Christa Hartsook 00:15
Hello, and welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

Olivia Hanlon 00:29
In this episode, I interviewed Christa Hartsook, small farms Program Coordinator with Iowa State University Extension and outreach. And we are talking about backyard chickens. I'm Olivia Hanlon small farms specialist and welcome to the show. Christa, welcome to the show. Thanks for being on.

Christa Hartsook 00:44
Thanks for having me, Olivia. It's a little different to be one of the persons being interviewed versus doing the interview itself.

Olivia Hanlon 00:52
Yes. And since you're on the flip side, Christa, you get to tell our listeners a little bit about what you do in your role for Iowa State Extension rather than just hosting us?

Christa Hartsook 01:03
Well, thanks. Essentially, the small farms program at Iowa State Extension and Outreach exists to connect resources from the university, to our clients out in Iowa and surrounding states with information resources and research that is applicable to their small farm or acreage.
Olivia Hanlon 01:22
All right, Christa so one of those things that's popular on small farms and acreage is as well as in town nowadays are chickens. And they're a popular topic lately, especially with the increased egg prices. So why don't we start with talking a little bit about what's causing that increase?

Christa Hartsook 01:39
Yeah, we're roughly a little bit over honestly, 200% increase in egg prices from just where we were a year ago at this time. So that's a pretty dramatic increase. And it's causing a lot of folks a, you know, a little bit of pain at the grocery store. And really, with our overall grocery budget, there's just a lot of increase in overall food prices right now. So folks are kind of looking for ways and opportunities to lower that bill. And backyard chickens might be one of those ways. But really one of the main factors causing an increase for our egg prices is the fact that we had some pretty significant outbreaks of avian influenza over the last couple of years. And it's really impacted our commercial laying flocks. So we're just down in overall laying hens, which then drives up the price if we have a lower supply.

Olivia Hanlon 02:33
All right, Christa so like you said, one of the options to lower that cost may or may not be getting a flock of your own. So if listeners are interested in getting started with a small flock of their own, what tips do you have for them before they get started?

Christa Hartsook 02:47
First and foremost, I'm going to suggest that no matter where you are at you check city ordinances if you happen to be in a community itself. Some communities are very progressive and are allowing backyard poultry flocks, others are not yet. And so that's an opportunity for you to first determine what is allowed in your community or not. Of course, if you're out on an acreage or a small farm, you can get chickens at any given time. But first, I really want you to do some research and to make sure that this is something you want to get into any kind of livestock is a commitment, right? We've had significant cold weather here in Iowa lately. And that doesn't mean that you won't have to be out there feeding and watering those birds every single day. So for a lot of folks, that does cause them to take a little bit of a step back and think, oh, do I really want that commitment, I just can't pick up and go when I want to. So that's first and foremost, to really do a little research. And then next, really evaluate what you have on your existing property in terms of facilities for your birds, where are you going to put these animals, you're going to need a pretty enclosed tight space for brooding chicks, which is really keeping them warm when they're very young, keeping them tight away from all drafts possible. And then as they grow, they're going to need a lot more space. So what are you going to do for a long term coop structure? Do you need to build something? Do you have a facility that you could rehab into something like that, and then you're going to want to take a look and make sure that you have access through your local farm store, or a co op for commercial laying feed that you're going to need for your birds as they grow.
Alright, Christa, another consideration might be our space that we have how limited we are there. Obviously chicks are really small, so it'd be easy to pack a whole bunch in a spot, but how do we determine how many birds are appropriate for the space that we have?

Yeah, that's a great question, Olivia. And as they grow, you know, you mentioned when they're very small, you want to keep them kind of confined and very warm when they're in that brooding stage. But as they grow, you're going to need a lot more space for them. So a Again, that depends on the breed of chicken that you select. So could be anywhere from, you know, two and a half square feet per bird up to four and a half square feet per bird, again, just depending on which breed you might select for that. So that's really a consideration to think about. And then you want to think long term to, you know, 12 birds that you may order now will eventually produce roughly 12 eggs a day. And is that something that you want? That's a lot of eggs over the course of a week, over the course of a month. So it's determining kind of what is the right size for you and your family. And then what your intentions are, if you are wanting additional eggs to give away to friends and family to potentially sell. You need to kind of think through long term, what you want this enterprise to do for you and your family.

All right, Christa, if we've decided that we've got the space, we've got the means we really want to do it and not just because egg prices are high right now, when is the prime time to get our chicks for our flock and where can we find them.

So Iowa has a lot of great hatcheries. First and foremost that you can order direct from, some of them will have minimum requirements for shipping those birds. Chicks are generally shipped through the United States Postal Service. And as the we are still in the cooler months, those minimum numbers will be higher. So I always tell people, it's a good time to start placing those orders for you know, an April May timeframe. So that first and foremost, your chicks aren't getting chilled in shipping if you are getting them from a hatchery. If you're getting them from your local farm store, you'll be able to walk in probably sooner than that, and see chicks and be able to pick up you know, five or six, let's say that you may want to start with but it's always a good idea to wait just a little bit until we're seeing kind of good consistent temps here, where they're not going to get chilled in shipping.

