

Backyard Poultry

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SPEAKERS

Christa Hartsook, Andy Larsen

- C** Christa Hartsook 00:00
Welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This is Episode 11, where I interview Andy Larsen, Small Farms Educator with the University of Illinois Extension. And we're talking about opportunities and challenges associated with raising backyard poultry. I'm Christa Hartsook, Small Farms Program Coordinator, and we hope you enjoy the show. Andy, welcome!
- A** Andy Larsen 00:26
Hi, how you doing, Christa?
- C** Christa Hartsook 00:28
I'm great. It's great to have you on the show today.
- A** Andy Larsen 00:31
Well, thank you for the opportunity. I'm glad to be here.
- C** Christa Hartsook 00:34
First off, Andy, let's really get into some of the reasons why people might choose to raise backyard chickens.
- A** Andy Larsen 00:40
Okav well there's two big reasons that at the moment are the predominant reasons one is

Okay, well, there's two big reasons that at the moment are the predominant reasons, one is eggs, two is pets. People love the idea of, or the actual existence of, once they've started, of farm fresh eggs, or backyard fresh eggs in this situation. They really feel like they can tell the difference in quality, and color, and flavor. And they also like to know exactly what it is has gone into the diet of their birds. Other folks are just kind of in it for the fun of it. They make nice pets, they can be very friendly. A lot of people have told me that they're replaced their evening TV watching with chicken watching- "chicken TV." So that's a big reason as well, then there's a whole host of sort of tertiary reasons that people do this. I mean, some people in their backyard raised meat birds, they want bug control, they want fertilizer, or they want the composting ability with the scratching, show chickens. But a lot of them are just kind of helping to teach their kids responsibility and the keeping of livestock even when they're not out on a farm.

C Christa Hartsook 01:54

And a very good reason right there too. So there's obviously some considerations before we just go picking up some chicks at you know, the the farm store or ordering things online. If we live in town, first, how can we find out if chickens are even allowed?

A Andy Larsen 02:11

Yeah, that definitely is an excellent consideration unless you want to go into stealth chicken mode, which I've seen as well. People should definitely go on to their local their communities website and village or city website, because those websites will always list the municipal code. And you can go into the code and search for terms like poultry, or chickens or whatever other kind of breed of poultry you want to have. And make sure that there isn't an ordinance, specifically against the keeping of poultry in your backyard. If there is it's often going to be amongst the the nuisance ordinances there's also often animal nuisance ordinances. So you're probably going to find it there if there is one. If your town is super small or doesn't have its own website, or whatever, look at there's various Municipal Code aggregators online too. For example, municode.com, M U N I C O D E, has a whole bunch of the Illinois where I am, has a bunch of their village municipal codes on that website.

C Christa Hartsook 03:24

Perfect, and definitely something people should consider right off the bat.

A Andy Larsen 03:28

Oh, absolutely. Because even if they're not specifically disallowed, there could be things that are, you know, smaller provisions, like you can only have a certain number, like you can only have five, or you can only have six, that's very common. Another is that you can't have roosters because of the noise that they make. So that's a very common provision as well. And in some situations, there are offsets, you know, you have to have your birds or your bird house or whatever, more than 25 feet away from your property line, for example, just to keep from being pesky to your neighbors.

C Christa Hartsook 04:05

Absolutely. Are there different breeds, Andy, that we should really think about if we are wanting to, you know, do meat versus layers? I mean, obviously, there's a difference there.

