



Poultry Management

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Starting a Backyard Flock

A backyard flock may be started for various reasons, as a hobby, showing chickens, pets for children, for meat and/or eggs for family and friends. Whatever the reason, it is a good idea to do a bit of work before you start to consider the type of bird to raise, the number of birds for the flock, and where they will be housed. One should consider whether poultry can be kept in the particular residential environment and also the type of neighbors you have. Are they agricultural or urban? Are they likely to object to poultry being raised in the vicinity of their homes? What type of housing will be used for the birds? It should be of an adequate size for the number of birds, not easily accessible to predators, and easily ventilated in summer and heated in winter. An important consideration is the type of full-time work the owner already has. The fact that a flock is in the backyard does not mean it will not need care and attention. If one does not have a lot of spare time, raising a backyard flock is not a good idea because it will not be worth the expense to start the project.

Problems in Poultry Production

1. Selection of chicks, poults, and mature birds – These need to be of good stock and from a disease-free program, or else nothing good will materialize even with good management and care. The age of the birds also needs to be considered. Birds may be purchased as day-old chicks, or starter chicks (2 to 4 weeks old). Day-old chicks may be cheaper, but they will need to be brooded and culled. Starter chicks may be more expensive at the start, but they will not need to be brooded, and they have a lower mortality rate.
2. Size of enterprise – This should be considered before anything is purchased. Consider the amount of space, the amount of help you will have, and the amount of time you will have to spend on the flock. This is especially true in the beginning when the birds are young and need extra care. If you do not know too much about poultry raising, it is not wise to start with a large backyard flock.
3. Housing – This is important and needs to be considered before the birds are purchased. Will they be allowed to be 100% free range, or will they be housed in some type of structure? Problems with complete free range may include wandering onto someone's property, loss due to predators, and difficulty accounting for birds and eggs laid (for layers). Wildfowl have more access to free-range birds, which increases the likelihood for disease spread. Some type of enclosure is advisable. It should allow for adequate light, ventilation at all times, heating in winter, cooling in summer, and access for feeding, watering, cleaning, and egg collecting. The enclosure should be large enough to prevent overcrowding. Overcrowding is not healthy for the birds and adds stress to their lives, encouraging cannibalism and spread of disease. A few perches within the enclosure will help the birds exercise and contribute to muscle development.
4. Bedding material – This is usually made of some type of industrial waste (sawdust, peanut or rice hulls, chopped straw, corn stover, ground corn-cobs, sand, pelletized newspaper) both to act as a cushion and to absorb moisture from spilled water and fecal material. This is usually laid out to a depth of 4-6 inches. It should be crusted out periodically to remove the caked and wet portions. It should be frequently topped up with new material.
5. Disease and parasites – However well maintained a flock is, it is prone to certain diseases and infection by parasites. The producer should be aware of this and make sure that birds are adequately protected from these and provide treatments when they do occur. It is a good idea to consult with a

local veterinarian or Extension office about disease problems and how best to treat them. Chicks are usually vaccinated against certain diseases, but consulting with an Extension faculty member or veterinarian will help you keep other diseases at bay.

6. Feeding and Management – A flock may be very well maintained, but poor-quality feed and water will offset excellent management. Feed will need to be formulated for the particular bird (layers or broilers), and the nutrients will need to target the specific age (starter, finisher, grower). For a backyard flock, it is not economical to make up one's own feed. It is better to buy good-quality commercial feed. This will make sure the flock has feed of consistent quality. Water should be potable and free of chemicals and bacteria. It should also be of a comfortable temperature. Birds will not drink if the water temperature is too warm or too cold.
7. Marketing – What strategies do you have to sell your eggs or birds to friends and neighbors? How are you going to ensure the consistent quality of your products so that your customers keep coming back? Eggs need to be collected daily to prevent them getting overly dirty or being destroyed. Are the eggs going to be washed before sale or sold as is? They will have to be refrigerated and packaged for sale.

8. How will dead birds be disposed of? - This is particularly important from a health standpoint and also from a social point of view. Neighbors will not look favorably on carcasses in a regular Dumpster. The owner may have to build an on-site mini-composter to accommodate normal mortalities, or use burial pits or incineration. In an area with a high water table, use of burial pits may not be permitted. The local health department will have to be consulted for a permit.
9. Record Keeping – For anything that is a business enterprise, it is essential to keep records of weekly and or monthly expenditures. These include chickens/birds bought, mortality levels, feed bought and consumed, cash purchases, eggs produced, and income from eggs and or birds sold. By keeping such records, trends can be noticed and problems corrected before they get out of hand.

References

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