

Feeding Chickens

Contributed by Treacodactyl

After my introductory article, I thought I would describe our hens' favourite activity - eating. This will, hopefully, give a useful overview and give a new poultry keeper some idea of what a chicken will eat and what they can be fed. This should only be taken as a rough guide and I recommend referring to a good poultry book (see links in the poultry and livestock forum) for more detailed instructions. I have learnt that there are many things people feed their chickens, there is not necessarily a 'right way' but there are definitely some things that should either not be fed or fed only as an occasional treat.

Chicken Food - What to Feed?

When we purchased our hens they were between 12-15 weeks old. Chicks are fed on fine food specially designed with the correct balance of nutrients for them. Young growing chickens are fed on special growers' feed and this is what we fed our hens on for their first few weeks. They were then gradually introduced to layers' feed

Exact ages and feed type will depend on the breed of poultry and the feed. For specific details I would suggest either speaking to the poultry supplier or a feed specialist. It is important to feed the correct food at the correct time to ensure the birds grow healthily, but make sure that you only purchase as much growing feed as necessary so that little is wasted and you are not tempted to feed the wrong food for too long.

When our hens were the correct age we tried them on layers' pellets. Our hens have always been a little fussy and they didn't seem overly keen on pellets so we tried layers' mash. Again they didn't seem that keen so we went back to pellets as we find they are easier to store and feed. We have fed pellets ever since, for about three years. Our hens seem to go through patches when they are far hungrier than others; this depends on the time of year, broodiness, the state of their moult and so on. So don't be surprised if your chickens initially turn their beaks up at what is offered to them.

The pellets are fed in a large dog bowl as our hens have a habit of eating 'feet' first and tipping over most containers. The dog bowl is more stable and made of very robust plastic which has lasted a long time. There are many specially designed troughs, bowls and feed hoppers available, depending on how poultry is reared, the food give, the way it is fed and how many birds you keep.

I'll now give a brief overview of the various feedstuffs we have fed our hens.

All in One Food: Mash & Pellets

The bulk of a hen's diet will be either layers' pellets or layers' mash. This is a complete feed and, in theory, a hen should not need much else other than water and grit. A good brand should contain all the nutrients and calcium a hen needs to be healthy and lay. Naturally it is possible to keep hens on different food but I have not tried doing this and don't know anyone who has.

There are many different manufacturers of feed and it ranges from cheap mass-produced to GM-free organic with the costs varying accordingly. It typically comes in a 20-25 kg sack and we pay about £8 for a 20kg sack of organic pellets. It should be noted that food has a best before date on it that indicates the length of time it should last before the nutrients may start to deteriorate. As we only have three hens we try and ensure the dates have enough time to run when we buy the food - our supplier is happy to check the dates on his stock, or to order us in a new bag on his next delivery, so it is worth phoning in advance.

Not all makes of layers pellets are equal, different mills can produce pellets of different sizes. I have noticed our hens often eat the smaller bits of pellets first and other people have said that with smaller pellets there is less waste. So, what could seem a more expensive option could work out cheaper in the long run.

The amount to feed varies depending on the size, age and activity of the chicken. Some books suggest feeding enough that can be eaten in 10 minutes, however our hens will often look around for something they fancy before tucking in to their pellets. Our three hens, which are described as a large breed (Sussex), are provided with about 400g of pellets between them each day. Most days they eat them all, but on occasions they don't so any left over are thrown on the

compost heap. So, a 20kg bag lasts them just under two months.
Mixed Corn & Grain

This is the classic feed that people often imagine scattering to a flock of happy hens. Increasingly vets and poultry experts are advising that mixed corn should not be used, as the maize is very fattening. A fat hen will lay less and can have severe health problems. Plain wheat is now advised and, even this, should be given in small amounts as a scratch feed. This tends to be given in the evening because it takes longer to digest and so is useful for keeping a bird warm overnight.

Many people make the mistake of feeding corn in the morning. Hens, by choice will eat this as it is tastier than pellets, but not as nutritious. It is advisable to only feed a little in the evening or not at all.

Too much grain will upset the balance of the layers' feed and is another reason for limiting it as this will mean less eggs are produced. We can only buy organic mixed corn which is an 80/20 mix of wheat and maize. I try to track down plain organic wheat to feed. We try to feed only 70g of corn a day to our three hens.

People often think that maize is useful for ensuring deep golden egg yolks, but this colour usually comes from green foodstuffs. The layers' pellets we use contain marigold leaves in their ingredients for this purpose.

Fruit & Vegetables

When our hens are free ranging in the garden they help themselves to whatever vegetation takes their fancy. They are quite keen on nibbling grass but they are especially keen on our vegetable patch. Cabbage and brussels tops are a favourite together with salad burnet. We try and fence off most of the vegetables and tolerate a certain amount of pecking.

