



Organic Chicken Basics

Learn the pros and cons of organic chickens, eggs and get information on a few common chicken-related terms, too!

Think you'd like to go organic with your flock?

First, consider the following pros and cons (and then check out the multitude of chicken terms below).

Pros

"Organic production requires a little bit more work, planning, management, time and observation," says John Foster of Oregon Tilth. But organic chicken production offers significant rewards:

1. Organic production is healthier for our environment. In order to raise organic poultry, you need organic feed, says Foster.

"That means more land put into organic production and sustainable management, reducing the amounts of pesticides and fertilizers used."

2. Organic chickens integrate well with other organic enterprises. If you already raise organic berries, apples or another crop, an organic chicken flock can allow you to diversify while assisting with weeding, mowing and pest control.

3. Organic retail sales are increasing 20 percent or more each year. There's money to be made if you're located near a good market and can build a loyal customer base by educating buyers about your growing methods, says California-based farmer Paul Hain.

Cons

Raising chickens organically also means committing to specialized management techniques, as well as to more time and money. Understanding and accepting the challenges are key.

1. Organic feed. It costs more and is harder to find than conventional. For example, only three organic feed mills operate in Ohio*, notes farmer Denise Anderson.

To Learn More

For more information on organic standards, certification and pasture-raised chicken, check out these sources: The National Organic Program Oregon Tilth Pastured Poultry Profits (1996) by Joel Salatin Pasture Perfect: The Far-Reaching Benefits of Choosing Meat, Eggs, and Dairy Products from Grass-Fed Animals (2004) by Jo Robinson She pays \$22 for a 100-pound bag of organic layer; \$27.50 for 100 pounds of organic broiler diet (about twice what she would pay for conventional).*

2. Organic certification. Currently it runs \$500* a year. However, some states operate cost-share programs.

3. Going organic takes a little extra effort. Preventive antibiotics in feed, synthetic fertilizers to enhance pasture, and other quick fixes aren't an option for organic producers.

Untangling Chicken-related Terms

Once upon a time, when you shopped for chicken or eggs all you really had to decide between was whole or cut-up fryers and white eggs in large, medium and small.

Today, however, consumers face an array of poultry products in various manifestations, including some with impressive but confusing labels like "Organic," "Free-Range," and "Natural."



Well, they sound healthy and chicken-friendly enough, but what do these labels really mean for chickens and us folks who eat them?

Here's a rough translation of how the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service defines some common poultry labeling terms:

Natural: These minimally processed products contain no artificial ingredients or added colors. The label implies nothing about what the chickens eat or how they live.

No Antibiotics: Chickens raised without antibiotics can bear this label (producer must show documentation).

No Hormones: Chicken products can carry this claim only if it's followed by a statement clarifying that federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones in all poultry production.

Free Range/Free Roaming: Producers must show that these chickens have access to the outdoors. The birds can receive regular or organic feed.

Organic: This label applies to food products produced without pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, synthetic fertilizers and bioengineering.

Chickens yielding organic eggs and meat must be raised in accordance with the USDA organic standards, which include receiving an organic diet and having access to the outdoors.

Certified Organic: A government-approved certifier must inspect the farm to ensure the USDA organic standard rules have been followed.

The American Pastured Poultry Producers Association (APPPA) is working on definitions for many of these terms that may be helpful in determining your marketing plan. For more information, visit their website at www.apppa.org

* 2006 DataBrown or White?

Since my primary business is a hatchery, I incubate most of the eggs my hens produce.

A few years ago when my wife wanted to sell eggs at the farmer's market, I purchased White Leghorn pullets and put them in a pastured hoop house. Most people identify brown eggs as "country eggs."

When we first brought white eggs to the market, one customer mentioned that she could get white eggs at the supermarket. I smiled and said, "Not like these!"

She took a dozen and returned the next week to say they were the best eggs she ever had. She has remained a regular customer.

Some customers simply prefer brown eggs over white eggs, so it is important to determine your market's preference.

~ Matt John, owner and president of Shady Lane Poultry Farm, Inc., Winchester, Ky.

This article contains excerpts from Popular Farming Series: Chickens, a publication with in-depth information for those who own or would like to own chickens. Buy one online or call (800) PET-BOOK (738-2665).