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# Raising poultry the organic way— management and production

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## Quick Facts

- Chickens will lay their first eggs anywhere from 4½ to 6 months of age, depending on breed and other factors.
- Chicks purchased in the spring will begin laying in the fall.
- Egg production is controlled by the chicken's pituitary gland, which is activated by the length of daylight; therefore, egg production drops in the fall and winter.
- Cold weather doesn't bother chickens as long as they are provided with warm or unfrozen water.
- Artificial lights can lengthen the day and increase egg production in the colder months.
- Commercial egg producers replace their layers annually; however, a small farmer may find it more profitable to carry over older birds.
- Chickens that are not producing should be culled because of the expense of feeding nonproductive birds.

## Managing Layers

Chickens will lay their first eggs anywhere from 4½ to six months after being hatched, depending on breed and other factors. The author's first pullet egg—no larger than a pigeon's—was the cause of much jubilation in his house, and he said he has since learned that this is the standard reaction. It is amazing how one tiny egg can make a person feel so self-sufficient!

## Egg Production

If chicks are purchased in the spring, they will start laying in the fall, and the farmer soon will be getting an egg from every bird almost every day. Visions of becoming an egg producer are likely to loom up at this time. But along about November or so, as the days get short, the farmer most likely will be in for a disappointment. Egg production will drop. The main reason is the decreasing length of day, which is more noticeable and therefore of more concern in the North. Spring is the natural time for birds to lay eggs, and that event is triggered by the increase in daylight hours. In the fall, the reverse is true. Scientists tell us that the pituitary gland, activated by light, controls egg laying.

Coupled with this (but of less importance), is the decrease in temperature. Cold weather doesn't bother chickens so long as they have warm or unfrozen water. However, they will have to eat more just to maintain themselves, so egg laying, which requires extra energy, is likely to suffer. When cold weather is accompanied by shorter days, with less time to eat and less stimulation of the pituitary, the effect of winter on egg production can be considerable.

The solution is to artificially lengthen the day with lights in the henhouse. Lights can be turned on before sunrise, or left on after sunset, or a combination of both. The time isn't important, but the length of exposure to light is. Too much light, however, can cause such problems as cannibalism. A 14-hour day is optimum.

During cold weather, water should be checked more often than usual to be sure it hasn't frozen. Eggs should be gathered several times a day to prevent them from freezing. (They also should be gathered frequently in very warm weather.)

As the flock nears its first birthday, the farmer will have to make a management decision. Should the farmer buy new chicks to replace those whose production will drop markedly when they reach the end of their year or will the old birds be carried over for an extra year?

**Author's Note:** While I have in no way developed an expertise in this art, the following aids are presented for persons who, for one of many reasons, may need to raise poultry for meat and/or eggs the organic way. I have extensively reviewed several sources of material. *Organic Gardening and Farming* is an excellent source of popular and new emerging ideas, and I would suggest this magazine if you care to subscribe; on the other hand, it does not satisfy the need for immediate comprehensive references. I recently learned of a book titled *The Homesteader's Handbook to Raising Small Livestock* by Jerome D. Belanger. In the book, the author describes chickens as "the most common homestead animal," and I believe that this source—while not the only one—is a valuable reference for persons needing specific help to manage poultry the organic way.

The following is reprinted from *The Homesteader's Handbook to Raising Small Livestock*, copyright 1974 by Rodale Press Inc., with the permission of Rodale Press Inc., Emmaus, Pa. (For more information, see Service in Action sheet 2.507, Raising poultry the organic way—disease control and feeding.)

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## How Long to Keep Layers?

Commercial egg producers invariably replace their layers annually because the rate of lay the second year is too low to be profitable. However, a commercial farmer's idea of profit might not be the small farmer's idea of profit, and, given the difference in management techniques, carrying over older birds might well be profitable for the homesteader.

Day-old chicks, for example, might cost 60 cents each in small lots (and much more for the more unusual breeds). Feed costs are highly variable, but, most likely, several dollars will be invested in feed per bird before that first pullet egg is produced.

Balancing those figures against the reduced rate of lay for second-year birds and the cost of feed during moulting when the laying rate is zero, and against the cost of raising replacements, the farmer might decide to give the old gals another year. There also is the cost of labor of raising chicks to consider and the fact that, while the eggs of old birds are less numerous, they are larger. There even are homesteaders who keep layers for a third year and are satisfied.

It is possible to start raising chickens by buying birds that egg farmers consider "all used up." Since these farmers seldom keep birds for the second year, they often ship them to soup factories. The price a farmer gets from the food processor is far below the cost of day-old chicks—to say nothing of the cost of feeding those chicks until they start laying. Chances are that, if there's a commercial laying operation near by, an interested person could get some of these birds at a very reasonable price.

## Forced Moulting

If these or other chickens don't lay eggs, the farmer might want to force-moulting the birds. Moulting is natural, and if the farmer is out of eggs for very long, he or she might like to help Mother Nature along.

Here's how to force-moulting chickens: enclose the birds in the henhouse and block out all light. Provide water, but no feed, for three days. After that, provide just a bulky feed, such as oats. The birds' feathers will fall out. After two weeks, normal feeding should be resumed. When their new feathers have grown, the birds will resume laying.

## Culling

An important part of an efficient laying operation, especially where older hens are involved, is culling. A 4½-pound (2-kilogram) bird eats about 60 pounds (27 kg) of feed a year even if she doesn't lay an egg. Feed consumption goes up with production. This means that a 4½-pound (2-kg) bird laying 200 eggs a year will eat about 89 pounds (40 kg) of feed.

There are several important signs that show if a hen is a boarder. A young hen that hasn't laid an egg, for example, has a very yellow beak and feet. The yellow bleaches out as the hen lays eggs, so if there is a hen that still has yellow feet when her sisters do not, she is a candidate for the soup pot. Laying hens have moist, round vents, while boarders' vents are dry and puckered. Layers have bright combs while those of culls are dull and shriveled. A layer's pubic bones are farther apart than a nonlayer's.

Culls can be used in dishes, such as chicken soup, chicken and dumplings, or others where the meat is moist-cooked for a long time.