



KEEPING POULTRY FOR EGG PRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Producing fresh and nutritious eggs for your own consumption can be both an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Rural properties, hobby farms, and in most towns, backyards, are acceptable places to keep between five and twenty hens for personal egg production.

Eggs produced by your own hens will always be nutritious, fresh and healthy – an important issue in today's quest for safe foodstuffs.



Poultry are also appropriate pets for children as in tending to their daily requirements discipline is taught.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS

The basic requirements for the successful keeping of poultry for egg production are:

- Suitable accommodation
- Healthy stock
- Regular feed and water supply
- Hygienic nests
- An ability to detect pests and diseases

Accommodation

Accommodation for poultry should be designed to provide protection from both the weather and predators, be non-stressful to the housed poultry, and give you easy access to the stock.

The ideal poultry house should be dry, provide adequate ventilation at all times, protect from draughts in cold weather, and provide shade during hot weather. It should be built of sturdy materials so that predators, such as dogs, cats and foxes, cannot easily enter.

The poultry house should be of sufficient size and height so that you can comfortably attend to the stock on a regular basis.

Poultry house plans are available from NSW Agriculture. Construction materials should be selected so as to minimize injury to stock.

Livestock

The key to achieving high egg production is healthy and parasite free stock, so particular attention should be paid to the sourcing of your stock.

Generally, purebred strains of poultry are less productive than the crossbred strains used in the commercial egg industry and, because they are purebred, they are also likely to be less resistant to disease.

Regardless of the strain or cross chosen, it is imperative to only purchase poultry that are healthy and have been properly vaccinated against the main diseases of poultry.

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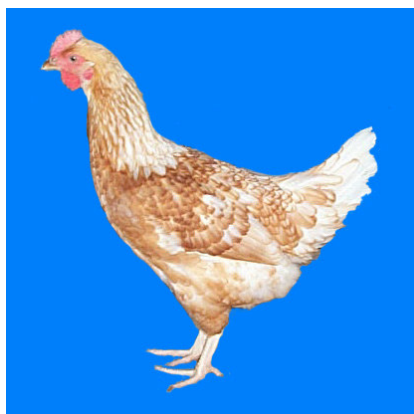
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All poultry should be vaccinated against Mareks disease and Fowl Pox and these vaccinations are usually done at day-old in the hatchery. Other diseases (particularly respiratory) can affect growing or adult stock and may be (but usually need not be) vaccinated against.

To protect existing stock and the disease status of your premises never purchase unhealthy or unvaccinated stock, or stock whose pen-mates are unhealthy

Only female (pullet) stock should be purchased, as male (cockerel or rooster) stock is not required for egg production and early morning crowing may irritate your neighbors.

Stock may be purchased as day-old chicks, partly reared (started) pullets, or ready-to-lay pullets depending on your personal preference.



Feed and Water

Poultry should have access to food at least once every day (preferably continuous) and continuous access to clean drinkable water. Numerous sizes and designs of feed and water equipment are available from poultry equipment suppliers and selected produce stores. Hopper type feeders that can hold several days feed and automatic waterers are the preferred equipment.

All equipment should be regularly checked to ensure it is operating correctly.

Poultry may be fed fruit and vegetable scraps but should never be fed fish or meat scraps. However, to achieve their genetic potential poultry should be fed a scientifically prepared diet that contains adequate nutrients for good health and production.

Prepared laying rations are available, in bags, from most produce stores as mash, crumbles or pellets, but mash or crumbled rations are preferable as consumption is generally lower, and the bird is occupied longer in eating.

Water should be fresh, cool and uncontaminated by minerals, salts or organic matter. It should be changed regularly if the supply is not automatic.

Nests

To ensure that hens are not stressed during the laying period and that produced eggs are unsoiled it is necessary to provide specific areas (nests) for laying (nesting).

Nests can be constructed of many materials with the aim being to provide a secluded and darkened area that is attractive to, and comfortable for, the hen about to lay. One easily accessible nest should be provided for every four or five hens, and the nesting material used within the nest should be changed regularly.

Pests and Diseases

You should make regular inspections of your stock and be aware of the signs of ill-health which include reduced food and water intake, decreased egg production, and/or abnormal physical appearance. Advice should be sought if the cause of ill-health cannot be quickly determined and corrected.

Dead or incurably sick birds should be removed from the flock as promptly as possible and disposed of in an hygienic way.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

When day-old chicks or started pullets under six weeks of age are purchased, additional special requirements will be necessary for their survival.

Heat

Young chickens require a heat source, as they cannot regulate their own body temperature until they are reasonably well feathered at about six weeks of age.



Day-old chicks should be brooded initially at around 33-35°C and gradually weaned off heat by reducing the temperature by around 2-3°C per week. No artificial heat should be required after six weeks of age.

Feed

Day-old and young growing chickens require special feed so that they grow to correct body size by sexual maturity.

Chick starter ration should be fed from day-old until at least six weeks of age. This ration is formulated to a very high nutrient specification and small particle size as chicks in this age span consume only small quantities of this feed

Pullet grower ration should be fed from six weeks of age until the pullets commence laying. Particle size in this ration is increased, but is still smaller than that able to be consumed by adult stock.

Both starter and grower rations contain small amounts of special medications which allow young chickens to build their own immunity to some disease organisms within their environment.

Layer rations should never be fed to young chickens because the particle size is too large, they contain no special medications, and they contain high calcium levels which are detrimental to young chickens.

PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

Healthy, well-reared poultry can be expected to lay well for more than one year providing their basic requirements are continually met.

Most breeds of layer will commence lay sometime between eighteen and twenty-two weeks of age. On an individual hen basis, egg production is sporadic for the first few weeks of lay but becomes almost daily after ten to twelve weeks. After peak egg production is reached, at 30-35 weeks of age, egg production thereafter declines slowly.

All poultry are light sensitive and a decreasing light pattern (as in experienced in autumn) will usually trigger a rest period where the lay ceases for several weeks and a moulting of feathers takes place. This is normal and not a cause for concern, as egg production will recommence after the bird has rested.

Initial egg size is always small and continually increases as the hen ages although in the first several weeks of lay the ovary may malfunction and produce very large double or triple yolk eggs.

As birds age and egg size increases, shell quality may decline. Additional calcium in the form of shell-grit will correct this problem.

Feed consumption is dependent on many factors, but as a guide, a healthy flock of twenty birds all laying well should require a bag (40 kg) of feed about every two weeks.

The information in this fact sheet is current at the time of writing.
However, it is the users responsibility to ensure that the information is still current and accurate at the time of use.