

## Chapter 18

# More than Ten Misconceptions about Chickens, Eggs, and So On

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Discerning the truth in what you read and hear about chickens
  - ▶ Allaying fears about bird flu, growth hormones, and antibiotics
  - ▶ Dispelling myths about what determines egg taste and quality
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**O**h, the things that are said about chickens! The very word chicken brings up the image of a coward, but chickens aren't really cowards. We talk about falsehoods throughout the book, but here is a compilation of the most common myths and misconceptions about chickens and eggs that you may encounter as a chicken owner — or chicken-keeper wannabe. Maybe some of these bits of misinformation are actually keeping you from getting some chickens of your own, so here we clear them up once and for all.

And when you're out there throwing around chicken references like “dumb cluck” or “hen-pecked,” remember that while some are based in fact, most are misconceptions about chicken behavior. Knowing a bit about chickens from reading this book and actually observing chickens will help you become a champion for the cause of chicken-keeping.

## *Bird Flu Is a Risk to Reckon With*

Some people want to keep chickens out of cities and suburban areas or are afraid to own chickens because they fear bird influenza. You're more likely to get human flu or West Nile virus than bird flu, or *avian flu*.

The fact is that bird flu has been among us for a long time. Wild birds carry many strains of bird flu, just as humans carry many strains of human flu. There have been outbreaks of bird flu among domestic poultry in the United States, but none so far have come from the dreaded H5N1 strain, the one responsible for disease and death in humans in Asia and some other countries. Most strains of bird flu do not infect humans.

Avian flu does not pass through the air. The H5N1 bird flu virus, at least so far, passes only from bird to human and not from human to human. It can be contracted from handling infected poultry, eating raw eggs or meat, or handling something in the environment contaminated by the virus shed in animal secretions.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is carefully monitoring the health of domestic and wild birds in the United States for bird flu of a deadly strain. Because wild birds are the likely source of this virus, and migratory birds could spread it here, home flock owners are advised to keep wild birds away from their chickens. In the case of an outbreak, the USDA would announce what steps home flock owners should take. Otherwise, common sense and good hygiene can keep chicken owners safe.

Chicken owners should limit visitors who own poultry themselves from handling their birds or going into chicken quarters. This is a real tough choice for many proud chicken owners, but it's a major way disease is spread between flocks, including bird flu. The virus can be carried on shoes, clothing, and even car tires. If you exhibit birds or buy new ones, they should go through a two-week quarantine period before being placed with the rest of the flock.

If most of the chickens in your flock suddenly die within a short period of time and without many symptoms, you should contact your local county Extension office, your state health department, or a local USDA office. It will either give you advice or tell you who to contact. Always wear gloves when handling dead or ill chickens, and keep your hands washed!

## *You Can't Raise Chickens if You Live in the City*

Chickens aren't just for country folk anymore. Anyone who has a small yard can find a place for a few chickens, even if you live in a bustling urban neighborhood.

They belong there even if your city isn't one of the enlightened cities that actually allows them (fortunately, an increasing number of cities are legalizing urban chicken-keeping). Pigeons have been allowed as pets in most cities for a long time, and they require similar care. Now, we can't tell you to break the law — but we can tell you to fight the law — and in Chapter 1 we give you some tips on how to get your city to amend outdated laws if yours is still in the dark ages.

If chickens are kept clean, they don't smell any more than the flock of Canada geese in the park or the neighbor's three Great Danes. Hens aren't any noisier

than the neighbor's blaring car stereo or leaf blower. Chickens allow urban dwellers to have some neat pets that make breakfast for them, too. Chickens are easier to care for than dogs, and they're quiet at night, unlike the neighborhood cats.

## ***Roosters Crow Only in the Morning***

Roosters do greet the sun exuberantly, but they also crow all day long, and sometimes if they're awakened at night, they crow then too. Roosters crow like songbirds sing, to mark their territory and make the hens aware of their presence. Healthy roosters crow every chance they get, although crowing frequency and sound vary by individual.

## ***You Need a Rooster to Get Eggs***

A hen is born with all the eggs she will ever have, and nature tricks her into laying them whether a rooster is around or not. The eggs are equally tasty, nutritious, and abundant, regardless of whether a rooster is present.

Hens don't seem to miss a rooster at all as long as they have hen friends to chum around with. Of course, none of their eggs can ever become chicks, but many chicken breeds don't care to be mothers anyway. It's fun to watch roosters escort and care for their hens, however, if you can have roosters.

## ***Keeping Chickens Penned Is Inhumane***

Chickens like to be able to roam around freely, but it isn't always safe for them to do so, even in the country. Most livestock is kept confined in some way for its own safety, and chickens are no exception. Your kids aren't the only ones who like chicken for dinner.

Chickens can be just as happy in a good-sized pen with nutritious food and a warm, dry place to sleep as your dog is confined to the backyard or your horse is confined to the pasture. They can be allowed supervised roaming from time to time, just like your pets. And confined chickens don't annoy the neighbors or damage the flower beds. Confined chickens pose less of a health risk too, because they aren't as likely to come in contact with wild birds that carry diseases, such as bird flu.

