

## **Egg Laying Chickens - Jeff & Karoline Heldt**

*We by no means consider ourselves experts. But the following is what we've learned works well on our farm over the last several years. Our go-to resource (besides the internet) is "The Encyclopedia of Country Living" by Carla Emery.*

- ORDERING
  - We order our chicks generally in March. You can get them any time of year as long as you can keep them warm.
    - Welp Hatchery online (international) - based in Iowa
    - Townline is another good one (Michigan based)
    - Order directly through your feed store
    - We avoid Tractor Supply, etc due to constant high stress environment
  - Can order straight run (all females) or mix
    - You don't need roosters for eggs. Some people like to have one for protection of the flock. They may fight or be aggressive.
  - Check to be sure the breed you order is for egg laying (some are for broiler chickens). Wherever you order from should specify.
    - Our favorite breed are sex links
- CHICKS
  - Keep in an enclosed area.
  - Protected
  - Wood chips on the floor
  - Water (some add electrolytes, we don't)
  - chick feed (specially formulated: "starter grower", has 20% protein)
  - Expand area as they grow to avoid overcrowding
  - Around 10% percent don't make it to 3 months - order a few more than what you want to end up with.
  - As the chicks get older they are less dependent on the heat lamp but we still run it at night until they're fully feathered (mature feathers, no "fluff")
- FEED
  - Transition their food to regular layer mix (16% protein) when they're fully feathered
    - We get the Dexter Mill standard egg layer mix. Already has calcium added in.
    - You can get from Tractor Supply, etc but we don't use it because it can be very old. Don't know how long it's been on the shelf.
    - Check to be sure what you're using has calcium added, or add oyster shells to your feed.
  - You can't over feed. They should always have food and water available.

- We have a couple of hanging plastic feeders for our flock of 100 birds and have to fill the feeders up every other day. Our flock goes through 25lbs of feed/day.
- We have a large plastic waterer and also keep a kiddie pool filled up in the summertime for extra water.
- Their food water should not be in the same area that they roost because that can cause disease (all the poop).
- Once they're full feathered, you can give them all your kitchen scraps. They're omnivores so they can have meat but we avoid giving them scraps with chicken or eggs in them. We've found there's a few things our chickens don't care for like orange and lemon rinds but chickens in general will eat most anything and that will help cut down on your food expenses.
- FREE RANGING
  - When they're fully grown, you can free range them in the daytime and they will come back to roost at night in the pen.
  - Be sure they're protected at night (close the gate)
  - They can be a little destructive if you free range them in your yard and they poop everywhere.
- EGGS
  - Will start laying eggs around 6 months old (very small pullet eggs to start)
  - A typical chicken will lay approximately 2 eggs every 3 days. So if you have a flock of 12 chickens you can expect around 8 eggs/day.
  - Collect every day because if they break their eggs and try eating one, they'll start breaking them on purpose to eat them. It's hard to break the habit once they start doing that. It's easier to prevent it by collecting regularly.
  - If you don't wash your eggs, the bacterial bloom on the outside will keep them fresh at room temperature for around 2 weeks.
  - Once washed, they must be refrigerated and are good for around 3 months.
  - You can do a "float test" if you're questioning whether an egg is still good or not.
    - Set the egg in water. If it sits at the bottom, it's still ok to eat (even if it's partially floating with just one part of the egg touching the bottom). If it floats, it's spoiled.
  - Wash eggs by rinsing in warm water, not cold and do not soak. Cold water and/or soaking them can promote bacterial transfer to the inside of the egg. Eggshells are porous.
- PREDATORS
  - Eagles, hawks, owls
  - Raccoons, Coyotes
  - Possums and skunks will come for eggs

- Once a possum discovers your coop, it will continue to come back for the food source.
  
- HOUSING
  - They need laying boxes elevated off the ground but not the highest point in the coop or they'll roost in them
  - They need somewhere to roost (where they sleep at night) that is elevated
  - It needs to be covered and enclosed because they don't like walking in snow and they need to be able to keep themselves warm in the winter but able to be well ventilated for the summer time
  - Lots of wood chips for bedding in the boxes and where they walk around.
  - Will need to scoop these out and replace with fresh bedding as needed. We do our whole coop about 3 times a year. But add wood chips to the laying boxes on a weekly basis/as needed.
  
- WINTER
  - Egg laying slows down in the winter time because of the shorter days. We keep a light running in the chicken coop on timers to prevent too much molting and keep egg laying more consistent. We have the light on usually 7-9am and then 5pm-9pm to simulate summer daylight timing.
  - We use a heated waterer (plugs in) to prevent constant freezing over
  
- LIFESPAN
  - Will lay eggs for generally 3 years.
  - When our spring chickens start laying, we generally kill our 3 year old chickens before winter time because their egg laying has slowed down so significantly that it's not economical to feed them through the winter.
  - They're not good for eating the meat once they're that old but if you're willing to do the work of cleaning, feathering, etc they make excellent chicken stock.