

## Ross Mosteller

District Extension Agent  
Livestock & Natural Resources

### **Chicks; More Than a Secular Easter Icon**

This time of year gardeners get anxious to plant, spring break travelers enjoy warmer climates and poultry keepers catch “chick fever”. While this can be a rewarding and self-sustaining venture, planning and preparation is key to success! I get it, it’s hard to walk past the chick pens at the local farm supply store and not take some of those cheeping, fluffy, egg-makers home; but make sure you know what you’re getting into and be prepared.

Know your intended outcome in raising chickens before you even begin to think about types, colors and quantity. With recent spikes in egg prices and more limited egg supplies, you might notice that hatcheries are experiencing strong demand and more limited supplies of chicks as well. This might cause you to rethink particular chick breeds you like, so discussion starts with what is the right breed or hybrid for your situation? Sourcing “ready to lay” pullets might be a good option, if you are looking for egg layers, but focus today will be on baby chicks. Plan to keep one age of bird in a flock at one time, sourced from the same hatchery, for best success.

Basic categories are egg layers, meat producers, dual purpose and “fancy” types geared more toward exhibition. If you only want eggs, look at pullets in the egg laying hybrids - such as sex-links (*in various colors*) and leghorn influenced crosses. Needing a quick protein source and not eggs? Meat-type broilers, such as Cornish Rock crosses, are your best choice. Many backyard flocks utilize dual purpose straight runs, who supply both meat and eggs. Popular breeds include: Rhode Island Reds, Wyandotte, Rocks, Orpington, Ameraucana, to name a few.

After your breed or hybrid has been selected, sourcing becomes the next topic. Always select chicks from sources that are reputable, have NPIP testing and other health assurances granted; and you might even consider additional vaccinations to prevent diseases. Direct shipment from a known hatchery is often the best idea to minimize health risk. Hatcheries generally supply all the above, plus live chick guarantees. Most local farm supply stores source chicks directly from hatcheries as well, so this can be a good choice too. This does come with more potential disease exposure due to whatever people might unintentionally bring into a store.

Chicks will need an artificial heat source, in a draft free environment, providing 90-95 degrees Fahrenheit the first week. This temperature can be reduced by 5 degrees per week, until reaching a constant 65-70 degrees. Floor space starts out at one half square foot per bird moving up to two or more square footage as adults. Adequate feeder and waterer space from day one is a must! Flat feeders and/or troughs should be used for the first six weeks. High protein, complete, balanced feed should be used. Fresh, cool, water with electrolytes for the first few weeks is a good idea as well. Pine shavings/chips make a good bedding source and should be kept fresh.

After that, daily care and inspection now becomes the most important aspect. Watch to make sure chicks are eating, drinking, remaining thermally comfortable by not piling up, and don’t show any signs of sickness or disease. Healthy chicks should be active and alert. Signs of sickness or disease can be lethargic, droopy chicks, chicks who can’t stand, coughing, sneezing, watery eyes, labored breathing and sadly - dead chicks. When disease is suspected, get a reliable diagnosis and start treatment. Note that the number of veterinarians specializing in poultry is limited, but vets should be your go-to source for health questions and concerns.

Hopefully if you plan, prepare and follow all the steps discussed, you can have great success with a thriving poultry flock. You will have a source of meat in 8-24 weeks and eggs in 18-24 weeks. One thing to remember is that if you’ve not been used to daily chores, you will have them now! Be prepared to enjoy the benefits of poultry, but also the daily work that comes with it. Additional information can be found in the KSRE publication: [Management of the Small Flock of Chickens](#), MF-2390.