BACKYARD FLOCK TIP . . .

"SCRATCH FEED" IS NOT "FEED"

If we think back a generation or more, many farm families kept chickens. These were not always confined to formal hen houses or fenced runs. Rather, the birds may have lived free range in the barnyard and consumed an extremely varied diet based on seeds, grass, worms, insects, table scraps, etc. The productive performance of these chickens did not begin to approach those achieved by modern poultry producers. Nevertheless, they provided valuable dietary supplements to the farm family. In order to increase production, grain (either whole or cracked) was frequently provided to the birds.

Reviewing this scenario from the point of view of a nutritionist, we realize that the extremely varied diet of the yard bird usually provided at least marginal levels of vitamins, trace minerals, and protein. For laying hens, supplementary oyster shell would have been valuable to provide extra calcium. The benefit of supplying extra grains was to provide the birds the energy necessary to improve productive performance.

Poultry Extension specialists routinely advise that backyard flocks receive a high quality mixed feed from a reputable supplier. Such feeds are formulated to provide energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals in the right combination to ensure optimum production. However, at many feed stores, it is also possible to buy "scratch feed." It is absolutely essential that we recognize that "scratch feed" is not "feed" - it is simply a mixture of several cracked grains. While this is clearly stated on the label, it is sometimes overlooked that the product was never intended to be the birds' sole source of nutrients.

Several bags of scratch feed were recently purchased and evaluated by The University of Georgia, Poultry Science Department for nutritional composition. This small study confirmed that scratch feed is simply a mixture of grains (in this case, corn, wheat, and sorghum) which absolutely will not provide balanced nutrition for the backyard flock.
An example of the lack of nutrients in scratch feed was recently observed by one of the authors of this article. While visiting a farm in south Georgia very severe nutritional deficiencies and high mortality were noted in a flock of birds receiving only scratch feed. It was immediately recommended that a balanced feed be provided to the flock to overcome these deficiencies.

Scratch feed is sometimes referred to as "scratch grains," and this is a much more accurate description. If one wishes to buy only a grain supplement for a backyard flock, the combination of cracked grains available in these products will be useful. However, under no cases should poultry receive scratch feed, or scratch grains, as the only source of nutrition. Further, daily supplementation with scratch feed only serves to dilute the much more nutritious formulated poultry diets. Scratch feed does not provide enough valuable nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and protein. For example, scratch feed typically provides 7 to 10% protein. Poultry diets require 15 to 20% protein. If someone says to provide only scratch feed, scratch that idea.

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**Consult with your poultry company representative before making management changes.**

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