyandotte in my arms. He swooped so silently I didn't hear him coming, but my husband saw it from the window. Scary. A hawk once busted through a pen that had mesh over it. I was stunned."

No need to feel sorry for the chickens, as the barn is a castle. "These chickens live such a great life," says Brett. "They like to be washed and blown dry. I enjoy the nurturing part."

Buying and selling

When Brett wants to buy a new bird she barter. "I never buy a chicken because I trade my artwork for them," she says. If you can't trade with your paintings, you can buy an older bird from a great bloodline fairly cheap. "It's not that difficult to get the top of bloodlines if you go to shows," says Brett. A young show-quality bird sells for about \$60, but some top show Silkies can bring \$100 to \$500. Brett sells many of her chickens to homeowners for about \$15 each. These birds might have white on their wings or



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above: All the chickens are kept in family groups in the sound-proof barns. Most never go outside because of the abundance of varmints that would love a chicken meal, but life inside is pretty pampered.

above: Broody hens sit on up to six eggs each in nest boxes until the eggs hatch. Other eggs are collected daily and used in cooking. "I always use fresh eggs when I bake, they taste better and make things rise better," says Brett.

a split crest and are not for show, but do great in the backyard.

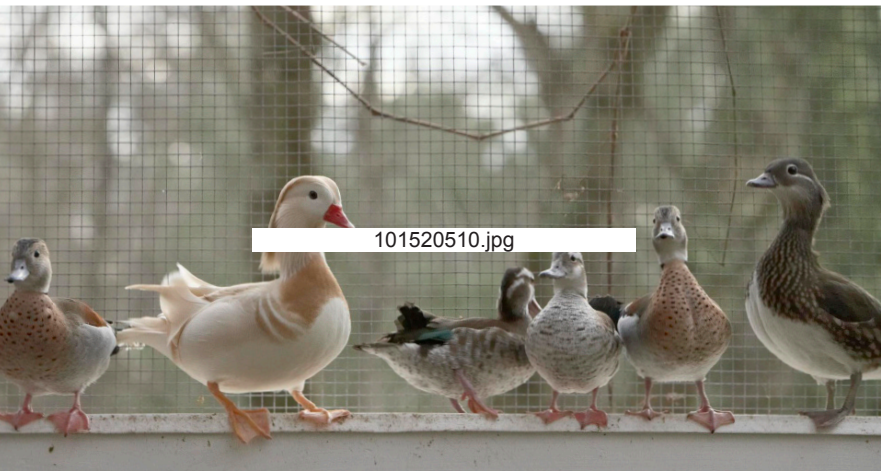
Do you homework on the breed before you buy, says Brett. Polish are tame, but their vision is obstructed and their crests require grooming. “Silkies are wonderful, but almost like bunny rabbits,” she says. “When you are looking for a breed, if it says ‘flighty’ it won’t be tame.”

Health care

If you want to show your chickens, they’ll need to be healthy, says Brett. “Judges want glossy feathers and red wattles.” Chickens that Brett takes to shows are isolated for two weeks when they get home for disease control. Brett has

an avian veterinarian nearby, but doesn’t need her too often. “I use my senses to check out the health of the coop,” she says. “I can smell if there is an infection and nip it in the bud.” When Brett is traveling, someone comes twice a day to care for the chickens and give her a report.

No time or expense is too much for her birds. “Chickens might be expendable to others, but they are not expendable to me,” she explains. “The chickens calm me down. I work on my art late in the evening and go out before bed to check the chickens. If they are not on their roost, I make sure they are okay.” Chickens are “such amazing creatures,” she says. “I have so much love for them and am so enthusiastic.” 🐔



above: Brett has quiet breeds of ducks like East Indies and Mandarins. “None of them make much noise, because my husband is a musician and doesn’t want to hear them when he is practicing,” she explains.

above right: Local stones and wood were used to build this fancy chicken house. A dozen windows provide light.

right: Each hen gets plenty of space to roam in the barn.



[> Learn More](#) -Jan Brett | P.O. Box 366, Norwell, Massachusetts 02061 | www.janbrett.com