# Before You Get Chickens: The Right Order to Set Up Your Homestead

A 90-Day Sequence-of-Operations Checklist for New One-Acre Homesteaders Who Want to Avoid Costly Beginner Mistakes

*For: Couples and families aged 28-45 who recently purchased rural property and are overwhelmed by competing priorities — they're eager but anxious, have a limited budget they cannot afford to waste, and default to exciting decisions (animals, gardens) before boring-but-critical ones (water, fencing, soil). They speak in practical terms, distrust vague advice, and need permission to slow down and do things in order.*

By **HogTron Factory** · hogtron.com

# Contents


01 Why Order Is Everything on a Homestead

02 Days 1-14: Assess What You Actually Have

03 Days 15-45: Lock In Water and Perimeter First

04 Days 46-75: Soil and Shelter Before Seeds and Animals

05 Your 90-Day Master Checklist and Decision Worksheets

06 Days 76-90: Now You're Ready for Animals and Garden

01

# Why Order Is Everything on a Homestead

*Establishes the 'sequence of operations' mindset by showing exactly how and why skipping steps destroys budgets and morale.*

Most new homesteaders spend their first serious money on chickens. It makes sense — chickens feel productive, they're exciting, they're the thing you moved here to have. Then, two weeks later, a fox gets into the coop because there was no proper perimeter fence. Or the birds drink from a mud puddle because the water system wasn't set up yet. Or they die in a cold snap because the shelter was built fast and wrong. The replacement birds cost $80. The emergency hardware cloth run costs $120. The vet visit, if you're lucky enough to catch a sick bird in time, costs more.

None of that is bad luck. It's sequence failure.

## The Real Problem Isn't Ignorance — It's Priority Chaos

When you arrive on a new property with a list of 40 things that all seem urgent, your brain treats them as roughly equal. Garden beds, a chicken coop, a compost system, fixing the barn roof, testing the well — they all feel like they need to happen *now*. So you start whichever one feels most motivating, which is almost never the one that actually needs to happen first.

The consequence isn't just wasted effort. It's that every downstream decision gets built on an unstable foundation. You can't know how much garden space you can reliably water until you

understand your water pressure and supply. You can't know where to put animal shelters until your perimeter is set. You can't improve your soil meaningfully until you know what's actually in it.

This is the idea of **dependencies** — the recognition that some things cannot function until other things exist. On a homestead, dependencies are everywhere, and ignoring them is where budgets collapse.

## The Three Phases That Make Order Possible

This 90-day sequence is organized around three phases, each with a specific job:

- **Stabilize (Days 1-45):** Assess your property honestly, then lock in water and perimeter fencing. Nothing lives here yet.
- **Build (Days 46-75):** Amend soil and construct shelter infrastructure. You're preparing, not populating.
- **Populate (Days 76-90):** Now — and only now — you bring in animals and put seeds in the ground.

The sequence wasn't built to slow you down. It was built by working backward from the most common and most expensive beginner mistakes: animals with no infrastructure, gardens with no water plan, shelters built in the wrong locations because the land wasn't understood first.

## What You're Actually Protecting

By Day 90, you won't have a finished homestead. You'll have something more valuable: a **working foundation**. Your water is reliable, your perimeter holds, your soil is understood, your shelters are placed correctly. Every exciting thing you add after that — the chickens, the garden, eventually maybe goats — lands on solid ground instead of wishful thinking.

That's the promise of doing this in order. Let's start at the beginning.

02

# Days 1-14: Assess What You Actually Have

*Guides readers through a ruthless property audit so every later decision is based on reality, not assumptions.*

The first two weeks on a new homestead have one job: find out what you're actually dealing with. Not what the listing said. Not what the previous owner told you. What's actually there, right now, in all weather.

Skip this and you'll spend money fixing surprises instead of building something intentional.

## Walk the Whole Thing — Twice

Before you order a single fence post or seed packet, put on boots and walk every inch of your property. Bring your phone or a notepad and sketch as you go. Free apps like OnX or even Google Maps satellite view can help you anchor your sketch to reality.

