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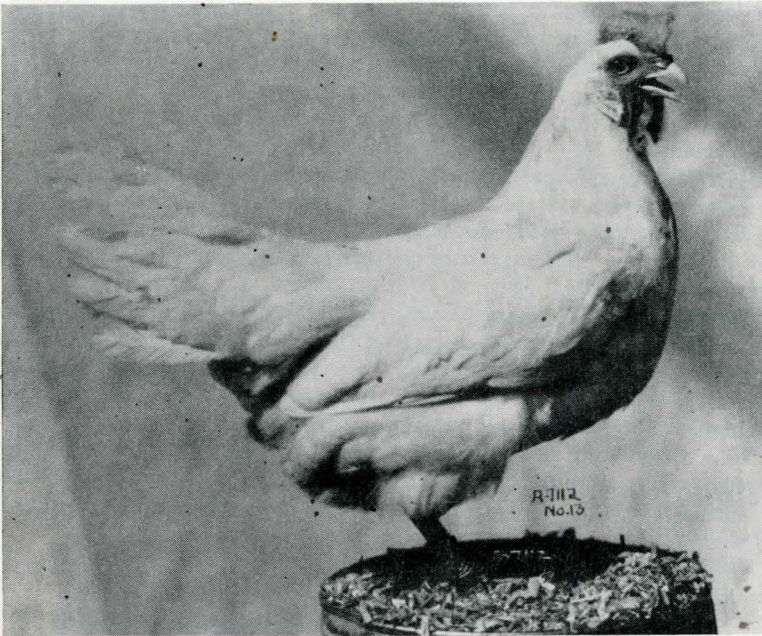
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How to Select Good Layers



The University of Nebraska Agricultural College Extension Service
and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating
W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln

How to Select Good Layers

J. R. REDDITT

THE removal of unproductive and unhealthy members of the farm poultry flock at frequent intervals *throughout the entire year* is a practice well established among those whose flocks really pay dividends. For efficiency, a knowledge of a few methods is necessary. The time required is not great; in fact the removal of unproductive chickens, or "culling", can be made a part of a routine and need not require more than a few hours per month, on an average. The directions that follow apply in a general way to all breed types. Slight modifications can be made in accordance with variations in breed characteristics.

Culling technique.—Since the handling of laying hens usually slows up egg production, the best culling method is one that will disturb the hens the least. A means of assuring this is to use a "catching coop", which has an opening at one end that may be set against the small door of the hen-house. Hens are then gently driven in and removed one by one from the top. Using a wire fence inside the house is probably quicker. A few hens are driven into a small wire pen and a catching hook is used to remove them from it.

In handling chickens there is only one good way; that is, holding the bird's head always toward the operator's body with its breast-bone resting in the palm of the hand, the forefinger between the bird's legs, and the legs held tightly with the rest of the hand. By this method any bird can easily be held without harm to bird or person.

Successful poultrymen do all-year culling and remove poor layers whenever they appear. Without disturbing the good layers, these are caught with a catching hook and removed. This system of culling when properly done insures maximum production averages, is a factor in keeping costs low, and is also helpful in lowering the death rate.

One should first determine whether or not the hen is in laying condition. Laying condition is denoted in three ways: (1) comb and wattles enlarged, smooth, and usually red; (2) abdomen dilated and comparatively soft and pliable; (3) vent enlarged, moist, and pliable.

Culling for egg production can be done more accurately during the latter part of the hen's first production year. Before pullets begin to lay, it is difficult to apply production characteristics to them; consequently they are judged chiefly by development, rate of maturity, and indications of vigor. By the use of these tests, a large percentage of the outstanding culls can be taken out before much housing space or feed is wasted on them. Select the healthy pullets that have well-developed bodies, refined, strong-appearing heads, and bright, intelligent eyes.

Head and eyes.—Poor layers nearly always have coarse head features, with wrinkled, meaty faces, and sunken eyes, in contrast with the refinement of the good layers, that have lean, clean faces with prominent, alert eyes. One must be careful, of course, not to emphasize over-refinement, which may indicate weakness. A term which has been used to define this desirable quality is "rugged refinement". The head and eye of the good

layer will suggest strength, vigor, alertness, and intelligence. The head will be deep and the beak rather short and well curved. A straight beak gives an impression of too much length to the head and is not desirable. The over-refined birds have thin and weak-appearing heads.

In a newer system, the theory is advanced that good layers have a skull that is flat and broad at the top, the breadth being carried well forward in front of the eyes. The eyes themselves will be set toward the upper part of the bird's head and not far from the top line of the skull. A head that appears decidedly rounded, either from the front or side, indicates low production. The eye set low in the head is also undesirable. This head-point system may be used in connection with other characteristics.

