BACKYARD FLOCK TIP . . .

NEITHER CHICKENS NOR FEED DO WELL IN THE HEAT

As we enter the warm late spring and summer months, it is a good idea to remember that the backyard flock does much better in cool than in hot weather. It is not at all unusual to find problems cropping up in the summer that were not noticed earlier in the year, and may well disappear when the cooler weather of September arrives. Often times, problems occurring during hot weather might not be obviously related to any one cause, but rather to the stress of hot weather in general. Thus, it is good to remember that both the chicken, and the feed itself, need extra attention during the summer months.

The chicken is obviously better suited for cool than warm weather. With its feather coat, the chicken can adapt with little problem to the temperatures encountered in Georgia during the winter months. However, the same insulation afforded by feathers reduces the ability of the chicken to lose body heat and cool itself during summer. As is well known, chickens do not have the ability to control body heat by sweating. Thus, they must either pant or raise their wings to dissipate heat, neither of which is a particularly effective mechanism.

We as humans know the importance of keeping fresh food in a refrigerator. While it is not necessary to refrigerate poultry feed, as temperatures rise in the summer the stability of poultry feed is reduced. At high temperatures, any fat in the feed has a greater tendency to go rancid, vitamin stability is reduced, and the feed tends to pick up an “off odor” which may affect palatability. Insect activity in the feed is also increased in warm weather, which again reduces the nutritive value and “shelf life” of the feed. In addition, as southern summers are characterized by high humidity, mold growth in feed is a problem we need to take steps to prevent.

As summer approaches, we should make a short check list of things to do to ensure the
continuing health and productivity of the backyard flock. First, chickens need a place to get out of the sun. The shelter should have a high enough roof so that heat does not radiate down and affect the birds. Also, sides should be open to take advantage of breezes. Water should be continuously provided, and changed regularly as slime and bacteria multiply rapidly in water during the summer. The drinker should be kept in the shade so the birds have access to reasonably cool water.

While frequently overlooked, protection must also be given to the feed. If feed can be stored in a cool place, so much the better. If not, it needs to be protected from excessive heat and moisture. Many small flock owners routinely store feed in a plastic garbage container with a tight fitting lid. Also, feed should be purchased a little at a time so that it does not go stale before being fed.

A final thought: Many families have an old electric fan in the attic or garage which is no longer used. If the backyard flock is kept in confinement, consideration might be given to setting up the fan so the birds can receive increased ventilation on those especially hot summer days.

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