Mark these on your map:

- **Property lines** — confirm them, don't assume
- **Slopes and elevation changes** — water flows downhill and takes your topsoil with it
- **Wet or soggy zones** — visit after rain if you can; a corner that floods changes everything
- **Shade patterns** — note which areas get full sun, part sun, or heavy afternoon shade
- **Existing trees, structures, and buried infrastructure markers**

Walk it a second time with fresh eyes. The first walk you're getting oriented; the second walk you start seeing problems.

## Your Water Audit Is Non-Negotiable

Locate your well head and pressure tank. Then test the water. Full stop.

Order a **comprehensive water test** through your county extension office or a certified lab — not a hardware store kit. Ask for a test that includes bacteria, nitrates, hardness, pH, and any heavy metals common to your region. Results take one to two weeks and cost $50–$150. That's the cheapest insurance you can buy.

Also check **flow rate** (how many gallons per minute your well produces) and your pressure reading at the tap. A well that produces less than 3 GPM will limit livestock options before you even start.

## Power, Access, and Outbuildings

Locate your main panel and note its amperage. Walk your outbuildings and assess them honestly: sound roof, level floor, functional doors? Drive your driveway and any internal lanes after a rain. If your truck gets stuck, your feed delivery will too.

## Pull a Soil Sample

Collect samples from four or five spots across your intended growing areas — a few inches deep, mixed together. Send them to your state extension service. For around $20, you'll get pH, nutrient levels, and organic matter content. Ask for the **vegetable garden panel** and note whether your soil needs lime, sulfur, or nitrogen. You'll need these numbers before Day 46.

## Find the One Thing That Constrains Everything

Every property has a limiting factor — a soggy low corner, a shared fence line with an aggressive neighbor, a setback requirement that eats your best flat ground. Your job this week is to **name it**. Write it down. That constraint shapes your entire plan.

Also pull your deed and check for easements, right-of-ways, and any recorded restrictions. Call your county zoning office and ask two questions: Are chickens allowed? Are there setback requirements for animal structures?

## Your Deliverable

By the end of Day 14, you should have a completed **Property Assessment Worksheet** (see Section 5) with your sketch, water test results ordered, soil samples submitted, and your primary constraint identified. Everything from Day 15 forward builds on what you find here.

# 03

# Days 15-45: Lock In Water and Perimeter First

*Covers the two infrastructure pillars — reliable water and secure fencing — that must be stable before any living thing is added.*

## Water First. Always.

Here's the cascading failure nobody warns you about: you bring home six meat birds in late May, confident you'll "figure out the waterer setup." Two days later, your single outdoor hose bib — on the wrong side of the house — is 200 feet from the brooder. You're hauling buckets twice a day in July heat. One of you misses a fill. Birds die. You just paid tuition you didn't have to.

Water infrastructure isn't glamorous, but it's the one system that touches every other decision. Get it wrong and every living thing you add amplifies the problem.

## Your Water System Checklist (Days 15–25)

Work through this before you price a single chick or seed packet:

- **Pressure tank:** If your well has an old bladder tank or you've never had it inspected, do it now. A failing tank short-cycles your pump and kills it within months. Replacement pump: $800–$2,500 installed. Tank inspection: $75–$150.
- **Frost-proof hydrants:** Plan for at least one hydrant per future paddock zone, buried below your local frost line (check your county extension office for depth). A single

frost-proof yard hydrant runs $80–$140 installed DIY, or $200–$350 with a plumber. Budget two or three now rather than trenching twice later.

- **Hose bib placement:** Walk your property with a rough sketch. Mark where animals will likely live in Year 2. Your hose bibs should be *there*, not where the previous owner put them.
- **Flow test:** Run your hose bib for 60 seconds into a five-gallon bucket. If it doesn't fill in under 30 seconds, you have a pressure or flow problem to solve before adding stock.

Realistic water infrastructure budget for one acre: **$400–$1,200 DIY**, depending on how many hydrant runs you trench and your existing well condition.

# Perimeter Before Paddocks (Days 26–45)

Fence for the animals you plan to have in Year 2, not what you have today. A fence that keeps your current dog in will not keep a goat in, a neighbor's dog out, or a determined rooster contained. Retrofit fencing costs double because you're doing the labor twice.

