

Getting Good Eggs

Keep your laying chickens in their best condition and learn about getting good eggs with these tips from experts.

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Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Back in the days before my layer flock came to enliven life on our farm, I would have picked the egg for sure—or maybe the egg carton. After all, the runny, pale-yolked eggs I cooked came from cartons sold at the grocery store, not from any chickens that I could see.

My perspective changed, however, when I brought home our first fuzzy chicks, watched them grow into gawky pullets and waited with bated breath for our first farm-fresh eggs to magically appear. And waited.

I eventually learned that not only did you first need chickens to have eggs (obviously), but to start getting eggs, you also needed your pullets to reach about 20 weeks of age. And to get an ongoing supply of good eggs, your chickens needed the right food, clean nest boxes, sufficient daylight and more.

In other words, because an egg's quality reflects the care and management the hen receives, getting good eggs takes some work—and not just on the chicken's part.

Home-grown Eggs Taste Better!

But, take it from anyone who has ever kept a layer flock, the delicious results are well worth the effort.

Egg-problem Prevention

Problem: Chickens play hide-and-you-see with their eggs.

PREVENTION:

© JeanFolge.com Confine birds completely or until later in the day; put artificial "dummy" eggs in nest boxes.

Problem: Scary, egg-eating chickens.

PREVENTION: Gather eggs promptly; provide secluded, darkened nest sites; identify culprit and remove from flock.

Problem: Scary, cannibalistic chickens.

PREVENTION: Provide darkened nest sites, apply anti-peck solution to wounds.

Problem: Broody biddy.

PREVENTION: Choose a less broody breed; don't let eggs pile up.

Problem: Filthy eggs that make you say, "Yuck!"

PREVENTION: Provide nest boxes with clean litter; keep coops, runs and nest boxes clean; collect eggs frequently.

Problem: Where have all the eggs gone?

PREVENTION: Provide a balanced diet, protect eggs from varmints, install artificial lighting, reduce sources of stress; improve biosecurity to prevent disease.

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“Eggs from pastured hens, or those from well-cared for backyard flocks, are different and so much better than supermarket eggs,” says Terry Golson, a professional chef and chicken raiser in Carlisle, Mass., author of a book brimming with fabulous, farm-egg recipes called *The Farmstead Egg Cookbook* (St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

“First of all, the eggs are fresher, which gives them a better texture. Also, they’re not washed in a chemical bath, so you don’t have that weird metallic taste you often get in supermarket eggs. Third, the hens eat a varied diet so you’ll get a more complex and richer flavor. Finally, I do think an animal that isn’t stressed produces a better product.”

About 10 years ago, Golson offered to take a lone, leftover 4-H hen, along with the portable coop it lived in, off her neighbor’s hands.

As often happens, one chicken led to another.

“Of course, that hen needed a companion and then I needed a larger coop—which gave me room for more chickens,” she says.

“I now have 12 hens in two small barns. My chickens provide eggs, but they’re also fun characters to have around.”

If you think fun chickens giving delectable eggs every day sounds like a recipe for hobby-farm happiness, our guide to getting good eggs will help you collect the right ingredients.

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The Basics: Food, Water and Shelter

Before we look at what should go into a laying chicken, let’s talk about what comes out.

That amazing chicken egg has a protective, external, porous shell consisting mainly of calcium carbonate covered with an invisible protein barrier called the cuticle that shields the interior from bacterial contamination.

These structures, along with an inner membrane, surround a cushiony, cloudy albumen (the white), composed mostly of water and protein. The albumen in turn envelopes the nutrient-packed yolk, the egg’s main nucleus of protein, fatty acids, vitamins and minerals.

On average, a chicken egg contains about six grams of protein and six grams of fat.

FOOD

To keep its body functioning and to produce one of these self-contained, nutrient-rich units each day, it’s essential a laying hen receive a balanced diet with adequate levels of protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins and minerals.

For laying flocks older than 16 to 20 weeks, experts generally recommend a balanced layer ration containing 16 to 18 percent protein and approximately 3.5 percent calcium to promote strong eggshells.

Many raisers also offer free-choice oyster shell for extra calcium in case their feed falls short of this important mineral. Calcium deficiency can result in thin-shelled eggs and leg problems. You may need to offer your birds the higher-protein feed during periods of peak egg production and when hot weather causes birds to eat less.

If you keep your flock confined, don’t forget to provide them with a source of insoluble grit to assist in grinding the feed in their gizzards. You’ll find oyster shell, grit, formulated layer rations and various types of feeders at your local feed store. Some even carry balanced, organic layer diets, if you prefer your flock dine on food free of antibiotics and grown in a sustainable fashion.

