

Hudson Hill's four keys to maximize backyard egg production

BY HUDSON HILL

Everywhere I go in Wyoming, I see more and more chickens. It seems more people than ever are experiencing the joys of having chickens and farm-fresh eggs. Here are four key concepts to consider when producing backyard eggs.

1. Nutrition is critical

Free-ranging chickens acquire most of the essential nutrients they need; however, as a guideline, provide growing chickens at least an 18 percent protein until maturity (between 16 and 18 weeks with most layers) then 16 percent protein once they start laying.

Calcium might even be as critical for layers, as a hen produces 150 percent of her body weight in eggs over an 18-month laying period. Adequate calcium is a must to make all those egg shells. Calcium can be provided two ways. Most bagged layer feeds include 4 percent calcium.

Alternatively, you can provide a free-choice option such as oyster shells. Remember that calcium is critical once a hen starts to lay, but you do not want to provide that calcium in the diet before she starts to produce eggs.

2. Housing chickens is pretty simple

Keep chickens dry and out of the wind, give them a place to lay their eggs, and provide protection from predators. It's easy to get on the internet and find advice about heating chicken coops and keeping chickens warm enough to lay eggs. In general, if you have the right breeds and you're doing everything else right, chickens do not need additional heat.

3. To lay eggs, chickens need 14 hours of light

If you want your chickens to lay eggs in winter, you need to provide extra light. The best way is to install a light on a timer set to go off in the a.m., not the p.m. If the light turns off at night, the chickens are left in total darkness and do not roost as well. If the light turns off in the morning when the sun is up, the chickens go about their business. In December, for example, it gets dark by 5 p.m. and light by about 8 a.m., which is nine

hours. Adding a light with a timer set to come on about 3 a.m. and turn off about 8 a.m. provides the flock with a full 14 hours of light.

4. Culling, the hardest management concept

Backyard producers must decide which comes first, the chicken or the eggs. After the first year, hens become less productive. After several years, they may be laying few eggs or none at all. Culling is removing those hens that are no longer laying eggs.

A hen lays eggs for about 18 months. After that, physiology will try to force her through a molting period. During molting, a hen stops laying and loses her feathers. In nature, this usually happens when daylight hours shorten. She will start laying again in the spring.

Here are two strategies I see poultry owners use for culling laying hens.

Producers purchase chickens, keep them through one full cycle, then cull the entire flock and start again with new birds. This approach closely mimics mainstream egg production and is probably the most economical way to produce eggs.

Other producers keep chickens of different ages and breeds and decide on an individual basis how long the chickens stay. These producers let the chickens go through the molting process. When egg production drops too low for the number of chickens, the producer examines the vent and pin bones to determine which chickens are laying eggs, then decides which and how many to cull.

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