The molt.—The best layers usually molt late in the season, but they molt rapidly and come back into production again at about the same time as do those birds that started much earlier. Late molting is correlated with good vigor, which is always an outstanding characteristic of the best layers, while early molting is equally characteristic of poor layers. The molting test is of especial value; first, it is very simple and easy to use, and second, when used in late spring or early summer it permits the removal of birds which are almost invariably poor producers. Early culling is recommended because it saves feed and reduces summer losses. Hen prices are usually highest in the spring, so it pays to sell the non-layers early. If breeding stock is selected by picking hens that have not started to molt by October first, the best layers will no doubt be included. Hens that have not molted will have ragged, weather-worn plumage in the fall.

The handling-quality test.—Handling quality may be determined by feeling the abdomen and pelvic bones. Birds having good quality will have a pliable abdomen, free from hard fat. The skin will be loose and pliable. The pelvic bones will be thin, pointed, pliable, and free from hard patches of fat. The shanks of these birds will be rather thin, smooth, and flat with close-fitting scales. Round, plump shanks or exceedingly coarse ones are indications of poor production.

The quality characteristics are not so evident as the hen grows old; hence this test is not so accurate with birds that are two years old or over.

Quality again is influenced greatly by the breed, strain, feeding conditions, and management. Large birds will not always carry or show the quality that can be noticed in the smaller type, even though they may lay as many eggs. Hens in active laying condition will show more evidence of quality than the same hens during a non-laying or resting period.

The pigmentation test.—Yellow-skinned breeds experience a fading out of the natural yellow pigmentation in the beak, shanks, and skin during heavy laying. When egg production stops, the yellow color reappears, provided the ration is rich in the yellow pigment-containing ingredients. Given the same feed and management, the loss of pigment occurs most rapidly in the best layers.

Disposition and temperament.—Another indicator of laying ability is temperament. Good laying hens are friendly, active, and ambitious. They are not wild or flighty, nor are they lazy and sluggish. Good layers go to

roost late at night and are always off the roost early in the morning. When in laying condition, good layers are hearty eaters and will be perfectly willing to rustle for their food supply. The toe nails of good layers will, as a rule, be worn from much scratching if they are housed on a cement floor.

The capacity test.—Good layers must have plenty of room for the digestive and egg-laying organs. Heavy layers are hearty eaters. A five-pound hen producing 200 eggs in a year must convert about 85 pounds of raw material into about 25 pounds of eggs. Plenty of room for a large, fully-developed digestive and reproductive system is important, and the term used to denote this quality is "capacity".

Comparative length, depth, and breadth of the body cavity can be noted by measuring the distance between the pelvic or "lay" bones and the distance from the end of the breast bone to the pelvic bones. Body width is indicated by the distance between the two pelvic bones, depth and length by the distance from the breast bone to the pelvic bones.

Body type.—If reasonable attention is paid to standard breed type in the selection of breeding stock, birds of reasonably good egg type will automatically be picked, for the standard type of all common breeds embodies an ideal which is not inconsistent with good egg-laying ability. Good breadth of back, a good spring of rib, and depth of body, both front and rear, are the important points, especially for males. These factors are of real significance in the selection of breeding males and exhibition birds of both sexes; hence they are automatically cared for if breeding stock is selected for standard qualities.

A good layer will show part or all of these characteristics. **The first eight are the most important.**

Good Layers Usually

1. Molt late—starting after October 1st.
2. Molt rapidly—dropping great numbers of feathers at one time.
3. Have clean-cut, strong, refined heads.
4. Have large, bright, prominent eyes.
5. Show refinement—in comb, wattles, legs, and skin.
6. Are active, alert, and healthy.
7. Have flattened (or triangular) lean shanks.
8. Lose the yellow color from their beak and shanks. (Applies only to yellow-shanked breeds.)
9. Are deep-chested and slab-sided.
10. Have worn, weather-beaten plumage from spring until they molt in the fall.
11. Have pointed flexible lay-bones (or pubic bones), which are on each side of the vent.
12. Have broad, flat backs.
13. Have soft, pliable abdomens.

Poor Layers Usually

1. Molt early—before October 1st.
2. Molt slowly—dropping just a few feathers at a time.
3. Have coarse, meaty, or else thin, weak-looking heads.
4. Have small, sleepy, or sunken eyes.
5. Show lack of refinement—roughness and coarseness in comb, wattles, legs, and skin.
6. Are "peppless" or sleepy.
7. Have rounded, fat shanks.
8. Retain part or all of their yellow color in beak and shanks. (Shows only in yellow-skinned breeds.)
9. Are shallow-chested and round-bodied.
10. Have sleek, shiny plumage at all times unless sick.
11. Have thick, meaty, rigid laybones.
12. Have rounded, narrow backs.
13. Have hard abdomens.

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