Managing the Small Laying Flock
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By L.W. Kalch Extension Poultry Man

To be successful with small laying flocks, members of 4-H Clubs and other owners of small flocks should know and practice good management principles. The 25 to 50 hens in a small laying flock require the same proper management practices that are used in managing large commercial flocks. This circular describes the basic management practices and requirements for a successful laying flock.

Types of Layers

Well raised pullets of a good egg production strain are needed to get a laying project off to a good start. How well the pullets were managed during their first 6 months of life will to a large degree determine livability and rate of lay. For a laying flock use only birds bred for production. Such birds include Rhode Island Reds, White Leghorns, and Leghorn-type crosses. The Sex-Link cross is also a good layer. Never use pullets from broiler stock for a laying project. For the most part dual-purpose birds (meat and eggs) are desirable for a small laying flock. Dual-purpose birds include Rhode Island Reds and the Sex-Link crosses. These birds are quiet and easier to handle than the Leghorn types and their meat is of excellent quality. It is a good idea to replace the laying flock every year. Layers do their best when between 6 and 20 months of age.

The primary purpose of the poultry house is to protect the birds against rain, hot sun, and predatory animals and to provide a dry, clean area for feeders, waterers, and nests. In most of Florida, poultry housing need only consist of an area covered by a roof, to keep out the hot sun and rain, and enclosed by poultry wire, to confine birds and exclude predators. Siding may be needed in some parts of the state for protection against cold winds and blowing rains.

Your Poultry House should be:

1. Adequate in size. Allow 3 to 4 square feet per bird. For example, a house 10 feet wide and 12 feet long has 120 square feet, or enough space to accommodate 30 to 40 laying hens. The house should also be at least 7 feet high to provide for good ventilation.

2. Kept clean and dry. Provide 4 to 6 inches of litter on the sand floor. Wood shavings, sawdust, peanut hulls, straw, etc. all are good litter material. If litter gets wet, remove it and replace with dry litter. Floor litter that is wet can help bring on diseases. Wet litter also results in dirty eggs. If the poultry house is located in a well drained area it is not necessary to have a concrete or wood floor - a sand floor is adequate.
**Feeding**

Use a good commercial all mash laying feed and keep the feed before the birds at all times. Do not feed scratch feed because the all mash laying feed is a complete diet. Feeders should be sufficient in size. One 5 foot feed trough will serve 25 laying hens. Allow the birds to eat all the feed from the troughs to prevent accumulation of dirty, dry and stale feed. Fill feeders about one-third to one-half full. This will help prevent feed wastage. Protect feeders from the hot sun and rain. Each laying hen should consume about 1 ½ to 2 pounds of laying mash per week. Guard against feed wastage. Leghorns use about 1 ½ pounds feed per week, while dual purpose breeds use about 2 pounds per week.

**Watering**

Plenty of cool, clean water is one of the most important requirements of laying hens. Provide suitable watering equipment to insure that the laying hens have water at all times. Automatic watering founts are best. It is important, however, to check all automatic watering equipment periodically to see that the equipment is in good working order. Automatic waters require that water be piped to the laying house. A 3 gallon water fount will supply the water requirements for 50 laying hens for 1 day and is a good investment when automatic equipment can’t be used. Extra waterers may be needed during hot weather. Clean all waterers, automatic or otherwise, daily as an aid in preventing diseases. Place waterers in the shade so the water will remain cool. Keep the area around the water founts as dry as possible. Avoid leaks and spilled water. A platform with a hardware cloth bottom placed under the water fount will help keep the water clean and the floor litter dry. It is a good practice to remove any litter that becomes wet and replace it with dry litter.

**Nests**

Provide one nest for every 5 laying hens. Therefore, 25 laying hens will require at least 5 nests, 30 laying hens 6 nests, etc. Each nest should be about 14 inches wide, 14 inches long and 15 inches high and should be located in a cool, dry and shaded area of the poultry house. Provide clean and dry nesting material, such as shavings, excelsior, peanut hulls or straw. Place the nests at a height from the ground so that gathering eggs will be made easy. The bottom of the nest about 3 feet from the ground is about right for most people. Good nests reduce the number of broken and dirty eggs. Apple boxes or orange crates can be made into usable nests.

**Roosts**

Roosts are not necessary. However, the following is recommended for those who desire them. Small poles 1 to 2 inches in diameter or lengths of 2" x 2" make ideal roosts. Roost poles should be placed 12 to 14 inches apart and about 2 feet above the ground. Six to 8 inches of roost space is needed for each layer. Thus 25 hens would require 12 to 16 feet of roost space. Two poles 8 feet long, placed 14 inches apart and 2 feet above the ground, will serve 25 laying hens.
**Lights**

The use of lights in the laying house during the long nights of the fall and winter months will do much to maintain high egg production. When an automatic time clock is used; a 40 watt light bulb is sufficient for 25 to 50 laying hens. Set the time clock to turn on the lights early in the morning and turn them off at dawn. Turn on lights at a time to provide the birds with a total of 14 hours of light per day. (Example: If the sun sets at 6:00 P.M., lights would have to be turned on at 4:00 A.M. to provide 14 hours of light.) Adjust the time clock about every 15 days to compensate for the changing times that the sun sets. If an automatic time clock is not available, production can be increased by use of all night lights. When using all night lights, one 25 watt bulb is sufficient for 25 to 50 laying hens. The bulb and reflector should be situated to allow the light to concentrate on the feeders and waterers, leaving the roosting area relatively dark. Place all lights 6 to 7 feet above the floor, fit them with a reflector (aluminum pie pans will suffice) and keep them free of dust. Once started, lights should be used every night. Sporadic use of lights can result in lowered production.

