

Poultry- Managing Laying Hens and Eggs for Hatching

Management of Laying Hens and Hatch of Eggs at the Small Farm or Homestead Level

The availability of chicks is often a limiting factor of small farm chicken production. Improving the management of laying hens increases the availability of eggs for consumption or sale, and increases the production of healthy chicks.

Why is care for laying hens and eggs important?

Healthy and properly fed hens lay more eggs and can produce more clutches each year (a “clutch” refers to “a group of eggs fertilized at the same time”).

Producing more eggs

Hens usually start to lay eggs at 5-6 months of age.

1. Hens – Laying a Clutch and Being Broody

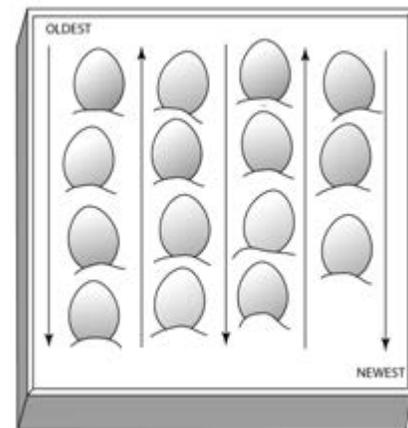
Among unmanaged free-ranging chickens, a hen will lay 10 to 15 eggs on consecutive days (a clutch) before she becomes broody (i.e., the hen wants to sit on the eggs to hatch them). At about 21 days after sitting and with the hen’s care, about 80% of the clutch will hatch. If eggs are removed each day (the most recent egg should be left to encourage the hen to return to the nest), the hen will lay more eggs, attempting to create a complete clutch before she begins to brood. The removed eggs can be stored for adding back to the nest when the hen becomes broody, or for sale or consumption.

2. Roosters and Hens

Eggs must be fertile to produce chicks. There should be one rooster for every 8-10 hens. It is a good idea to have one extra rooster, but more than that is inefficient.

3. Managing Eggs

As eggs are removed from the nest, they should be stored in a cool (as close to 12°C as possible) protected place (from predators) and organized or marked such that they can be identified from newest to oldest. One egg should be left in the nest to encourage the hen to return to the same nest. One way to store eggs is in a large ceramic bowl (or wooden box) with a few inches of clean sand and a lid. The eggs can stand up in the sand in rows from oldest to newest (See figure at right), or a number can be written on each egg in pencil (1, 2, 3...) to keep track of oldest vs. newest eggs. Once a day the eggs should be tilted in the sand in the opposite direction. Eggs should be selected from the oldest for consumption, and the newest set of eggs should be used for producing chicks.



When the hen becomes broody, place 11-13 of the newest eggs (from the storage bowl or box) back in the nest. After 7 days of brooding, you can candle the eggs to assess if any of the eggs are not fertile (See references below for description of candling). Remove all unfertile eggs.

Prepared by David Bunn, May 31, 2012.

References: 1) ACIAR, 2009. Improving village chicken production: A manual for field workers and trainers. www.aciar.gov.au. 2) Sonaiya, E.B. and S. E. J. Swan. 2004. Small-scale Poultry Production Technical Guide. FAO Animal Health and Production Manual.

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