



The University of Georgia

**Cooperative Extension Service**

College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences / Athens, Georgia 30602-4356

March 2010

## **BACKYARD TIP . . .**

### **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT BACKYARD FLOCKS**



#### **Why are my chickens losing feathers?**

There are several possible reasons why chickens may be losing feathers. Nutrition is the first factor to consider. Protein requirements of chickens change as they mature. The nutrient requirements also change depending on whether the birds are being used for egg or meat production. The best way to assure proper nutrition is for the backyard flock owner to purchase a properly balanced and formulated feed for the appropriate age and type of bird.

Poultry may lose feathers due to molt. Molt is a natural condition in which the birds will cease to lay eggs and lose feathers from their neck, breast and back areas. It is a process that birds typically undergo when day length becomes shorter to provide a rest period prior to the birds going into maximum egg production when the day length gets longer in the spring.

Feather pecking, where other birds “bite” the feathers off at the skin, can be a cause of feather loss. Feather pecking can occur in situations where the birds are overcrowded or due to poor nutrition. External parasites such as lice or mites can cause feather loss. Excessive mating may be a cause of feather loss on the back in the hens. More information on feather loss can be obtained from the November 2007 poultry tip titled “[Feather Loss in Chickens](#)”.

#### **Why are my chickens not laying eggs?**

Many people keep chickens to produce eggs for consumption. Nutrition is one issue to check in the cases of poor egg production. Hens should be fed a layer ration specifically formulated for

### **PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK**

The University of Georgia and Ft. Valley State College, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and counties of the state cooperating.  
The Cooperative Extension service offers educational programs, assistance and materials to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex or disability.

An equal opportunity/affirmative action organization committed to a diverse work force.

egg layers. Layer diets typically have more protein, energy and calcium than meat bird diets to meet the demands that egg production places on the hen's body.

Short day lengths are another reason why birds may stop laying eggs. Poultry typically need 12-14 hours of light per day to stimulate egg production. For flocks on natural daylight, egg production will decline in the winter months and increase in the spring. Reducing day length can initiate molt during which egg production stops. Providing artificial light can correct this situation. For more information read the September 2005 poultry tip titled "[Several Reasons why your Hens may Stop Laying Eggs](#)".

#### **What environmental temperatures are acceptable for poultry?**

The environmental temperature requirements for birds decrease as they mature. Chicks, poult and ducklings are incapable of maintaining a steady body temperature when they hatch. Body temperature regulation develops between 10-14 days of age depending on the breed and species. Bird body temperatures are higher than that of mammals and for chickens it typically is around 105 F. Since these young birds cannot maintain their body temperatures, they are dependent on room temperature. If the room is too cool, then their body temperature will drop, and if the room is too hot their body temperature will rise. Typically we look for a floor temperature of 90-95 F for optimum brooding conditions. This temperature can be reduced 5 degrees each week until a temperature of 70 degrees is reached. By this time the birds should have significant feather coverage which will insulate their body, keeping the warmth in and the cold out. At this point they should be able to withstand some of the variations experienced in daily temperatures. In winter time, efforts should be made to keep birds inside shelters that will prevent drafts and hold in heat but at the same time provides good air quality. More information can be found in the January 2002 poultry tip titled "[Brooding Basics for Backyard Flocks – Temperature](#)".

#### **Which breeds are good egg laying breeds?**

Araucana, Americana, Hamburg and Leghorn breeds are known for good egg production. The Araucana and Americana are known for laying blue eggs. The White Leghorn is the predominant breed used in commercial egg production in the U.S. There are other breeds known as dual purpose breeds that will lay well and are large enough to provide meat if desired. Some of these breeds include the Plymouth Rock, Rhode Island Red, Holland, New Hampshire, Orpington and Wyandotte. The breed, Jersey Giant, is a large bird breed that has been reported to provide 3-4 eggs per week. For more information on breeds characteristics for the backyard flock, read the following poultry tips:

July 2008 - [Which Breed of Chicken Should I Put in My Backyard Flock?](#)

January 2009 - [Which Breed of Chicken Should I Put in My Backyard Flock?](#)

#### **What do I do if a bird is sick?**

In the state of Georgia, poultry producers, large and small, have access to the Georgia Poultry Laboratory Network ([www.gapoultrylab.org](http://www.gapoultrylab.org)). The Georgia Poultry Laboratory Network is a compilation of diagnostic laboratories whose purpose is to identify and help prevent the outbreak of poultry diseases in the state. The network headquarters is located in Oakwood, GA, but there are branch laboratories located throughout the state. It is important to remember that these labs are not like a normal veterinarian's office and therefore the birds will not be treated. Instead the sick birds taken to these facilities will be humanely euthanized and the veterinarian will conduct a post-mortem examination. It

is possible to take birds that have recently died, but these birds need to be bagged and placed in a refrigerator or cooler, otherwise post-mortem examination will not be possible. When dead birds are used for examination, it is best to use birds that have been dead 24 hours or less and not frozen. Birds that have been dead longer and frozen make it next to impossible to diagnose the problem. More information can be found in the following poultry tips:

November 2004 - [My Flock's Health is in Question: What Should I Do?](#)

January 2006 - [Backyard Flock: Diagnosing Poultry Diseases](#)

### **Are males needed for egg production?**

No. This is a common misunderstanding. Hens will lay eggs in the absence of a rooster. However, if hatching eggs are the goal, then a rooster will be needed to obtain fertilized eggs.

### **How can I prevent my backyard poultry from attracting rodents and insects?**

Maintaining a clean environment not only helps to keep the birds healthy, but is a crucial component of preventing the attraction of vermin to areas where poultry are kept. Feed supplies should be stored in a sealed container. Proper disposal of dead birds and manure are also good preventative measures. If rodents become a problem, bait stations should be placed around the area to control these populations.

### **How can chickens be sexed?**

The simplest way to sex backyard chickens is to watch them grow. As the birds mature, secondary sex characteristics will begin to develop and are easily identified in the males. In many breeds the combs of young males will begin to develop at an early age and become larger than in the females. The appearance of the comb and wattles will usually be more red compared to the females. Other methods involve vent sexing and feather sexing but these methods require more training. Feather sexing is not applicable to all breeds. In the end it is the easiest and probably the most enjoyable sexing method is to sit back and watch the flock grow. For more information on this topic read the July 2000 poultry tip titled "[Sexing Chicks in the Backyard Flock](#)".



Brian D. Fairchild  
Extension Poultry Scientist

Extension County Coordinator/Agent