Fruit is another matter - I have concluded that our hens like fruit that is just a little too under ripe for me to pick. They will greedily eat almost any garden fruit such as strawberries, tomatoes, blackcurrants, blackberries, raspberries, grapes and so on. This means we have to take a great deal of care with our ripening fruit otherwise we end up with no fruit and a clump of very plump hens! Again fencing is used along with careful watching when the fruit is almost ready.

A benefit of their appetite for fruit is that any fruit that is damaged (by other birds, slugs, mice etc) can be given directly to the hens and we don't feel as if we are wasting it. Windfall apples and apple cores are also fed to the hens and they are especially useful when added to the hens' ark when they are shut in. This gives them something to peck at when they are otherwise unoccupied in the ark. We also feed brussel tops, cabbage hearts or leaves when they are shut in. These can be tied to the inside of the ark and, again, will give something for the hens to peck at. Traditionally nettle tops have been used and I will try this winter as we have managed to grow a small crop this year.

We always only feed food that we would eat ourselves. If anything is too ripe or mouldy then we will not feed it to them and we'll add it to the compost heap that the hens do not have access to.

Not all fruit is suitable, so it is worth doing a little research before feeding them anything out of the ordinary. Some fruits such as papaya, kiwi fruit and pineapple have active enzymes which are good for humans but which we're reluctant to allow the chickens to feast on.

Treats

In the past we have fed fruit and a little left over bread to our hens as treats. They used to love cooked pasta and potatoes, cheese and many other things but these sort of treats will make a chicken fat if too much is given too often. Oats have been traditionally fed to hens during the moult as it is supposed to provide extra nutrients for growing feathers.

However, regulations have been brought in which means no catering waste (which includes kitchen scraps) can be fed to farm animals, including poultry. For full details check the DEFRA web site:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/by%2Dprods/wastefood/>

DEFRA have also produced this useful leaflet:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/by-prods/pdf/swill-leaflet.pdf>

It should also be noted if you intend to sell any eggs there are new very strict laws about what can be fed to a chicken, details of which can be found on the DEFRA web site.

Free Range Food

A good source of food for our hens is the varied pest population of our garden. We have numerous small slugs and snails that would otherwise wreak havoc with our fruit and vegetables. Luckily another of our hens' favourite tasks is to run round the garden with us and eagerly wait the lifting of a pot or stone so they can eat the varmint underneath. Large snails need to be broken and then we stand well back as the hens shake them about until they can eat them. When digging over new ground that has been covered in grass for a number of years the hens selflessly ate most of the leatherjackets and chafer grubs that would have otherwise tucked into our plants.

Our hens are also partial to ants and will spend a long time digging up a nest to tuck into the ants, eggs and larvae. They also run round the garden after the flying ants in the summer, much to our amusement.

A few words of caution: when we are digging our hens are only too keen to help so a great deal of care must be taken not hurt them. They are also not that selective and love to eat animals that are good for the garden such as beetles (which they love to crunch), centipedes, slow worms and even frogs and toads. So when lifting pots and stones I always look under first. It is also wise to ensure that no poisons have been used (we don't use any) to treat pests if chickens are near by. Chickens are also prone to picking up worms from pests and so treating them regularly is essential.

Plain Grit & Mixed Grit

Plain insoluble grit is required for many birds to assist in the grinding up of their food. Soluble grit gives extra calcium to aid hens that are laying and to provide calcium for bones.

I have read that free-ranging hens may not require any grit as they should pick up enough from the earth as they rummage about. Although ours spend a great deal of time free-ranging we also provide extra mixed grit as this is cheap and it will ensure they get what they need. Grit comes in different sizes, smaller for young or growing birds and larger for large adult breeds. A word of caution, as layers' feed should contain enough calcium for a laying hen if this is their main food they may not need any extra supplied in the mixed grit. Chickens can suffer problems from too much calcium but this is far beyond my expertise so if you have any concerns it would be worth discussing with a feed supplier or vet. We choose to use mixed grit as this is what has been traditionally used and we feel the hens should be able to choose how much they need. Salt

One thing that is essential when feeding any treats is that chickens should not be fed food that contains too much salt. The layers' pellets we feed have a little added sea salt (yes sea salt - well it does make the pellets taste better). It is not advisable to feed any other food that has added salt.

Water

The provision of water should never be overlooked; I have read a chicken will survive a few days without food but not without water. It is essential that chickens have constant access to clean, fresh drinking water during the day. As our hens are prone to knocking over water containers we leave them with two, one a traditional drinker with a reservoir and one an open bowl. We find the drinker can get clogged up and the bowls knocked over, but by combining the two the hens have access to at least one supply of fresh water.

It is also worth noting that free ranging hens will find their own sources of water, often from some unpleasant places, so provide them with fresh water and clean away sources of stagnant or potentially harmful water - this includes pot trays, puddles and buckets and watering cans.

With thanks to Alison for her advice.

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