

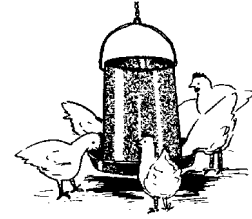


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**Cooperative Extension Service**

*College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences / Athens, Georgia 30602-4356*

MARCH 1999



## ***BACKYARD FLOCK TIP...***

### **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT CHICKENS**

I have raised chickens, read about chickens and talked about chickens since I was a kid and continue to have many of the same questions asked of me today as were asked many years ago. There have been great changes in the poultry industry over the last 20 years from equipment to management to growth rate of birds. The equipment used today is highly sophisticated which allows for more micro-management of chickens raised commercially. With these changes and improved genetics and nutrition, a modern day broiler can gain about 4½ to 5 pounds of body weight by six weeks of age. However, there are several factors that remain constant for the backyard poultry grower in relation to raising chickens. Several of these topics will be briefly answered in this backyard poultry tip.

**Can you sex adult chickens by the size of the comb and/or wattles?** In some breeds that have single combs, particularly those from the Mediterranean Class, both hens and roosters have rather large combs and wattles. In other breeds, those with pea combs for example, both the roosters' and the hens' combs will be small and almost unnoticeable. This is particularly the case in the ornamental head-feathered breeds such as Polish, Houdans and Spitzhaubans. In each case, however, males will generally have larger combs and wattles than females of the same breed. Also, it must be recognized that the standard for game birds, such as Old English and Modern Games is to have the comb, wattles and ear lobes completely removed (referred to as dubbed).

**Do you need to give birds rocks or gravel for their gizzards?** The digestive system of the chicken contains a gizzard which is used for the grinding and breakdown of food eaten. In the old days when birds ate more whole grains, it was probably more important for the gizzard to have plenty of gravel and rocks. Most chickens today eat formulated diets which contain grains that have been milled and broken down into smaller pieces so the need for rocks in the gizzard may not be as important. Also, most backyard flocks have access to a natural floor or range conditions where they may be able to eat small rocks if needed.

**Why are my chickens losing their feathers?** On most birds which have large patches of missing feathers, the problem is a result of the other birds' picking them. Look closely at the feather follicles of the 'bare' birds to determine if there are remnants of the feather shaft still in the follicle. If this is the case, the other birds are probably biting the feathers off at skin level. Feather picking can begin when birds are overcrowded which then turns into a habit that is hard to break. Once the habit is formed, your flock must be given more room and the suspected 'peckers' or 'peckees' separated from the flock. An anti-pick lotion can also help in these situations.

### **PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK**

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Another possible cause is infestation of birds with mites or lice. Check the feathers and skin, especially around the vent area, for these pesky poultry parasites. Thoroughly examine the birds closely and quickly as the bugs will run for cover when you expose them to light. If lice are present but not noticed, they may have left eggs in whitish clusters stuck to the bases of the feather shaft. Dusting the infected birds 2-3 times at 10 day intervals with Sevin usually will kill these pests.

Another potential cause of missing feathers in hens is excessive mating. In large flocks with multiple hens and roosters, the 'best' hens will generally get mated very frequently. They may have feather loss along their back and on the back of the neck and head. When a hen is mated, the male stands on the hen's back and with his beak holds on to the feathers or skin on the back of the hen's head for balance. So, in contrast to what many people believe, the prettiest hens to us aren't necessarily the best hens in the rooster's eyes.

Relatively uniform feather loss throughout the body of the hen can also be due to molting of the birds feathers. Molting is considered a natural event the hen goes through annually in an effort to rejuvenate her body for another year of egg production. Along with the massive feather loss and subsequent replacement comes reduction in comb and wattle size and color intensity. Birds in a molt will usually quit egg production for several weeks until the molt is finished.

**Why do I occasionally get eggs with blood on the shell?** It is not unusual to find blood smears on the shells of eggs from young hens (pullets) as they are coming into egg production. As their bodies gets adjusted to egg production the frequency of these blood smears should be reduced. Remember, eggs are big in relation to the size of most chickens!

**Why do I sometimes find blood spots in the egg? Is this the little chick developing?** The occasional blood spot in the egg is not a developing chick. It would take 2-3 days of incubation of a fertile egg for blood to be visible in a developing embryo and even then the blood would not be concentrated into one spot. Blood spots are caused when tiny blood vessels on the follicle rupture during ovulation of the yolk (or ova). These eggs are edible but considered unsightly by most. If you are seeing a large number of blood spots, make sure the birds are not being frightened or startled early in the morning hours causing premature ovulation.

**Why do I get fewer eggs during the winter when my birds are still young?** Sexually mature birds still need to be stimulated into reproduction. With many of today's higher producing hens, egg production will generally not stop completely during the winter but will be drastically reduced. If you add a small light (as small as a Christmas tree light) to their pen or close-by and make sure it is on 14 to 16 hours per day (the same duration everyday), egg production will be greatly improved. However, even with an adequate diet and lighting, the colder temperatures and a full season of egg production behind them will generally cause a drop in egg numbers in most backyard birds during winter months. In most cases, though, enough eggs can be produced for your family and even a few friends if the birds are given the right environment.

These are some of the most commonly asked questions I have received over the years. Undoubtedly I will be asked these as well as many other questions regarding raising backyard birds in the future. Much joy and knowledge can be attained from raising, watching, and asking questions about your chickens. In addition to the University of Georgia Extension Service, there are several good sources of information on the Internet that are very helpful to the backyard chicken farmer. Two of these are the Department of Poultry Science web site at [www.uga.edu/~poultry/](http://www.uga.edu/~poultry/) which has some good poultry links, and [www.amerasure.com/chicken.html](http://www.amerasure.com/chicken.html) which is a chicken question asking bulletin board which offers several good links as well.

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County Extension Coordinator/Agent

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”