The bantam is a miniature fowl available in over 150 breeds and varieties of domestic chickens. History indicates they came from the Orient.

Bantams are hardy, inexpensive birds to raise and maintain. Bred for beauty and form they can be reasonable egg layers and meat producers. Egg size falls in the peewee and pullet-weight classes and recipes calling for two large eggs would require three bantam eggs.

Characteristics of Bantams

Size. Generally adult bantams weigh between one and two pounds. Often with the introduction of new blood lines and using growth-promoting diets, bantams tend to increase in size with each generation. Therefore, continued selection for smallness is necessary.

Growth Rate. The growth habits of bantams vary with each breed. Usually the tight-feathered breeds mature in about 6 months, while the loose-feathered breeds take about 9 months. Bantams tend to slowly gain size and weight through their second year.

Meat and Egg Production. Bantams have not been selected or bred especially for meat or egg production. The meat is delicious, but the portions are small. The eggshell color varies with the breed and ranges from white for the Mediterranean breeds to light brown for miniatures of the Asiatic breeds. Aracuanas are an exception with eggshell color generally in the blue to green range.

Broodiness. Broodiness is the inherent tendency of the hen to remain on the nest and incubate eggs. Most bantam hens will go broody, but the Mediterranean varieties are poor risks as they frequently desert their nests. Miniatures of the heavy breeds (especially the feather-legged ones) are exceptionally good brooders, mothers and foster mothers for other breeds of chickens, bantams, or game birds.

Breeds and Varieties. Bantams are identified by breed the same as other fowl and livestock. Breed differences are those of shape and body outline. Variety differences usually consist of differences in color patterns or comb type. The selection available is tremendous. The following statements may help you in your choice of breed:

- It is easier to produce good specimens of solid-color varieties.
- Games and Cornish need plenty of exercise to develop desired hard feathering and muscle tone.
- Feather-legged breeds should be kept out of wet grass and muddy areas.
- Crested breeds, such as Polish and Houdans, should be kept dry in cold weather.
- Adult Modern and Old English Game males must be dubbed—comb and wattles removed.
- Talk to local breeders, visit the poultry building at several fairs, and obtain a copy of The Standard of Perfection in order to observe the various breeds illustrated.

Selecting and Mating

Start off with good, vigorous birds. Select your breeders carefully using only your best stock. Pen these birds together (1 cock and 2 to 8 laying hens) ten days before starting to save the eggs. Trim the fluff feathers from around the vent to insure better fertility if the birds are heavily feathered. Other, less than perfect hens may be used for brooding.

Incubation and Brooding

Bantam eggs require 21 days to incubate. You may set the eggs under a broody hen, build or
purchase a small incubator of your own, or have your eggs custom hatched.

The following pamphlets will help you:
EM 3994 Incubation of Small Numbers of Eggs
EM 4243 Suggested Ideas for Homemade Incubators
EM 4241 Care of a Small Flock of Chickens
These are available at your county agent’s office.

If you have identified the eggs by pen matings, then you must set them under separate hens or in separate wire boxes in the incubator. Use a toe web punch or leg bands to mark the chicks.

Setting the Brooding Hen
1. Select a quiet, secluded area protected from all predators including rats.
2. Provide a darkened, easy-to-enter nest at ground level.
3. If several brooding hens are setting in the same area, separate so they cannot trade nests. Dust hens with poultry louse powder to be sure no parasites exist.
4. Give each hen only the number of eggs she can completely cover (8-10).
5. Provide fresh feed and water daily. Feed mostly grain to the brooding hen, as mash will tend to make her droppings loose and she may soil her eggs.
6. Leave her alone.

After the eggs hatch, place hen and chicks in a light, dry, protected area with feed and water. After one week, allow outdoors in movable wire pen with rain protector.

Artificial brooding temperature starts at 92°F. and drops 5°F each week. Place cloth over litter for first two weeks. Change daily. Newspapers are slick and may cause crippled toes and legs. Do not attempt to raise breeds of different sizes or chicks of different ages together as feather picking and cannibalism may start.

Feeding Bantams
Baby Chicks have a three-day reserve food supply of yolk but should be fed the day after hatching. They should receive an 18%-20% chick starter mash or crumble, containing a coccidiostat and have a constant supply of clean water available. At 6 weeks of age, add small amounts of chick scratch daily. Increase the scratch approximately 5% each week, until by 16 weeks of age they are receiving half scratch and half growing mash.

Growing Birds. Switch to growing mash or 15% protein, multipurpose mash at 8 weeks of age. Continue with growing mash and scratch mixture until pullets start to lay.

Laying Birds should have laying mash plus a small amount of grain for the activity of scratching. Birds in molt and roosters do well on half scratch and half laying mash. Supply grit or small stones for the gizzard every month or so. Supply oyster shells continually if the birds are running loose or being fed other than an all-mash diet.

Most backyard bantams have outside runs or freedom of the lawn and garden. Caution: Confin the birds for several days following spraying or fertilizing. If greens are fed, they should be chopped to short lengths to avoid causing bound crops. Do not feed or allow wilted, musty or moldy material in the chicken yard.

Housing
As Bantams are usually kept as a fun project, make the house large enough or accessible enough that you can enjoy it too. The coop should be draft free, insulated, and easy to ventilate. Under extreme winter conditions, it might be well to provide some source of heat to prevent frozen combs and toes.

Allow 2 square feet of floor space for large varieties and 1 1/2 for smaller varieties. Six inches of litter is recommended for floor birds. Some birds, such as the feather-legged varieties, do well on wire floors which raise them above the droppings. Provide one nest for every four or five hens and keep the nest well supplied with a deep nesting material. Nest size should be 9” x 9” x 11” high. Roosting area should allow all birds to roost comfortably at one time.

Assistance from Washington State University is available to all persons, without regard to race, color, or national origin.