

CHIT-CHAT ABOUT CHICKENS



by Mrs. Andy Mast, Salem, MO

Having been the primary caretaker of the laying hens and fryers while I was growing up, I continued the project through most of my married years, learning a lot by trial and error.

With minimal expense, you can benefit from having a small flock of hens for fresh eggs, or fryers for their meat.

I suppose that more people would raise chickens or hens if we could follow Mother's example in the Depression of the '30s. She would take her surplus eggs to the local grocery store, trade them for groceries and still have money left to take home! Even though those days are past, I still see a lot of value in having hens supply our home with fresh eggs.



When buying chicks for pullets (laying hens) there are aspects you need to consider. Are you looking for an excellent egg-layer that will produce eggs for your own use, with surplus to sell?

Another option is a heavier bird with a limited egg production, which yields more meat when butchered. You might consider a lighter-weight bird, which lays well but has a lesser feed intake.

My mother preferred the white Leghorns. They are lightweight birds with minimal feed intake, good laying qualities, and they produce white eggs.

On the downside, they are a flighty bird. If you need to move quickly when doing chores or gathering eggs, and the door of the coop opens, mayhem will ensue! We are not competing with Mother's 200-

count flock, therefore we chose a brown hen variety that is advertised as an excellent layer.

Now, the fluffy little chicks you ordered are in your possession. You need a dry, warm, ventilated place to keep them. Warm, 90° temperatures are vital the first week or two, to get them started. A thermometer is fine to regulate heat temperatures, but better yet, observing your chicks will tell you what they need. Bunching or crowding together tells you they're cold. Puffing, spreading their wings and crowding for cooler corners signals that they're too warm. When they nestle in a huddle by the heater in a comfortable way, they're happy and content. A chick with cold, wet feet will be a dead chick, unless conditions are altered.

Getting back to the ideal location for the chicks, consider several options. If you already have a fair-sized chicken house, consider enclosing a small area with clear plastic or broiler guard. This works well to maintain your heat. A chicken coop or little house will also work.

For a starter cover on the floor, we like to spread out cut-up feed bags. When they become wet and soiled, we replace them with clean, dry bags. Another option is finely chopped straw or coarse shavings. If the shavings are too fine, the chicks will eat them and destroy their digestive systems. Soon, they will be laying on their sides, your dreams of future egg-layers diminished.

We prefer to use the feed bags, sprinkling the starter mash directly on the bags. It's easier for the chicks to find the feed, getting them off to a better start. After a few days, we switch to using a feeder. Continue using chick starter feed (mash) until your chicks are feathered out. Switch to a grower feed which is cheaper, until they are 3-4 months old. At this point, supplement their diet with a layer feed.

Another important factor is keeping their water fresh. Begin with a small-sized waterer – a style that your chicks can't jump into and get wet. Replace it with a larger one when your chicks are a week old.

If cared for properly, pullets begin laying eggs at 4-5 months old.

If you haven't already, move them to their permanent home. This can be a coop or a place that's dry and protected from the wind, cold, rain and varmints.

Set up several nesting boxes inside. We have six for our 24 hens. If you don't provide a nesting area, your chickens will lay eggs wherever they please.



NOTE: Nesting boxes are accessible from the inside – egg gathering is done from the outside.

A roost is a necessary addition to your chicken structure. It should be a minimum of 2' high and long enough to roost all your chickens.

Healthy chickens need a clean environment. Spread a layer of straw for bedding, adding a light cover weekly as needed. When it gets too wet, soiled and smelly, clean it out and put down fresh straw. Experience tells us wet, damp conditions result in diseased, licey chickens.

Add a fenced area to your coop.



It gives them freedom and allows them to feed and scratch.

Better yet, let them roam on your premises. Feeding on bugs and insects keeps them healthy and happy. One major drawback: they will scratch in the flower beds, sample the garden goodies and fertilize the yard.

If this brings contention to your marital union, it may be wise to keep your chickens penned.

They can benefit from your extra garden vegetables and salad greens when you toss them in their pen. Overripe melons or melon rinds are favorites. They thrive on these extras.



If you have surplus milk and it turns rancid, feed it to the chickens. A daily measure of sour milk is an asset to their well-being.

One garden item – tomatoes – needs to be banished from the chickens' diet. Fed in excess, tomatoes can cause less egg production and throw them into a molt.

Cut back on feed costs by adding one part cracked corn to two parts of layer feed.

Corn is cheaper and your chickens will do well on it. When feeding corn, clean out their feeder once a week, as a build-up will settle on the bottom.

Adding a rooster to the flock has its merits. He will lead the hens to feed and be protective of them. If you hear your rooster raising a ruckus, it's a good idea to go and check, as there may be something amiss in the henhouse.



We also need to address the negative side of the rooster's character. Be on guard when your younger children do the chicken chores. A cantankerous rooster is not a laughing matter when he flies in your face. Oftentimes when attacking children, he will go for their eyes.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST: What egg production can I expect?



Taking proper care of your chickens, using the right kind of feed, providing fresh water and a good place to nest should result in good production daily. From our 24 hens, we gather 20-24 eggs every day. Very cold or very warm weather, or several days of neglect, will drop their production.

An important factor in winter is to have fresh water available when your chickens descend from the roost in the morning.



Did you know your chickens can forecast the weather?

- When roaming outside their confines and they go to roost early, you can expect nice weather tomorrow.
- When they are reluctant to go to bed, expect a change in the weather.

Adding a drop of Sol-u-mel (Melaleuca product) to one gallon of water, filling a spray bottle, adding one little spray to their water several times a week keeps your hens laying better and in healthier condition. The Sol-u-mel is very strong, so take it easy when you are using it.