## *Chickens Are Vegetarians*

Chickens love meat, including fried chicken (believe it or not, this is true). Chickens are designed to eat just about anything, and they really need some of the amino acids they get from consuming animal-based proteins. Makers of commercial poultry feed usually add amino acids that are missing from grain-based diets, or they include safe animal sources of protein.

Homemade diets that are based on only grain may not keep your chickens at optimum health, especially in the winter when they can't dig some maggots out of the litter or catch moths. And pasture-only diets are just not a good way to grow chickens. Most pasture-based chicken-raising also involves commercial feed.

## *Big, Brown, Organic Eggs Are Best in Taste and Quality*

If all eggs are equally fresh, there isn't usually a difference in taste or nutrition. Farm-fresh eggs are generally brown eggs, because brown-egg layers are easier for most small flock owners to care for. And if you eat your own eggs or buy them locally, they're generally much fresher than store-bought eggs and they taste better. Green and blue eggs also taste the same as brown or white eggs. Small eggs taste like jumbo eggs. You might look at the eggs, though, and see a difference besides shell color. Chickens that have access to greens or are fed things like marigold flowers have eggs with deeper yellow yolks, which appeal to some people.

While some people think organic eggs taste better, it's usually because, once again, they're fresher. In general, however, in a blindfold taste test, organic and non-organic eggs are indistinguishable.

Chicken eggs can taste differently if the hens are fed a lot of certain foods, like flax seed, fish, or onions or if the eggs are not stored properly. Eggs can also pick up unusual flavors if they're stored next to foods with strong odors.

Nutritional claims about certain eggs vary widely in credibility. Chickens can be fed so that their eggs have less cholesterol and more of certain nutrients, but this is an exacting science that most small flock owners can't practice. Besides, the nutritional gurus are now telling us that the cholesterol we get from eggs is not the kind that builds up in our blood, so the point may be moot.

## *Fertilized and Unfertilized Eggs Are Easily Distinguishable*

Only a trained eye can tell fertilized and unfertilized eggs apart, unless they're stored improperly and an embryo begins growing. And blood spots in an egg do not mean it is fertilized. They're simply the result of a vein rupturing as an egg is released from the ovary. Store-bought eggs are almost always infertile eggs. Commercial breeders don't keep roosters with hens. Only a store selling locally produced eggs from a small flock with a rooster would have a chance of having a fertilized egg in there. But if you keep a rooster with your hens, chances are very good the eggs you eat are fertilized. If that bothers you, don't keep a rooster with your hens — it's that simple.

Fertilized eggs don't taste any differently than unfertilized ones. And that tiny bit of chicken sperm does not give the egg any nutritional boost, either.

## *Egg-Carton Advertising Is the Absolute Truth*

When buying eggs, beware: "Cage-free" doesn't mean organically raised, and it doesn't mean the hens range the farm freely. It usually means they were housed in large pens with a little room to move around. Growers refer to this environment as cage-free, but really it's just a giant cage with lots of chickens crowded into it. It's slightly better than being crowded into cages so small a chicken can't stand up or flap its wings, the way most commercial layers are housed. The eggs you buy from big-box stores are not going to be from hens that roam freely outside, no matter what deceptive words are used on the carton.

"Organic" doesn't mean the hens weren't kept in small cages either, at least not yet in the United States. Organic just refers to the feed they were given, not the conditions they were kept in. In Europe, however, eggs labeled organic must come from hens that have access to the outdoors.

Buying your eggs locally from hens kept in small flocks — whether free-ranging or fed organically or not — gives you the best-tasting eggs short of collecting them each morning from your own hens. And it probably means that the hens were kept in more humane conditions than commercial, caged layers.

## *Chickens Are Good for Your Garden*

Many people claim that chickens can till your soil, pull the weeds, eat the bugs, and fertilize the soil, but the truth is that chickens ruin your garden. They till the soil all right, right after you plant that crop of beans. They eat the weeds, along with all the lettuce. And while they eat the tomato worms, they take a bite out of each tomato.

Chickens don't belong in the garden. Maybe in the fall just before you clean it all out, but no other time. Chicken manure is good for the garden only after it has been composted. Fresh chicken manure deposited in the garden burns plants and brings the risk of salmonella bacteria contaminating your fresh veggies.

## *Chickens Are Dumb and Cowardly*

Most people who have raised chickens for any length of time strongly defend their chickens' intelligence and can tell you many tales of chicken bravery. Not to mention that sometimes it is certainly smarter to run from danger than to face it, so don't judge the chicken that retreats from danger.

As birds — or animals, for that matter — go, chickens are pretty intelligent. They can learn to count and understand the concept of zero. They can be trained to do tricks and to recognize colors. They can figure out how to get out of almost any pen you put them in, sooner or later. Chickens and other birds have been observed planning future actions or anticipating reactions to an action they're going to take. And chickens learn by observing and copying other chickens.

Chickens have a very well-organized social system that limits strife among a flock. Anyone who has ever watched a rooster coaxing his hens over to some choice food knows that they communicate among themselves.

Although the word "chicken" has come to mean cowardly, chickens can be very brave when defending their babies or their flock. Hens sometimes sacrifice themselves for their chicks. Roosters often fight to the death, even though most of us would consider that rather stupid behavior. And roosters can be formidable when protecting their girls — just ask anyone who has been chased by an angry rooster!