

Keeping a Small Poultry Flock in the Top End Part 2. Starting a Flock

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HOW MANY?

The average family will find that 8-12 hens will provide sufficient eggs for their own needs. More birds may be kept for meat.

WHICH BREED?

Hybrid pullets are the best option for most purposes since they lay well under a wide range of conditions but some people prefer established breeds such as White Leghorn, New Hampshire or Australorp. Some special breeds are available through the Top End Poultry Fanciers Club. Crossbreeds are also suitable for meat but may be of a different strain from those for laying.

PULLETS OR DAY OLD CHICKS

The flock can be started from point-of-lay pullets or from day-old chicks. When first starting with poultry, it is advisable to commence with point-of-lay pullets. Later, as management skills increase, you may wish to try day-old chicks as replacements. Always purchase stock from a reputable hatchery or breeder. Never accept the last few survivors of someone else's disaster, you will only bring disease and problems into your own fowl run.

Buy only from a disease-free source and ensure that pullets are vaccinated for fowl pox and Marek's disease.

Point-of-Lay-Pullets

A pullet is a young female before her first laying season. The point-of-lay pullet is around 18 weeks old and should start laying when she is about 22 to 24 weeks old. A four to six week period between purchase and first egg allows the pullet to get used to her new surroundings. The best time to buy pullets is in December or January for the reason described below under 'Moulting'.

Point of lay signs:

- wattles and combs enlarge and become bright red;
- bird size increases;
- pubic bones spread apart until three fingers can fit between them;
- the vent becomes moist;
- the abdomen becomes soft.

BROODING AND REARING OF CHICKENS

Buying the Chickens

Day-old female chicks should be bought in June or July. The reason for this is explained below under 'Moulting'. Male chickens for the table may be bought at any time.

When you buy the chickens you should ask the hatchery to:

- Vaccinate the chicks against fowl pox and Marek's disease.
- Take the chicks to their brooder and introduce them to food and water as soon as possible after collecting them from the hatchery. Sprinkle food on newspaper when first placing chicks in the brooder. The rustling of the paper encourages them to peck.

The Brooder

A simple brooder can be made in a shed that is not draughty by suspending a 25 or 40 watt electric bulb about 35 cm from the floor and enclosing an area beneath the light with a surround 50 cm high. The surround is made of light flexible material such as galvanised iron and this is moved outwards to increase the enclosed area as the chicks grow until five weeks when the chicks no longer require to be confined close to the heat source. The area required is approximately:

0 - 4 weeks	30 - 40 cm ² per chick
4 - 8 weeks	50 - 90 cm ² per chick
8 - 20 weeks	90 - 120 cm ² per chick

Note: The larger areas are needed when rearing more than 50 chicks.

Clean, disinfect and cover the area with 4-6 cm of dry, absorbent litter. Chaff is suitable but not cat litter or plastic beads which may be eaten by the chicks; nor sawdust or woodchip which may have been treated with insecticide.

Food and Water

Provide food and water in containers which the chickens cannot get into so that they cannot foul them or spread the food and water about or drown in the water. There must be adequate trough space for all chickens to feed at the one time; increase it as the chickens grow.

On the day of arrival, the area should be warmed and adequate food and water must be provided.

Young chickens should have clean, fresh water and feed at all times. Use a chick starter mash or crumble during the brooding period. Feed must not be allowed to become moist and fermented or compacted. Food and water containers should be cleaned daily or when fouled. Troughs must be designed to prevent chickens from falling or standing in them and becoming wet.

Warmth and Lighting

It is important to brood chickens at the correct temperature in an area free of draughts and with plenty of light.

Day-old chicks need continuous light for the first week. This is then decreased over the next four to five weeks.

For the first few weeks of life, chicks are unable to maintain body heat if the temperature falls. It is therefore necessary that a heat source is provided, particularly at night during the dry season, when the temperature, even in the Top End, may fall low enough to be harmful.

The bulb should hang over the centre of the area and the surround is placed 1 m out from it. This will allow the chickens to move between a warm and cool zone. The height of the bulb is adjusted to provide a suitable temperature at ground level at the centre. This should be 35°C for the first three to four days and it should be

dropped 1°C each day (by raising the bulb) until heat is no longer required, at three weeks. As the chicks grow the surround is progressively moved out so that they have access to cooler areas.

Keep an eye on the chicks, especially during the first few days and make sure they are comfortable. Chicks will show by their behaviour if their environment is not comfortable. If they huddle together under the heat source they are too cold. If they keep against the surround and away from the heat, they are too hot. Overheating is as dangerous as chilling for young chicks. Raise or lower the bulb to modify the temperature.

Natural Brooding

The natural method is probably the most convenient for most backyarders as the broody hen does all the work. All that is required is a sheltered coop with nesting material, food and water and, of course, some fertile eggs for the clucky hen to sit

on. Bantams are often kept for this purpose since they make good mothers. Brooding hens should be set apart from other birds to avoid fighting over the eggs.

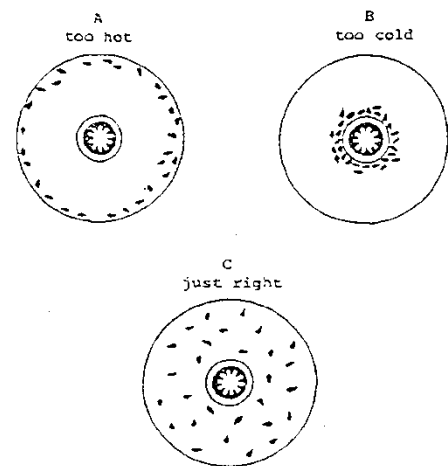


Figure 1. Behaviour of chicks when a brooder is too hot (A), too cold (B) and just right (C)

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