

Small-Scale Poultry Production

A FACT SHEET SERIES AVAILABLE AT POULTRYEXTENSION.PSU.EDU

Management Requirements for Laying Flocks

Best Breeds to Raise

The best breed to raise depends on the color eggs you prefer. Commercial White Leghorn-type hybrids produce white-shelled eggs, and commercial-production “Reds” or sex-linked hybrids produce large, brown-shelled eggs. The Leghorns are also much more flighty. The brown-egg Reds or sex-linked hybrids tend to be more docile and are usually preferred for small family flocks. Most commercial-egg-type birds produce between 200 and 260 eggs a year. Purebred poultry also lay considerable eggs (between 100 and 180 eggs a year) but are not as efficient. Dual-purpose breeds like Plymouth Rock, New Hampshire Red, Rhode Island Red, and others are also commonly raised in small flocks.

When to Purchase Stock

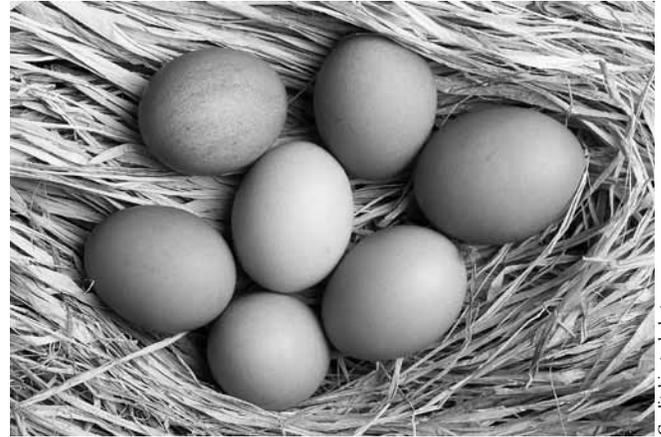
If you prefer to raise your flock from chicks, you should start the flock in late spring to reduce the cost of heating. Purchasing started pullets that are 18–22 weeks of age and ready to lay is usually the easiest and most economical method. If you start with chicks, brood them at 92–95°F for the first week and then decrease the temperature 5 degrees per week until the temperature reaches 70°F. Bring laying hens into production around 20 weeks of age.

Floor Space

Allow at least 1.5 square feet per hen, although chicks can be started in a smaller brooding space at 0.5 square foot per bird for the first 6–8 weeks.

Litter

Keep litter 3–4 inches deep and remove wet litter as needed. Pine shavings provide the best litter, but any absorbent material with minimal dust will do. To prevent leg problems, do not start chicks on slippery surfaces like newspaper.



Credit: bigstockphoto.com

Feed

Feed a completely balanced ration. Feeding table scraps or whole grains can decrease production, make the birds fat, and cause prolapse. Feed an 18–20 percent protein starter for the first 6–8 weeks, and then feed a 14–15 percent protein grower or developer to 18 weeks of age. For laying hens over 18 weeks of age, feed a 16–18 percent protein layer ration with grit and a calcium source like oyster shells free choice in a separate feeder.

Feeders

Provide 3 inches of feeder space per bird. The lip of the feeder should be level with the birds’ back height and the trough feeder filled only one-third to one-half full to prevent feed wastage.

Waterers

Any container that provides at least 5 gallons of water for every 100 birds daily will do. Provide 1 inch of water space per bird. Clean the waterers and provide fresh water daily. Place the waterers so that the lip is level with the birds’ backs. Never let the laying hens go without water for more than 12 hours, or you will see a drop or stoppage of egg production.

Ventilation

Windows or a fan should provide adequate ventilation to keep the pen dry.

Lights

One 25- to 40-watt bulb located above the feed and water area at ceiling height for each 100 square feet of pen is ample. Provide 14–16 hours of light per day for maximum year-round production. Never decrease the lighting period on birds in production, or they will stop laying. You will have to add lights in the fall or winter. An inexpensive time clock can be installed to turn lights on in the morning hours and let the birds go to roost with the natural sunset.

Roosts

Place 2-inch-by-2-inch boards spaced 12 inches apart and 24 inches above the floor. Provide 6 linear inches of perch space per bird.

Laying Cycles

Under proper management, pullets should come into production at around 20 weeks of age, and the flock should remain above 60 percent production to 80 weeks of age. After 80 weeks of age, it is best to molt the flock together if possible. Birds will take about 10–12 weeks to complete a molt and come back into production. Hens can be kept for multiple laying cycles. However, the hens will lay fewer eggs, are less efficient, and will lay eggs for a shorter time with each additional cycle.

Nests

Provide a minimum of four nest boxes and at least one 12-inch-by-12-inch nest for every four hens in your flock. Place nests 24 inches above the floor and away from the roosts. Keep the nesting material clean and dry. Collect the eggs often (two times daily). This will prevent egg breakage, broodiness, and the potential of egg eating by the flock.



Credit: istockphoto.com

Yards

Yards are not necessary. If desired, confine the birds to an exercise area that provides 5–10 square feet per bird.



Credit: istockphoto.com

Prepared by Phillip J. Clauer, poultry extension specialist

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Penn State is committed to affirmative action, equal opportunity, and the diversity of its workforce.

Produced by Ag Communications and Marketing

© The Pennsylvania State University 2010

Code # UM193 5.1M12/10mpc5027