Christa, another thing to think about there, just because we're getting our birds in April does not mean we're getting our eggs in April, how long do we need to wait? Or how long can we expect to wait before we start getting consistent eggs for most birds?
Christa Hartsook 07:13
Yeah, that's a great question, you're gonna have a pretty significant investment right in doing something like this. And not only in the cost of the facility that you are building or rehabbing on your property, but you'll have some in initial equipment, feeders, waters, feed itself, things like that, and the chick itself, and you're not going to see any kind of potential return to you, until probably five to six months later, again, depending on that breed of chicken, as to when those birds will start laying eggs. So this is not a money making venture by any stretch of the imagination. But it is a great way to have a connection to where your food comes from. Maybe teach a little bit of responsibility to young family members if you have kids at home, and really foster that idea, and that connection to livestock.

Olivia Hanlon 08:06
Alright, Christa, is there anything else we need to think about before getting our backyard chickens?

Christa Hartsook 08:11
I think just planning overall, you know, planning to make sure that you can be there planning to make sure that you can get those chicks started out really, really well. So when they come, you know, you're going to want to make sure you can get to the post office quickly when they call, you're going to need to hand dip those beaks into water immediately upon arrival home, so that you have those chicks off and started really, really well. Obviously, you want your brooder space enclosed and very warm. You know, I'm talking 90 plus degrees for those first few weeks of life while those chicks are acclimating to your space in your environment. And then you're really going to want to offer a high quality feed source for them and make sure that you're getting them started off on the right foot.

Olivia Hanlon 08:56
In addition to that, we could also think about taking a course that you offer, which has all of this information and more. Why don't you share a little bit of information about that with our listeners?

Christa Hartsook 09:07
Sure, we do have a great online resource for anybody that they can take at any given time. If they do a search on the Iowa State University Extension Outreach store, they can find an online course called Getting Started with backyard chickens. That's going to walk you through step by step of how to get your birds started really well on your property, what you need to think about in terms of housing, and then protection from potential predators that might be out there and help you make sure that your birds have the greatest chance for success out there. Again,
that's a free course anybody can take that at any given time. It does provide a certificate at the end. And so we found it a great option for those communities that require their residents to have some sort of education prior to ordering and having chicks in their community itself.

Olivia Hanlon  10:03
All right, Christa, correct me if I'm wrong, but every once in a while you are out in the counties doing that program as well. Are there any coming up that you can share with our listeners?

Christa Hartsook  10:12
Absolutely. So we do always offer a face to face option if counties or extension offices are interested in hosting that program and having folks get together in the extension office usually. So I know I have programs coming up in the Warren County area, and the Taylor County area in the Marion County area and probably in the Story county area right now. So we're filling right up, and we love the excitement and the enthusiasm.

Olivia Hanlon  10:41
All right, Christa, if listeners are looking for more information about backyard chickens, or about the online course, or county office program, where can they find that information? Or who should they get in contact with?

Christa Hartsook  10:54
If you are interested in having your county host a program, I would always start with your county extension office and just see if they have one planned or one in the region that they could connect you to. And then if you are interested in just learning more overall or looking for that course, please feel free to find the small farm sustainability website on the Iowa State University Extension Outreach website. We're connected on there. And we've got a lot of great information about getting started, what you need to think about avian influenza itself, if you have any concerns about that, just a lot of great information is out there.

Olivia Hanlon  11:34
Christa, that's a good point that I did not ask about with avian influenza being the cause of all of this, should we be concerned at all about our backyard birds or birds we may already have on the acreage or looking to get,

Christa Hartsook  11:48
You know, I think spring and fall migration are always a time to be a little bit more watchful of your birds. And I tell folks, if they have a concern, you know, we know this is spread primarily through that spring and fall migration from wild birds. And so if you are concerned, it's never a
bad idea to just keep your birds a little bit more contained during that time. So maybe they're locked up. Maybe they don't have free range on your acreage, your small farm within your backyard during those times but the rest of the time, they really should be fine. If you are following good biosecurity practices. You're cleaning that coop out regularly, you know, you're keeping your feed locked up to prevent any kind of contamination from any predators or rodents, pest problems that might be out there.

Olivia Hanlon 12:37
All right. Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you want to talk about here, Christa?

Christa Hartsook 12:42
I don't think so. I think this is just a great opportunity. And it brings a great awareness to the enterprise itself with the rising cost of eggs but this is something that you're really getting into not as a great money making venture but as an opportunity to connect with where your food supply comes from and maybe enjoy having those animals on your property.

Olivia Hanlon 13:06
All right, well thank you so much for being on Christa and hopefully we get to have you on again on this other side of the microphone.

Christa Hartsook 13:12
Thanks, Olivia. Happy to be here.

Small Farms 13:14
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