



A rooster crows a morning announcement.

By Lindsay Taylor

Layer chickens may be a great option for small-acreage landowners who would like to produce something on their land but may not have enough space for larger livestock.

Chickens require less space, have lower startup costs, and provide a food product that is a staple of most family's diets – EGGS! In most of Wyoming, even 40 acres typically does not provide enough forage for more than one cow/calf pair, so raising cattle (or even sheep, goats, or pigs) can mean a big feed bill. Chickens can be fed all year for approximately \$30 per bird, and they can help keep the bug population down.

Facilities

Chickens require space for resting, feeding, watering, movement, and protection from weather and predators. This can all be accomplished with a simple structure, or coop, and access to the outdoors. Hens need

Backyard chickens a small

approximately three to four square feet of floor space per bird if in a fenced-in area.

The coop needs to be built with human access in mind. Someone will need to gather eggs and clean the facility. Anything from a doghouse to an old shed will work as long as the hens have a place to get out of the weather and lay their eggs. Bedding such as straw and wood shavings inside the enclosure may also help with easy cleanup and help the birds stay warm in inclement weather. Roosting or nesting boxes can be placed within the enclosure for the hens to lay their eggs in. These can be roughly one cubic foot and have some sort of bedding they can nest in. Elevated boxes are preferred. Manure and old bedding materials that build up in the enclosure can be composted and then used as fertilizer. For more about composting, see the University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service bulletin B-974R, *Backyard Composting: Simple, small-scale methods*, at www.uwyo.edu/cessupport/agpubs/Search_Start.asp

Outdoor access needs to be provided, keeping protection from predators at the fore. Chickens can be a tasty treat for everything from foxes to raccoons to the family dog, as they have very few natural defenses. Protection can be provided by fencing off an area around the coop or having a coop in which the birds can be confined to at night.

If a fence is built, fencing material should have no larger than one-inch holes. Covering the enclosure with bird netting may also provide added security (raccoons have been known

to climb fences) as well as keeping out wild birds that may carry diseases to which domestic chickens are susceptible.

Selection

Many local feed stores carry chicks in the spring, and many breeds make fine layer hens. White or brown varieties of leghorns are the most productive laying hens and will lay white eggs. They are feed efficient and lay eggs at a higher rate than other breeds; however, other breeds also lay eggs and are oftentimes more eye appealing for a small backyard flock. Common breeds for backyard flocks include Barred Plymouth Rocks (black and white striped), Rhode Island Reds, and a variety of bantam (smaller) chickens. These are typically brown egg layers. Chickens with white earlobes lay white eggs, and those with brown earlobes lay brown eggs. There is no nutritional difference between the two colors of eggs.

The most difficult part of selecting chicks is determining the sex. Sexing of chicks can be done with up to 95-percent accuracy by those who are trained. For most of us, the best we



-acreage production opportunity

can do is to purchase chicks and wait and see what happens. Some breeders or feed stores may sell pullets (young female chickens) specifically, but even then there is a chance you will end up with a rooster. Roosters do not need to be present for hens to lay eggs. It may be preferable not to have a rooster around, as that will prevent eggs from being fertilized. If roosters are kept with laying hens, occasionally an egg may be collected that contains a developing chick.

Raising Chicks

Chicks need to be kept near a source of heat until fully feathered. This will typically be around three to four weeks. This can be accomplished by keeping them in a cardboard box, old stock water tank, or other confined area with a heat lamp. Baby chicks should be kept at 90 degrees. The best indicator of correct temperature is the activity of the chicks (see below). If they are all huddled beneath the lamp, they are too cold. If they are spread to the far edges of the space provided, as far from the lamp



Photo by Judy Bishop

Three chickens have a mobile perch.