**Materials comparison:**

- **Woven wire (field fence):** Versatile, moderately predator-resistant, works for poultry and goats with a hot wire added at the bottom. Expect $1.50–$2.50 per linear foot for materials.
- **Cattle panel:** Rigid, nearly indestructible, excellent for goats and pigs. More expensive ($2.50–$4.00/ft) but lasts decades and requires fewer posts.
- **Electric (poly-wire or high-tensile):** Lowest upfront cost, highest maintenance. Effective only if grounded correctly — **skipping ground rods is the single most common beginner mistake**. Three ground rods minimum, eight feet apart, driven full depth.

**Common fencing mistakes to avoid:**

- Corner posts sunk less than 3.5 feet — they'll heave or lean within one winter.
- Gates placed for convenience today rather than for vehicle and equipment access tomorrow. Plan for a gate wide enough for a small tractor or ATV.
- Skipping the bottom hot wire on woven wire — predators dig under, not through.

Realistic perimeter fencing budget for one acre (roughly 830 linear feet): **$1,200–$3,500** depending on materials and whether you hire post-driving.

# End-of-Phase Gate

Before you move to Section 4, answer these honestly:

1. Do you have reliable water pressure and at least one frost-proof hydrant in your planned animal zone?

2. Is your perimeter fence complete, corners solid, and gated for future equipment access?

If either answer is *no*, stay here. Section 4 will still be there in two weeks. The animals and the garden are not going anywhere. The foundation you're building right now is the reason they'll actually survive when you add them.

# 04

# Days 46-75: Soil and Shelter Before Seeds and Animals

*Explains why amending soil and building basic shelter infrastructure must precede planting or acquiring livestock.*

You've locked in your water and your perimeter. Now comes the phase where most new homesteaders go sideways — they see open ground and want to plant, or they drive past a farm auction and come home with chickens. Hold that impulse for thirty more days. Soil and shelter aren't glamorous, but skipping them is exactly how you spend twice the money for half the results.

## Reading Your Soil Test: Three Numbers That Matter Now

If you sent off a soil sample in Phase 1, your results are back. The full report looks complicated, but for a first-year homestead, anchor on three things:

- **pH** — Most vegetables and forage crops want 6.0–7.0. Below 6.0, nutrients lock up and plants starve even when you're fertilizing.
- **Organic matter percentage** — Anything under 3% means your soil can't hold water or nutrients reliably. Under 2% and you're essentially farming sand.
- **Phosphorus level** — Critically low? Your plants won't root well. Already high? Adding more is wasteful and can cause runoff problems.

The lab report will recommend amendments. Don't skip to the amendment list without understanding these three first — they tell you whether you're doing minor tuning or a serious rebuild.

## Amending Without Overspending

Your budget is real. Here's how to amend smart:

1. **Lime first, if pH is low.** Agricultural lime is inexpensive and widely available. It takes 60–90 days to work, so apply it now, not the week before planting.

2. **Compost sourcing.** Buy in bulk by the yard from a local landscape supplier — it's far cheaper per cubic foot than bagged product. Municipal compost programs often give it away free. Call your county extension office and ask.

3. **Cover crop instead of a first-year garden.** This is the move most new homesteaders resist and then later wish they'd made. A cover crop — winter rye, crimson clover, buckwheat depending on your season — costs roughly $30–60 for a quarter-acre, suppresses weeds, adds organic matter when tilled under, and sets up a genuinely productive garden bed for Year 2. A rushed garden on poor soil costs more in inputs, produces less, and teaches you frustration. Cover crop season buys you time and builds wealth underground.

## Shelter Sequencing: Fix Before You Build

Before you price out a new structure, walk every existing outbuilding with a flashlight and a notepad. Triage by asking: is the roof sound, are the gaps animal-proof, is there water access nearby? Patching an existing structure almost always costs less than framing new.

**Minimum viable specs by animal type:**

- **Chickens:** 4 sq ft per bird inside, 10 sq ft per bird outside in a run. Gaps no larger than 1 inch. Roof that sheds rain. Ventilation near the roofline, not at bird level.
- **Rabbits:** Elevated hutch with wire floor panel or solid floor plus daily cleaning. Protection from wind on three sides minimum. No direct afternoon sun in summer.
- **Goats:** 15 sq ft per animal minimum, more if they're in during bad weather. Goats need *dry* — they'll get sick sleeping in dampness faster than cold.