A Andy Larsen 04:17

Oh, gosh, yeah. I mean, there's there's a million options. There is a lot of heavy bread egg layers. I mean, if anybody gets the Murray McMurray catalog, for example, you know that that is like the, it's like the dessert menu of chicken catalogs. They've got everything in there. And it's super interesting, but they are only one of quite a number of hatcheries in Iowa. But yeah, so your decision should really be narrowed down by your goal. If you want to max out egg production. If you're only going to have a couple of birds and you want to get as many eggs as you possibly can one every day like clockwork, then think about hybrid sex links, black stars and red stars are kind of the common names that you hear those go by. They are an F2 hybrid that you can tell whether it's a Pullet or a Cockerel by the coloration when they hatch. So you're almost certain to get all girls if that's what you want. And they're almost certain to lay you one egg every 25 hours for a good long time, for at least a couple of laying cycles. So they're, they're super productive. There's also the heritage breeds that are really productive. The top of the heap for that is probably your, your Rhode Island Reds or your Production Reds, or your Black Australorps, those are.. they tend to be parent lineage for a lot of those crosses. So those are maxing out eggs if you want to max out meat, then you have a much narrower selection you're pretty much looking at Cornish Crosses. Those things will turn 15 pounds of feed into a seven pound carcass in about seven or eight weeks. If you're looking for a more heritage alternative to that you're looking at Red Rangers or Freedom Rangers or some of those non-Cornish cross meat birds. And then you know there's other things that people are looking at there look for colored eggs for example "I want green, yellow, pink, light blue eggs", in that case you're looking for Araucanas or Ameraucanas. "I want chocolate brown eggs", in which case you're looking at the French Cuckoo Marans or something like that. Some people just want to have yard ornaments, you know, look for the Crested Polish with the big, fluffy tuft on their head. There's the silkies and the frizzles that have all that like soft sticky-outy plumage that super funny looking and there's a ton of exotics out there. I mean, there's even an all black chicken called the Ayam Cemani that's got a lot of popularity and his commanding crazy premiums right now.

C Christa Hartsook 06:54

Crazy! You can get about anything you want out there.

A Andy Larsen 06:58

Yes, just about anything you want. You just got to think about why you're doing this and make sure you stick with that when you're ordering your birds!

C Christa Hartsook 07:08

Which brings up a great point Andy. You know, is it best to order birds from a reputable

which brings up a great point, Andy. You know, is it best to order birds from a reputable hatchery? Can I go to the farm source and pick up my birds? Where should I head?

A

Andy Larsen 07:17

Well, so the Farm Stores are generally going to be sourcing their chicks from a reputable hatchery. So as long as the Farm Stores are using good protocols for biosecurity and raising their birds, then that's that's a fine option. If you order directly from the hatchery yourself, if you need that number of birds, there's usually going to be a minimum amount, oftentimes it's 25, because that's how many conservative stays safe within a chick shipping box that comes in the mail. They have vaccinations available, you know exactly what breed you're getting. You generally know whether you're getting Cockerels, Pullets, or a Straight Run, which is a mix of both. So they're the professionals on getting chicks to people. So yeah, going to the hatchery, if you need that many, is a great option. You can even get them from a neighbor. I mean, if your neighbor does use practices that you think are clean, and positive, and humane, and you know all that good-jazz, and you're not thinking that you're going to buy a diseased bird and then end up having pathogens on your place, then I mean buying from a neighbor is fine. I would avoid sort of the anonymous swap meets where you don't know the person, you don't know the bird, and you don't know what you're getting, because you're not going to believe what you end up getting.

C

Christa Hartsook 08:50

Alright, so we've placed an order, let's say through the hatchery, you know our chicks are gonna come on this certain day, what do I need to do to get ready?

A

Andy Larsen 08:59

Okay, so the day before your chicks get there, set up your brooder. A brooder is just the the situation that you're using to keep your baby chicks warm, and fed, and watered while they're tiny little things. And generally what that's consisting of is a cardboard ring, or a big Tupperware Container, or an aquarium, or whatever, something to sort of keep them contained. You put your bedding down, generally pine shavings, put a little bit of paper towel over the top of that pine shavings for the first day just to keep their leg health optimal. And then turn on your brooder lamp to sort of warm up the situation up to that 95 degrees at chick level the day before, because there's a good chance that if you don't heat up that sort of thermal mass of your brooder before the chicks arrive, there's still a chance that they could succumb to chilling, even with the brooder lamp on. So turn on your brooder lamp early, have the level the chicks are at on the floor of the brooder be about 90-95 degrees when they first get there, and you can reduce that by about five degrees per week until they get fully feathered, or 70 degrees, whichever comes first. The other thing you'll need is feeders that can accommodate the chicks and waters that they're not going to drown in. So basically, there's.. you can get chick trough feeders real easily from pretty much any farm store. You need an inch or two of feeder space for each baby chick, and then progressively more feeder space as they get larger. And then as far as drinkers are concerned, you want either those little courts, the shallow court fountains, or potentially some nipple drinkers which I like, they tend to stay cleaner. But, either way, when