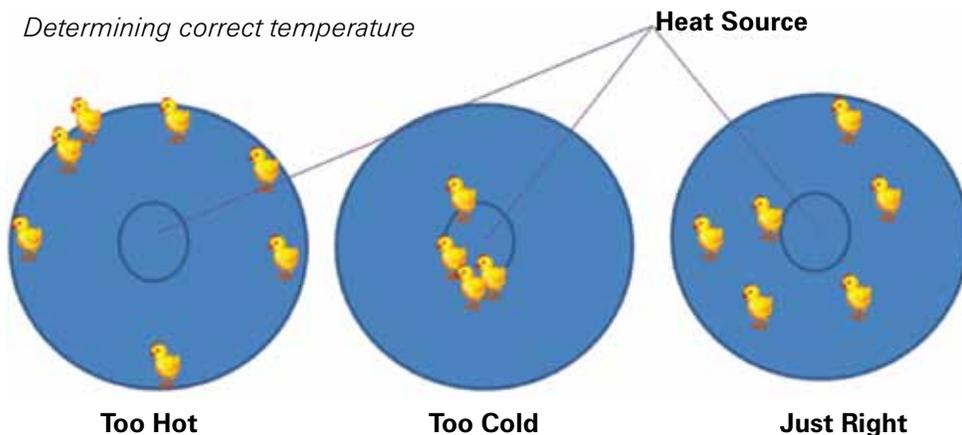
as possible, they are too hot. Chicks that are crowding together either away from or near a heat source have the potential to suffocate each other, so keeping the temperature of their space regulated is very important.

Feeding

The most important nutrient for any animal is water. A constantly available source of clean water is a necessity to keep hens, roosters, and chicks healthy. Water can be provided in a store-bought or homemade poultry waterer. These water containers help keep the water cleaner than if chickens are allowed free access to open dishes. This also prevents water from being dumped onto clean bedding. Another solution to prevent a mess is running water. If there is a way to provide running water, such as runoff from a stock tank or pesticide-free garden, that will work as well.

Complete feeds are available for all ages and production stages. Layer chickens, chickens for meat, and chicks all have different feed

Determining correct temperature





Black Cochon rooster

requirements. They are relatively inexpensive and designed to provide all of the nutrients the birds will need at various stages of their life. Keep in mind young, growing animals need higher levels of protein than older birds. Starter chicken feeds (up to 6 weeks) for laying birds are usually around 18-20 percent protein, while a grower/developer (7-20 weeks) mix will be 15-16 percent protein.

Once hens are laying eggs, they need a feed that is roughly 16 percent protein and has added calcium for shell production. Layer feeds should be used once hens reach 20 weeks of age or lay their first eggs, whichever comes first. Ground oyster shell fed free-choice can provide an added source of calcium if the egg shells are poor quality or thin.

Chickens enjoy scratching the ground for loose grains, bugs, and seeds. Providing a "scratch" or grain feed such as cracked corn or rolled oats is an option; however, keep in mind a complete feed is all the birds need, and

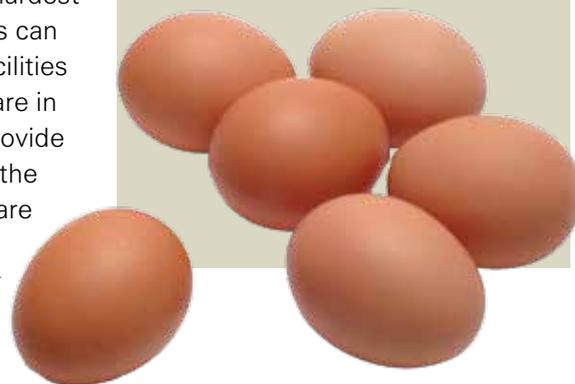
the scratch is in addition to their normal diet. This means any scratch they eat will dilute the formulated diet, as they will still only eat so much in one day.

As a general rule, do not feed more scratch than can be consumed in about 20 minutes. When providing scratch, birds must also have access to insoluble grit to properly digest the grains. Birds with access to the ground can usually find enough grit in the form of pebbles or small rocks, but grit can also be purchased.

Chickens are a great option for many landowners. They provide a farm-fresh product and can be enjoyable to watch and care for. Protection from predators is typically the hardest part of raising chickens, but this can be managed through proper facilities construction. Once the basics are in place, a small layer flock can provide hours of enjoyment, as well as the satisfaction from knowing you are producing a product that is helping to feed yourself or your family.

Guidelines if selling farm products to public

If you produce more eggs than you can use, consider selling them to neighbors you know well. Another possible outlet is a farmers' market in Wyoming. Check out the Wyoming Department of Agriculture guidelines and requirements at <http://wyagric.state.wy.us/divisions/chs/docs/farmersmarkets.pdf>. Keep in mind eggs cannot be sold in reused egg containers (to protect customers from the risk of salmonella). Label new egg cartons with what is in them (fresh chicken eggs), along with your name and address. Eggs must be kept below 41 degrees but above freezing. Putting them in the new cartons in a cooler with ice works well.



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