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Culling the Flock

Gathering eggs as the days get shorter often means fewer minutes spent in the hen house, as poultry will naturally start to lay fewer eggs and prepare for a molt in declining daylight. This is a natural process that is required by the hen for long term egg production, and it can be regulated with artificial light. But what needs to be done when a hen goes more permanently out of production? In staying with the same theme from last week, culling - this time of hens, seems like a topic to discuss.

Culling refers to the identification and removal of the non-laying or low producing hens from a laying flock. Removing the inferior birds reduces the cost of producing eggs, reduces the incidence of disease, and increases the available space for more productive hens. Hens eat feed whether or not they are laying. Removing the cull birds will make more feed and space for productive birds. Unless the birds are diseased, they are suitable for marketing or home cooking.

There are different ways to cull the flock, each with pros and cons. Some common methods are: "all in, all out", sight culling and individual inspection. All in, all out involves replacing the entire flock with new birds. This is a simple process that has some biosecurity benefits but often involves removing productive hens. Sight culling is just like it sounds, looking at the flock and culling out those that are smaller, look less thrifty, have obvious deformities/injuries or appear to be sick. Individual culling is the most labor intensive, but lends itself to removing non-producing birds, especially those that might not have visual indicators that they aren't laying using the simple sight culling method.

Individual culling requires handling each bird, typically done at night to cause the least amount of disturbance. This also provides a good opportunity to inspect for mites or other pest issues that can be treated while handling the birds. After the laying flock has reached peak egg production and production decrease is noted, occasionally check the flock for poor producing hens. This can be accomplished with evaluation of physical characteristics of the bird.

A good layer will have a large, smooth, moist, almost white vent. The vent of a non-layer is usually small, puckered, and round. The two small bones at the sides of the vent are called the pubic bones. They should be flexible and wide apart, with at least two finger widths between them. The abdomen should be deep, soft, and pliable without an accumulation of body fat. As the hen produces eggs, she diverts yellow color from certain portions of her body and deposits it into the yolks of the eggs. Bleaching of various parts of the hen's body is a very good indicator of the time the hen has been in production. Comb and wattles should be large, bright red, and glossy.

Hens will not lay well or at all if they are suffering from a health condition or molting. Delay culling if a significant portion of the flock is suffering or recovering from a minor disease or molt. Culling a diseased or molting flock often removes some of the better laying birds. If unsure of your culling ability and fear elimination of good hens, place suspect hens in wire-bottomed coop or cage and observe egg production for a few days before completing the culling process. Mississippi State University has a good publication (#358) on culling hens for those seeking more information with charts and examples.