you get your chicks make sure you train your chicks to the drinker that they're going to start out on. So getting that water in them, right when they arrive is the most important thing that you can do because they have not had anything to eat or drink since they hatched.

C Christa Hartsook 11:22

So, for example, I'm physically dipping my chicks beaks into the water, it's kind of important for people to know that?

A Andy Larsen 11:28

Yep, absolutely. And so, if you're using a nipple drinker, hit their beak on it until a drop comes out and it falls onto their beak and they take it in and drink it. If you're using a, you know, a quart stand fountain, dip their beak into the fountain until they get water on their beak, and then they have to swallow it. And then usually, if you can do that with all or most of your chicks that arrive, you should be fine.

C Christa Hartsook 11:57

Gotcha. You know, Andy, the brooding is great, obviously, for chicks when they are young, but they're gonna grow.

A Andy Larsen 12:04

Yep.

C Christa Hartsook 12:05

At what point do we need to get them into a coop? And what kind of basic recommendations do you have for that?

A Andy Larsen 12:11

Well, so they don't need a whole heck of a lot of space for about the first month. The first four weeks, you're really looking at only about a half square foot per bird. Once they get between four and eight weeks, they need about double that you're looking at at least one square foot per bird. Once they're getting up towards Pullet age, that sort of eight to 18 weeks, that sort of adolescent young adult stage, they're going to start needing something closer to adult spacing. And so when you're building your chicken coop, you want to plan for at least two square feet of floor space per bird for your lighter breeds. If you have some of the big heavies, you might want to go even bigger than that. Because there are going to be points in time where your birds are all going to be indoors, whether they're closed in at night to keep them protected from predators, or whether it's winter, and they just don't want to go outside and range around. You want to make sure that that coop is big enough for them to be comfortable and minimally

stressed, even when they're all indoors. So yeah, that that's the sort of initial rule of thumb when you're building your coop from the beginning, it's make sure you've got at least two square feet of space per bird. Other than that there's just some basic considerations with coops, not too terrible hard, what you got to do is you got to have enough roost space, you know, because those hands are going to perch at night. You want to have close to a foot.. you can probably squeak a little bit under than that if you need to, but close to a foot of roofspace per bird. You're gonna want to have adequate ventilation. There needs to be air exchange inside that coop because otherwise it can get sort of moist and stinky and smell like ammonia from the droppings. So you want to have either passive or mechanical ventilation. You need nest boxes for them to lay in, well, it's preferable to have nest boxes for them to lay in. And you need about one nest box per four or five birds. And then the last consideration is really just access for you. Can you get in there and clean up eggs and fill up, or excuse me, pick up eggs, and clean up poop, and fill up waters, and all that stuff without having to contort yourself into some kind of strange configuration? I mean make sure that you can get in there just as easily as the birds can.

C Christa Hartsook 14:46

Absolutely, and it's probably important to note, Andy, there's differences here in terms of building a coop for layers that will be utilized year round.

A Andy Larsen 14:55

You bet.

C Christa Hartsook 14:55

Versus meat birds, they're on a very shorter cycle.

A Andy Larsen 14:59

Yeah, I mean meat birds, you have to remember, they're only going to be on your place for somewhere between, oh, about between 7-17 weeks, is really kind of the depending on which breed you get. So meat birds don't need to have roosts, they're not going to reach a reproductive age. And if you're going to keep them penned, like in a chicken tractor all the time, you want to make sure that they have enough space and that they can be moved on a daily basis to get to fresh forages. They're not going to have to have roofs they're not going to have to have nest boxes. But they are going to have to have adequate floor space, adequate ventilation, and of course, adequate feed and water and you're going to be amazed how quickly the feed goes down those meat birds.