Chickens allowed to roam pastures, orchards, gardens or other outdoor areas will consume a nutritious and diverse mix of insects, grains, berries, seeds and plants in addition to their formulated fare. Many raisers treat their flocks to other

goodies, too, from bread to surplus cow's milk. However, a number of poultry experts advise against this practice.

"A lot of farmers try to save money by feeding scratch grains and household food scraps," says Jacquie Jacob, Ph.D., an assistant professor and poultry extension expert at University of Minnesota's Department of Science. "This dilutes the nutrition of the laying feed and can result in shell weakness or cessation of production altogether."

Choosing a Layer

"Selecting a chicken breed is like picking out a dog," maintains chef, author and chicken raiser Terry Golson. "Different breeds of chickens have different personalities and traits."

With a plethora of breeds to choose from, you should think carefully about which traits are important to you in a layer flock and do your research before going chicken-wild at the feed store or online hatchery.

If maximum egg output and efficient feed conversion rank high on your list, for example, you'll want to check out the commercial hybrid strains and the lightweight Mediterranean breeds.

Looking for brown eggs from a heftier fowl that could do double-duty as a meat bird and can forage outdoors? Then consider one of the hardy, dual-purpose American breeds.

Raisers more interested in preserving our rare fowl—and getting some yummy eggs in the process—should check out the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy website (click on "Conservation Priority List," then "Poultry Breeds" and "Chickens").

Here are seven layer breeds capable of providing a steady supply of good eggs for the farmstead:

Americauna: This docile, lightweight breed produces cool, green- and blue-tinted eggs. They forage well and tolerate the cold, but can be prone to broodiness.

Ancona: Listed as "Threatened" by the ALBC, the Italian-bred Ancona lays large numbers of small, white eggs and matures early. It's flightier and less cold hardy than some breeds.

Australorp: The dual-purpose Australorp is a hardy, adaptable native of Australia. It lays brown eggs and has a gentle disposition, handling confinement and free-range conditions well.

Minorca: This rare, early maturing, Spanish breed produces the largest white eggs of all the chicken breeds and the birds seldom go broody. Though heat-tolerant, these fowl possess big combs that are prone to frostbite and they dislike wet conditions.

Plymouth Rock: This tough, dual-purpose New England breed performs well in cold climates and adapts to both confinement and free-range systems. The mellow Plymouth Rock lays plenty of light-brown eggs, but can sometimes be prone to broodiness.

Rhode Island Red: Another dual-purpose, cold-tolerant fowl, the state bird of Rhode Island excels in free-range systems, yields a steady supply of medium-brown eggs and matures early. They don't tend to go broody.

White Leghorn: This light, Mediterranean breed pumps out the most eggs of any chicken breed and lays pure-white eggs. They eat less than bigger fowl and almost never go broody, but tend to be nervous and noisy. Their large combs are vulnerable to frostbite.

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WATER

Laying chickens also require a constant supply of fresh, clean water. Not only does a chicken's body use this life-sustaining liquid for numerous physiological functions, but water also comprises more than half of an egg's volume. You must ensure your birds have a reliable water source during both hot, dry periods and freezing weather, or their egg production will suffer.

SHELTER

Along with a balanced diet and ample water, your chickens need protection from the elements, predators and disease to stay alive and healthy—and thus keep laying eggs.

A cold, wet chicken, for example, will be forced to spend its energy reserves trying to stay warm rather than on egg production. A sick or stressed chicken will often reduce its egg output or completely quit laying. And it goes without saying that a bird killed by fowl cholera or a coyote will not be giving you any more eggs—ever.

A snug, secure, well-built and properly ventilated poultry house will offer your flock shelter from inclement weather, give your birds a predator-safe spot to roost at night, and discourage the presence of disease-carrying rodents and wild birds.

Outdoor access into a covered coop or pen gives the chickens a protected place to dust bathe, scratch for bugs and preen in the sunshine.

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INDOORS or OUT?

However, not all raisers keep their birds cooped round-the-clock; many allow their flocks to free-range around the farm during the day, while others utilize pasture-based systems that incorporate mobile chicken “tractors” or moveable poultry netting.

Both confinement and free-range systems have their pros and cons, says Jacob. Free-ranging birds may have more room and increased opportunities to behave like chickens and forage for a varied, natural diet, but outdoor living does pose definite risks.

“Many people think that having chickens romping around a pasture is idyllic, but they can’t imagine all the threats the birds are exposed to, such as diseases and predators,” says Francine Bradley, Ph.D., an extension poultry specialist with the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of California who recommends confining layer flocks.

