

Extension Notes

Personal Column for March 16, 2010

By Gary Hall, Iowa State University Regional Extension Education Director

Spring Chicks Require Good Start

Remember as a kid going into the farm store and seeing all the baby chicks and ducklings? What a fun time and a sure sign of spring. Chicks are arriving now and for those purchasing those little birds be aware of the importance of getting those chicks off to a good start.

Should you already have some chickens, it is best to start the new arrivals in a separate area that can be sanitized and cleaned without contact with the older flock for at least one month. Once your new brood has a good start, they can be introduced to the older flock. It takes time for the young flock to build immunity to diseases to which the older flock has already built up a resistance.

Here are some additional management tips to help you start a healthy crop of chicks:

-- Provide a clean, sanitized, dry and warm environment for the new batch of chicks that is preferably in a separate space from your mature flock of chickens. Provide a brooding space that can be properly heated but still allow adequate space for movement of the little chicks around feeders and waterers.

-- Provide adequate fresh bedding for the new flock of chicks. This may be a 3-4 inch base of fresh wood shavings or a 2-3 inch base of wheat straw. It is important to stir wet spots from drinker spills or manure buildup to avoid excessive moisture in the brooding area. Replacement of wet litter will need to take place by about three to four weeks of age. Perhaps you have some children who can gain experience at cleaning out the chicken house.

-- Provide a light source for a minimum of 12 hours per day. It is hard to get adequate feed intake and growth without some supplemental light.

-- Provide fresh and clean water and feed daily. Keep feed pans and waterers clean of manure and litter on a daily basis.

-- At about three to four weeks of age, provide more space for your chicks. At this time, they are growing very fast and they will need less heat but more space to exercise and move. At this time, it may be safe to introduce the chicks to a separate pen in a mature flock space. However, keep the chickens separated until about eight to 10 weeks of age.

-- Once the new chicks are about eight to 10 weeks of age, introduce them to their adult environment. If planning to have layers, introduce them to their nest boxes at this early age for acclimation to potential laying sites.

-- Fresh air/ventilation of the brooding and adult facilities is important to the long term health of the flock. One of the most common health issues in poultry is respiratory disease. Adult farm flocks need constant fresh air to avoid a buildup of noxious ammonia gases and dust. An open inlet and fan in an enclosed pen/barn will help facilitate a good air environment.

-- Clean adult pens approximately once a month of wet spots. Wet litter breeds bacteria and disease along with ammonia fumes. Good litter management is important to both bird health and your comfort while working in the chicken coop.

Raising poultry is a great family adventure. Young children learn how to care for an animal and parents interact with their children in a learning and nurturing environment. The family eventually benefits from fresh eggs and/or meat. If raising poultry is also a 4-H project, you and your children can find many other benefits from raising and enjoying some spring chicks.

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