The single most common shelter mistake: building it, then figuring out water access. Don't. Every shelter needs a water source inside it or within 20 feet before the first animal arrives. Running a hose in winter or hauling buckets twice a day is how people quit homesteading. Plan the frost-free hydrant or water line extension now while the shelter is still a construction site.

# Your Phase 4 Gate

Before you move to Days 76–90, check both boxes:

- [ ] Soil amendment (lime, compost, or cover crop seed) applied to your primary growing area
- [ ] At least one shelter is weather-tight, predator-resistant, and has water access confirmed

Both boxes checked? You've earned what comes next.

# 05

# Your 90-Day Master Checklist and Decision Worksheets

*The hands-on section — a printable, phase-by-phase checklist plus four decision worksheets readers fill in to make the right calls for their specific property.*

Print this section. Seriously — these tools only work if you write in them.

## Phase 1 Checklist: Days 1–14 (Property Assessment)

Check each item only when it's *done*, not when you think you know the answer.

- [ ] Walked every boundary line — confirmed against deed or survey _Notes:_____
- [ ] Located all water sources (well, municipal, pond, creek) _Notes:_____
- [ ] Tested well flow rate (gallons per minute) _Notes:_____
- [ ] Sent water sample to lab for potability test _Notes:_____
- [ ] Identified septic location and setback distances _Notes:_____
- [ ] Mapped low spots, flood zones, or standing water areas _Notes:_____
- [ ] Noted prevailing wind direction across the property _Notes:_____
- [ ] Located existing fence lines and assessed condition _Notes:_____

- [ ] Identified soil type by texture (squeeze a wet handful — does it ribbon?) _Notes:_____
- [ ] Found and tested any existing outbuildings for structural soundness _Notes:_____
- [ ] Noted sun exposure by quadrant (morning vs. afternoon) _Notes:_____
- [ ] Identified tree lines that could block light or drop debris _Notes:_____
- [ ] Mapped driveway access and utility easements _Notes:_____
- [ ] Confirmed zoning permits animals and structures you're planning _Notes:_____
- [ ] Identified any invasive plants requiring early control _Notes:_____
- [ ] Photographed full property from four corners _Notes:_____
- [ ] Listed every tool and piece of equipment you currently own _Notes:_____
- [ ] Written a one-paragraph honest summary of the property's biggest limitation _Notes:_____

# Phase 2 Checklist: Days 15–45 (Water and Perimeter)

- [ ] Primary water source confirmed reliable in dry season
- [ ] Backup water storage (minimum 50 gallons) in place
- [ ] All hose bibs and hydrants winterized or rated for your zone
- [ ] Perimeter fencing plan drawn and materials sourced
- [ ] Corner and gate posts set in concrete and cured
- [ ] Fencing complete on all four perimeter sides
- [ ] Gates hang level and latch securely under pressure
- [ ] No gaps at ground level larger than 2 inches anywhere on perimeter

# Phase 3 Checklist: Days 46–75 (Soil and Shelter)

**Soil Amendment Log**

| Bed or Zone | Test pH | Target pH | Amendment Added | Date |

|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | |

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**Shelter Readiness Tracker**

- [ ] Animal shelter structure weathertight on all sides
- [ ] Ventilation present but drafts eliminated at animal height
- [ ] Predator-proof latches on every door and access panel
- [ ] Dry bedding storage within 50 feet of shelter
- [ ] Adequate drainage around shelter footprint

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# Worksheet A: Property Dependency Map

Fill in each box with your specific answer. The point is to see how your constraints chain together before you make any purchase.

**My biggest water limitation is: _____**

**That means I cannot add: _____**

**My fencing weak point is: _____**

**That means these animals are not yet safe here:**

**_____**

**My soil's main deficit is: _____**

**That delays planting _____ until at least:**

**_____**

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# Worksheet B: Budget Allocation Guide

Recommended splits for your first 90-day infrastructure budget:

| Category | Recommended % | Your Dollar Amount |
|---|---|---|
| Water infrastructure | 30% | $_____ |
| Fencing and perimeter | 35% | $_____ |
| Soil amendment and inputs | 15% | $_____ |
| Shelter and outbuilding repair | 20% | $_____ |

If a category is already solid on your property, redirect that percentage — but don't pull it into animals or seeds before Days 76–90.