“If your birds are enclosed, you’ll also be able to quickly find the eggs. You can supply a clean nest box so the chicken lays there instead of hiding its nest somewhere or laying its eggs in a mud puddle. This increases your chances of getting clean eggs.”

KEEP LIVING AREA CLEAN

Whichever raising system you use, avoid crowding your chickens and keep their environment as clean and dry as possible.

Regularly layering fresh litter in houses, preventing mud formation in pens, and raking up droppings will help prevent your birds from tracking feces and mud into their nest boxes and onto their eggs. Hygienic conditions promote healthier hens, as will paying attention to biosecurity issues, such as quarantine periods for new fowl and limiting visits to your farm from other chicken raisers.

“If a visit is necessary, the farmers should have showered before coming to the farm, and should not wear clothing, including baseball caps, or shoes and boots that they’ve worn anywhere near their own birds,” stresses Jacob.

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Nest Sites and Light

To get eggs—especially nice, clean, intact ones—you’ll need to persuade your chickens to lay where you want them to lay, not in some poopy corner of their coop or hidden in tall grass somewhere out in the back 40.

Bradley stresses providing plenty of covered nest boxes for your flock; one for every four hens. You can purchase easy-to-clean nest boxes from poultry supply companies or build your own from wood.

Install the boxes about two feet off the floor and deeply layer each with clean, soft litter, such as non-toxic wood shavings, to provide cushioning for the eggs and to absorb droppings.

“You may want to tack a little cloth over part of the opening to make it secluded and dark. Chickens like this and it will help prevent egg eating,” Bradley says. “You’ll want to put a plastic or rubber egg in the box first to attract the chickens to the nest box.”

For birds allowed outside, Jacob suggests keeping them inside until later in the day so you won't have to embark on an Easter egg hunt every morning.

Most chickens finish their egg-laying by 10 a.m. or so. Knowing exactly where your birds deposit their eggs will enable you to find and gather the eggs promptly, making it less likely for them to become broken and attract a hungry chicken's attention.

"Egg eating is a very bad vice and one chicken can teach the others this habit," notes Bradley. "It's best not to let the habit start to begin with."

Light is another important factor that affects egg production, and a good many neophyte chicken keepers have been left scratching their heads and wondering why their chickens quit laying as winter set in (note: Hens will also cease laying during molting periods).

"Hens come into production with increasing hours of light per day and go out of production with decreasing hours of light per day," explains Jacob. "A minimum of 14 hours of light per day is necessary to maintain egg production. Timers can be used so that the [artificial] lights don't have to be on all day; they can come on before sunrise and/or stay on after sunset in order to maintain the required number of hours of light per day."

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Getting Eggs Clean

Frequent egg collection coupled with clean, dry, uncrowded nest boxes and coops will go a long way toward keeping your flock's eggs clean. Not only is a pristine, freshly laid egg a thing of beauty, but it can go right into a carton and into your fridge, no scrubbing required.

"If eggs are found clean, there's no need to wash them since it would remove the bloom, or cuticle, which is the invisible, protective layer naturally found on eggs," says Jacob.

But despite our best efforts, sometimes dirty eggs happen. With a small amount of dirt or droppings, you can: Dry clean the egg by buffing it off with some fine-grit sandpaper. Wet washing, although the normal procedure in commercial operations, can result in bacteria being sucked into the egg if done improperly (for example, in a cold bucket of water). Got some really filthy eggs? Toss them out to be on the safe side.

As soon as you collect them, stash your fresh eggs small-side down in a dated egg carton in the refrigerator. Don't store them with or near odorous foods like onions or fish. When cooking with raw eggs, be careful you don't cross-contaminate other foods and always cook eggs thoroughly. Wash your hands well afterward with warm water and soap.

Once you figure out the right ingredients, getting good eggs from a small layer flock actually doesn't take that much time and effort on a daily basis.

In fact, it's a wonder more people don't keep chickens, given that fresh-from-the-coop eggs look and taste so much better than store-bought. As Golson has discovered, the straightforward recipe for optimal egg production has changed little over the years.

"I have a favorite book, first published in 1895, called *The Biggle Poultry Book*, which gives advice for the 'urban hennerly,'" she says. "It used to be that most everyone had a few hens in their backyard to provide eggs for the table. The advice that worked then is just as good now: Provide a secure shelter, access to a yard and sunlight, good food, and keep it clean. That's it!"

About the Author

Cherie Langlois is a former zookeeper and a freelance writer who has kept a variety of chicken breeds—and enjoyed dozens of fresh eggs!—on her Washington farm for over 17 years.

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