C Christa Hartsook 15:51

You know, speaking of meat birds, Andy, we think that chicken is obviously quite tasty. But there are other critters out there that do as well. What kind of predators do we really need to watch out for here?

watch out for here:

A

Andy Larsen 16:04

Oh, my gosh, I like to tell people that pretty much anything with a backbone and teeth is going to want to eat your chickens. I mean, it really runs the full gamut. The absolute worst, predators are going to be your minks and your weasels. They are horrible little critters when it comes to poultry farming, because they will.. they basically can't control themselves once they get into a chicken coop, and they will kill the entire flock just kind of for sport, they won't even consume it, they'll just kill them and pile them up. So that's a bad thing. More commonly, people have to worry about things like raccoons, and domestic dogs and cats, especially in sort of an in town type of situation. Those are going to be very common, even in town. So you've got to make sure that your birds are protected from those. And also, even in town, you're gonna have aerial predators, hawks, owls, eagles in some parts of the state and parts of the Midwest are all possibilities. So making sure that your chickens have some sort of dive shelter someplace that they can go if they see something flying overhead, or have some kind of protection above them via wildlife netting or something like that. And you know, now that I think about it, I said that backbone thing and there are a couple things without backbones that are going to eat. Think about mites and lice. I mean, these are skin critters, skin parasites, that can cause some real problems for your chickens, so make sure that they have a dust bath too. I don't think everybody gets informed about the whole dust bathing, whatever you want to call it, instinct I guess, amongst chickens. People consider chickens dirty because they see him rolling around in the dirt and getting as much fine dust and dirt against their skin as they possibly can. So that when they shake, they do sort of like a pig pen thing. And there's this neat little cloud of, of dust that puffs up. Well, that dust and dirt really minimizes the likelihood that you're going to end up with a skin parasite problem. So if you can provide a good dust bathing area for your chickens, a good medium to have in there is going to be one part dirt, one part sand, and one part wood ashes, that makes for a really good dust bathing material. If you don't provide that, they're going to make their own dust baths, and it's probably going to be in your flower bed where you don't want them. So be aware of that. If you can give him a place that sort of a preferential dust bath. You'll probably be saving yourself some effort and trying to revive your flower beds later on down the line.

C

Christa Hartsook 19:09

You bet. Andy, this is a lot of information we covered in short amount of time!

A

Andy Larsen 19:15

Yeah, that happens!

C

Christa Hartsook 19:16

Yeah! Are there other, you know, beginning tips and tricks that you would like to give people?



A

Andy Larsen 19:25

If there is an opening in your coop that you can fit your thumb through, it's too big. Something is going to be able to get in there a mouse, or a rat, or a weasel, or whatever. You want to have your chicken coop be almost Fort Knox, you know! If you want to keep your chickens protected, make sure that you have all those little cracks and crevices plugged up at night. If you have a hole from a knot or anything like that, steel wool or just screwing on a little piece of metal paneling, or something like that, that'll keep them protected a lot better. And also, really be careful about walking from one chicken situation, to another chicken situation, to another chicken situation, like an urban coop tour or something like that. It's a really great way to spread chicken pathogens from one person's house to another. So if you're going to do something like that, have some spray disinfectant that you can spray on your shoes and wash your hands in between and all that good-jazz to try and keep your chickens healthy, because, you know, one of the greatest arguments that I've heard against backyard chickens, is that they can harbor disease that might affect commercial chicken operations. And the fact of the matter is, that's true. So even small producers, backyard producers, have to be aware of of biosecurity practices and do their due diligence to keep the state and region's poultry flock healthy.

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Christa Hartsook 21:08

Absolutely! Great point to make too! Well, Andy, thanks so much for being on today. We really appreciate it.

A

Andy Larsen 21:15

Hey, happy to do it. And it's wonderful to talk to you, Christa.

C

Christa Hartsook 21:20

You take care.

A

Andy Larsen 21:21

Alright.