

Why do my hens stop laying eggs in the winter?

Hens require about 16 hours of daylight to maintain a regular egg-laying schedule. Chickens may stop laying altogether in the cold, winter months when daylength is at its shortest and birds are stuck inside a dark coop. To ensure that your hens continue laying eggs through the winter, there are a few things you can do. The easiest and best method is to add a few hours of artificial lighting to your chicken coop. To save energy, couple this with a timer and photosensitive switch. Adding a south-facing window to the coop can also help to introduce natural light when it is available. Allowing hens access to the outdoors on warm, sunny days free of deep snow will also help stimulate egg laying.

Lighting is not the only factor that affects egg production though. Hens need to be healthy, have adequate nutrition, and have access to clean, fresh water. In the summer, hens with outdoor access will eat not only their rations but also insects and weeds, enhancing egg production. During cold weather, hens will spend more time in the coop – and more of their calories simply trying to stay warm, which translates to lower egg production. Supplementing layer feed with an additional high-calorie feed such as cracked corn can help. As chickens have more difficulty accessing natural grit when locked in a coop or on snow-covered ground, be sure to provide grit as a supplement. (Chickens use grit in their gizzards in the same way that we chew with our teeth). Also, adding crushed oyster shells helps ensure adequate calcium, which is used to form eggshells. Importantly, water should not be allowed to freeze. Birds must be allowed to drink clean water freely.

Older hens will generally lay fewer eggs; adding a few younger birds and culling unproductive older birds will increase your overall egg production. Don't forget that chickens take time to mature before they reach an age where they start laying eggs. For most egg-laying breeds, this occurs sometime between 18-24 weeks old. Those first eggs laid by young hens will be smaller than normal. Hens also lay less frequently when they first begin laying. Most chickens will eventually lay about one egg per day. The number of eggs will naturally taper off in Autumn, especially up here in the North Country where our days get very short in the winter season.

Chickens continue to grow in popularity with homesteaders and backyard enthusiasts. The decision to keep chickens, however, should not be made impulsively. Be sure that you understand the basics of keeping hens healthy year-round prior to bringing home the first chick. Keep in mind that New York State law requires the purchase of a minimum of six baby chicks at one time if they are under two months of age. While this is done to ensure that baby chicks stay warm, it's also a good idea for the winter as more hens will help keep each other warmer.

If you want to know more about raising hens, please join us for a presentation titled “Back to the Basics: Poultry 101,” on Thursday, February 24th, from 7:00-8:00PM. This meeting will cover different chicken breeds, nutrition, housing, and much more. You can register on the Cooperative Extension website here: https://reg.cce.cornell.edu/Poultry101_222.

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