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# Worksheet C: Animal Readiness Scorecard

Answer honestly. Every 'No' is a hard stop.

1. Is my perimeter fence complete and tested under pressure? Y / N
2. Is my water supply sufficient for animals at peak summer demand? Y / N
3. Do I have a weather-tight shelter ready before the animal arrives? Y / N
4. Have I sourced feed and confirmed ongoing availability? Y / N
5. Do I know the signs of common illness for this species? Y / N
6. Do I have a vet or livestock contact within 30 miles? Y / N
7. Can I care for this animal if I'm sick or away for 48 hours? Y / N
8. Have I budgeted for unexpected vet costs of at least $300? Y / N
9. Have I confirmed this animal is legal under my zoning? Y / N

10. Have I spent at least one day around this animal type before buying? Y / N

**Score:** _____ **/ 10** — Proceed only at 10/10.

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# Worksheet D: Week 12 Honest Audit

Before you add anything living to this property, answer each prompt in writing.

**The one system I'm least confident in right now is:**
_____

**The reason I haven't fully fixed it is:** _____

**If an animal or crop depended on that system tomorrow, the realistic consequence would be:** _____

**My honest timeline to close that gap is:** _____

If you can fill in that last line with a specific date — not 'soon' — you're thinking like a homesteader.

06

# Days 76-90: Now You're Ready for Animals and Garden

*Shows readers how to make the first 'exciting' additions correctly and sustainably once the foundation is genuinely solid.*

You made it to Day 76. The water runs reliably, the perimeter is solid, the soil is amended, and your shelter infrastructure is in place. Now — and only now — do you earn the fun part.

## Start with Poultry. Always Poultry.

The animal introduction sequence isn't arbitrary: **poultry first, small livestock second, large animals third.** Chickens are forgiving teachers. They're low-cost to acquire, low-cost to feed, and their mistakes are recoverable. A pig that escapes through a weak fence panel costs you a day of chaos. A chicken that escapes costs you twenty minutes.

For beginners, stick with **dual-purpose breeds** — birds that lay well and can be eaten if needed. Rhode Island Reds, Black Australorps, and Plymouth Rocks are consistently recommended for good reason: they're hardy, calm, and productive across a range of climates.

## Minimum Viable Chicken Setup

Before your birds arrive, run through this checklist:

- [ ] Coop is dry, ventilated at the roofline (not drafty at bird height), and predator-proof at floor level
- [ ] Hardware cloth (not chicken wire) covers all openings — 1/2-inch gauge minimum
- [ ] Latches are carabiner-style or two-step — raccoons open simple hook latches
- [ ] Feeder and waterer are hung or elevated to reduce contamination
- [ ] Run is enclosed on top or electric fencing is active at night
- [ ] You know where your nearest farm supply store and emergency vet are

Start with **4-6 hens**, no rooster until you know what you're doing. A small flock teaches you everything a large flock does at a fraction of the cost.

## Your Kitchen Garden in Year 1

Given the soil amendment work you did in Phase 3, here's the honest decision: if your native soil is still uncertain, **start in raised beds.** Two 4x8 beds will produce more than you expect and won't disappoint you while your in-ground soil finishes maturing. In Year 2, expand in-ground with confidence.

Prioritize crops that give fast, visible feedback: lettuce, radishes, green beans, and zucchini. Save the long-game crops — tomatoes, peppers, melons — for when you've learned your property's sun and water patterns.

## Three Warning Signs You're Moving Too Fast

- You're acquiring animals before their housing is completely finished
- You're spending money in Month 3 that was budgeted for Month 6
- You feel like you're always reacting instead of executing a plan

If any of these are true, stop adding. Stabilize what you have.

## What Comes Next: Month 4-12

Decide now — while you're thinking clearly — what your second phase looks like. Write it down: *Are we adding a second chicken flock? Starting fruit trees? Building a root cellar?* Sequencing your second phase while your first phase is fresh is how good homesteads stay good.

## What Day 90 Actually Looks Like

It's not a finished homestead. It's a **working foundation** — and that's better than the fantasy. You have a property you understand, infrastructure that won't fail you, a small flock that's teaching you daily, and a garden that's actually producing. No emergency spending. No wasted animals. No demoralized family.

That's not a small thing. That's everything.

# HogTron Factory

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