

Thoughts on Culling the Flock

Karma Glos, Kingbird Farm

As fall draws near, the weather grows cold, and the grass stops growing, its time to think about culling the flock. When the season turns and I must start thinking about moving the laying hens in from pasture, I must also decide who will make the transition to winter housing in order to lay another 6 months. The hens that have been laying now for twelve months (they are 18 months old) are molting and not likely to be as productive next year. The hens that began laying this spring will continue through the winter and be culled next spring, after twelve months of production. Thus, every six months part of the flock is culled and a new set of pullets comes in to take its place. Consequently, when fall rolls around I must remove approximately 150 18-month old hens from the flock and move the remaining 150 12-month old hens to winter housing where 150 6-month old pullets are waiting and just starting to lay. The following spring we repeat the process by sending out 150 now 12-month old hens to summer housing with a new batch of newly laying pullets we have raised up over the winter. This system gives us a vital flock of 300 layers, half of which are newly laying and half of which are part ways through production. It also gives us good, consistent production and young healthy hens. It also requires us to cull 150 hens every six months.

Culling is no one's favorite task. I would love to let my hens live out their natural life span here on the farm where they produced so many beautiful eggs for us. However, economy of scale would ruin us in a short time. In order to keep a vital healthy flock that produces constantly year round; we must keep raising up new replacement pullets. After their second season the older hens begin to decline in production enough that they cease even to pay for their feed. This may be fine in a backyard flock, but feeding and managing certified organic hens who are not laying enough threatens the viability of our egg business and the quality of management we can give to the overall flock. The hens must support their corner of the farm.

Despite the grim prospects, there are several options for a hen retired from commercial production. We use all of these options when culling and hope to make the best decisions both morally and financially. The three general options for retired layers on our farm are: 1. Sale to a person with a backyard flock. 2. Processing for sale as stew hens. 3. Culling and composting for unthrifty or injured birds.

We choose one of these options based on the breed, health, and production condition of the hen (check poultry books for methods to determine the laying condition of a hen). We initially try to sell the healthy retired hens to people with small backyard flocks who don't require the level of production we do. Eighteen-month-old hens are plenty productive for the small flock owner as long as the hens are healthy and well cared for. We base our price for these hens on what we would get for that bird if we processed it as a stew hen. Depending on breed, a dressed stew hen weighs 2½–3 lbs. We charge \$2.25/lb. for stew hens, so a 2½ lb. hen is worth \$5.63 in the freezer. However, that means we do have to



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process, package, freeze, and sell that bird to earn \$5.63. On the other hand, if someone buys that bird live off the farm, we have no additional labor involved in the culling of that bird. Based on those numbers we typically sell retired certified organic laying hens for \$3 picked up at the farm. These hens are rarely over 18 months old, in very good health and plenty productive for the small home flock.

After selling as many hens possible live, we then look at the remaining hens' health and body condition to make our final cull. Hens that are obviously unthrifty or injured are immediately culled and composted for their own sake and the well being of the flock. This is done throughout the season as well as during the major culling periods. In addition, some breeds of chickens are very slight of build and never have much meat on them; these are rarely worth processing. Culling and composting is our least favorite method. This only requires us to kill and properly compost the birds, but sometimes feels wanton. Somehow, the killing and dressing of a retired bird for human nourishment seems a fair choice, but composting can feel cruel and pointless. Of course it's not cruel and pointless, especially in the case of a sick, suffering bird. The carefully tended compost, composed of chickens, manure, and straw, is turned and heated for a year to produce a vital, nitrogen-rich food for the health of our crops. The composted birds return to the earth and help maintain the vitality of our farm.

The hens we chose to process for food must be healthy, robust, and not molting. For the effort we want a fairly large (2½–4 lb.), plump bird with good fat coverage (for that amazing broth) and no pinfeathers. The lack of pin feathers is particularly important if you're attempting to clean colored birds such as Rhode Island Reds, Black Sex-Links, or Barred Rocks. White birds such as Delawares, Leghorns, and White Rocks are usually much easier to clean regardless of molt. Also keep in mind that older birds can be more effort to pluck, eviscerate, and cut up. Due to the maturity of the bird, tendons, ligaments, and skin are much harder to cut and thus more effort to process. Keep this in mind if you are planning to process your own stew hens, they take more time than broilers, and typically bring in less money. That being said, there is a market for organic stew hens. They are virtually unavailable in grocery stores and make the most marvelous chicken soup or stock. Their flavor and richness far surpass a broiler chicken, but they must be stewed long and slow for tender meat. Remember, they are usually at least 16 months older than a broiler and they

have had a lot of exercise (at least free-range hens have). They have also had a lifetime of foraging for seeds, insects, and greens and a balanced diet of certified organic grains. This diet produces rich golden fat for broth and delicious meat.

With these thoughts about culling on your mind, carefully consider the breed, age makeup, and management of your next laying flock. We are conscious of trying to select a breed with the following criteria: 1. Good production in a free-range system. 2. Docile, levelheaded breed with social skills. 3. Medium to heavy breed with good feathering for winter. 4. Robust, meaty bird worth processing for a stew hen. 5. Not so fat and heavy that they put their feed into fat and not eggs. 6. Good foraging habits. 7. Light colored or white feathers that are easy to remove. Finding a breed with all the above criteria is rare, and we are always trying new breeds to maximize the use of the bird overall. Eventually, all laying hens must move on and it is up to the farmer to select a good breed both for laying eggs and what lies beyond.

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