**Litter**

The condition of the litter in a poultry house is closely related to good sanitation. The floor litter, composed of shavings, straw or peanut hulls, should be about 4 to 6 inches deep and kept dry but not dusty. Remove any litter that becomes wet or caked and replace it with dry litter. Stirring the litter occasionally may aid in keeping it dry. All the litter can be removed from the laying house once each year or as often as is found necessary.

**Cannibalism**

*Cannibalism* occurs when birds start picking one another until blood is showing. It is a bad habit birds develop when they are overcrowded, over heated or left without feed for lengthy periods. Once started, cannibalism is difficult to control, especially in white-feathered birds on which blood is more noticeable. Birds can be easily killed by cannibalism. As an aid in controlling cannibalism, treat pecked areas of birds with red salve (called stop pick, anti-pick or no pick). Upper beak of all chickens can be cut back 1/4 to 1/2 inch with electric de-beaker. Give hens more room and plenty of feed.

**Culling**

Remove birds that are out of production from the flock and sell them or use them for home consumption. Hens that are out of production usually have small, pale, and dried up combs and wattles. The beak and shanks will be yellow in color rather than white, as in a good layer. Hens not laying will have a narrow space, width of 2 fingers or less, between the 2 pubic bones, and a narrow distance, width of 3 fingers or less, between the 2 public bones and the keel bone.
**Diseases**

The best defenses against diseases are good management and sanitation. These include such things as purchasing chicks and pullets from reliable sources, feeding a good feed, providing clean water and washing founts daily, keeping floor litter dry but not dusty, keeping the poultry house cool and well ventilated and providing bird with ample space. In addition, you should keep the poultry house and area free of old trash, boards, dead birds and manure piles.

A. **Fowlpox**: also called chickenpox and sorehead. This disease is contagious and can be spread from bird to bird and farm to farm by infected birds and by mosquitoes. This disease can be prevented by vaccinating the chicks when they are about 8 weeks of age. Chickens having fowlpox will have a number of wart like scabs appear on their comb, face, and wattles. Once the disease occurs in a laying flock, little can be done except wait for the disease to run its course. Few if any laying birds will die of fowlpox. However, the birds will quit laying for a period of 2 to 4 weeks. The drop in egg production will be the heaviest loss. Birds with fowlpox can be fed a high level antibiotic feed to help keep down other infections and thus allow the birds to recover more quickly.

B. **Respiratory Diseases**: there are a number of respiratory diseases that have similar symptoms such as sneezing, gasping for air, and discharges from the nose and eyes. Feeding the birds a high level antibiotic feed will help them recover.

C. **Enteritis**: this is an inflammation of the intestines caused by a number of different organisms. Affected birds usually appear weak, sluggish, and have poor appetite. There may be cases of diarrhea. Egg production slows down. Failure to keep waterers clean and allowing birds to gather in wet, muddy areas will contribute to the disease. Feeding the birds a high level antibiotic feed tends to rid them of enteritis.

**PARASITES**;

*There are 2 types of parasites, external; lice, mites, fleas and internal; worms*

**External Parasites:**

**Lice**: The body lice is the most common and is usually found on the skin just below the vent. Body lice spend their entire life on the birds. Presence of lice can cause lowered production and even death of chickens.

**Mites**: The red mite is most common. It is very small in size and is usually first seen crawling on eggs in the nest. This mite spends its nights feeding on the bird and its days hiding in the cracks of roosts and between boards of the poultry house. The northern fowl mite is also common and usually stays on the bird all the time but may be found on eggs and in litter. These mites congregate near the vent, tail, and neck where they suck blood.

**Fleas**: Fleas usually attach themselves to the area of the face of the chickens. They are commonly found around the eyes and under the wattles.

**Control**: For the latest approved method of control of external parasites, contact your local livestock extension agent.
Internal Parasites

Large Roundworms: These worms are commonly found in the intestines of chickens. Chickens obtain the worms from wet or moist areas where chickens have been kept before. To rid chickens of roundworms, add piperazine to the drinking water. Follow directions on the bottle. Piperazine can be purchased from your local feed dealer.

Care of Eggs

Gathering: Gather eggs a minimum of once each day and place them in a wire basket to cool.

Cleaning: Clean all dirty eggs with a piece of sandpaper, emery cloth or steel wool. Many dirty eggs can be prevented by keeping plenty of clean nesting material in the nests and keeping floor litter dry.

Holding: Store eggs in refrigerator until used.

Selling: If eggs are to be sold, weight and candle them and place them in egg carton (large end up) according to weight, and store them in refrigerator until sold. Sell eggs before they reach 4 days of age.

By following recommended management practices, you should have good results with your laying flock. How well the flock performs will depend on you as its manager. To know how well your flock performs, keep a complete and accurate record on your flock.

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