

EGGS AND CHICKENS IN MID-WINTER.

By "THEO."



henwife does indeed rejoice with a well-earned satisfaction if she can supply her family with plenty of new-laid eggs during the months of December, January, and February.

Perhaps some of the readers of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER are discouraged when they find that their hens have ceased to supply their wants. They say in disgust that poultry-keeping is

a failure, that hens never will lay in winter, etc. But let us consider the matter in a simple, straightforward manner.

Is it likely that hens that have been laying all through the spring and summer, perhaps on into the autumn, should lay in the early winter months, when they have hardly had time to get their new feathers? Even the best laying hens often rest from six to eight weeks on ceasing to lay in the autumn, and many stop longer than that. Therefore kill all but the best layers as soon as they show signs of moulting or stopping laying. The stock must be renewed by young pullets hatched not later than March or the beginning of April.

This is most important. So many people leave their chicken-hatching until May. Then the pullets are not ready to begin to lay until the cold winter has set in, and then they often wait until spring to begin at all. Meanwhile the unfortunate owner has looked longingly for eggs; has heard that new-laid eggs are selling at 2d. to 2½d. each. She has missed the harvest-time, and her pullets do not lay until everyone else's are doing so, and all the old hens have begun again, and eggs are as cheap as ever.

I stayed at a little Yorkshire village in the autumn and saw lots of young chickens about. But they were very young, and on inquiry I found that no one there hatched out early birds. The result—I received a letter in November, saying there was hardly an egg in the place.

Those girls who do not rear their own chickens must be very particular when buying birds to make sure that they are early hatched. Early-hatched pullets of pure breeds are usually to be met with from 5s. to 7s. 6d. each.

February hatched chickens are useful for keeping up the early autumn supply; but they are not much use for winter laying, as they moult like old hens.

Next in importance to the proper kind of stock is the condition of the house and run.

The house must be perfectly dry, with plenty of loose ashes, or, better still, peat moss litter on the ground.

The board under the perches must be cleaned daily, and the nests kept nice and fresh.

The house, if well made, without draughts, will be warm enough, but ventilation must be provided by means of small windows on two sides of the house at the highest point, well above the birds' heads, covered with fine perforated zinc.

When once hens catch cold and get out of sorts in the winter, it is difficult for them to get right again, but dryness, warmth, and cleanliness by means of plenty of dusting material will do wonders. This autumn has been very

bad for hens, owing to the extremely wet weather, which has made it almost impossible to keep the runs dry. Those who have a small covered-in run will have found out how essential it is. For hens kept dry, even in a small run, if properly fed, will do better than birds with a large grass range, if they have nowhere to go for shelter. Birds will often stand frost and snow, while wet and damp will give them roup.

I hope you have provided yourselves with proper winter breeds, such as Cochins, Brahmas, Plymouth rocks, white Leghorns, and good crosses from the feather-legged tribes.

Now as to food:—

Remember that in winter the fowl cannot get many things which it can during the summer.

Grit.—Very sharp, and plenty of it. For often the ground is hard, or else soft and muddy, and no proper grit is to be found; it is better to buy it at so much per cwt., if it cannot be otherwise obtained, than to let the hens go without it; for what use is food if there be no means of digestion?

Plenty of Green Food.—Grass or cabbage, etc., or turnips or carrots, etc. My hens have been much enjoying some fallen apples lately, but they are rather an expensive diet.

Very Hot Food in the Morning.—Meal scraps, etc., mixed with boiling water; add salt, a very little cayenne pepper, or some of Cook's poultry powder. Either scraps of meat, or meat crissel must also be given.

Corn of Different Kinds at Night.—Barley or buckwheat, or occasionally a little Indian corn.

Half the evening meal may consist of slightly boiled corn.

Be very careful not to throw the food on to wet, muddy ground. It is very bad for the hens.

Shut the hens into their houses every night, and after letting them out for their morning meal shut them up again for a couple of hours until they have comfortably digested their food, otherwise they will stand about in the cold.

Give hot water to drink. Empty the water trough every night to prevent the water freezing.

Should a hen really catch a bad cold, I have found nothing better than to bring her into the house and feed her with hot boiled linseed meal. It has to be put down her throat.

Buy chickens in mid-winter—I do not mean chickens for the Christmas dinner table, but little chicks, running about lively and happy, unconsciously preparing themselves for the spring market.

In order to attain this, it is necessary, of course, to have the eggs to hatch, which must be got from pullets or early moulted hens, mated with a strong cock or cockerel in good condition. Only allow six hens with one cock. Choose large hens with deep breasts, or plump birds with small bones.

Dorking and game crosses make good table fowls. Game Dorkings are considered the best table cross, as they make splendid birds. But for home spring chickens the great thing is to have plump, fast-growing birds. Even Leghorns mated with Houdans or Dorkings make fair spring chickens, as they grow so quickly, and are so precocious. Those who keep the feather-legged tribes ought to have some birds wanting to sit about Christmas, or early in January. Such birds are almost worth their weight in gold; and should a girl find one on the nest, great should be her joy.

But even with a good "clocking hen" and

the best eggs, it does not follow that chickens will result.

Do not try spring chickens unless you have a warm dry place for them.

A stable is the best place, or even a dry loft. The nest must be made most carefully with plenty of hay and feathers—hard and round, so that the eggs keep in the centre.

Not more than from eight to ten eggs must be set, according to the size of the hen.

The nest must be made in a quiet place, free from draught, and the hen put on with a few dummy eggs at night. When she is well settled in a day or so, put the real eggs under her.

Feed with hard corn and warm water, and provide some ashes in case she wants to dust herself. Then a day or two before hatching, sometimes it is wise to sprinkle a little water on the eggs at night, replacing the hen immediately, but if it is severe weather it is often safest to leave the eggs entirely alone.

Let the hen manage the chicks, as far as possible, herself. She must have free run of a warm, dry place, and must be kept in entirely if the weather be bad, the chicks being supplied with green food. If fine, however, a run in the garden will do all good, and in the early spring or winter they can do little harm.

Feed on egg, oatmeal, groats, etc., and don't forget the grit and the green food; and either milk or water to drink. When the egg is discontinued after the first week, give a little meat, scraps, rice pudding, etc.

There are three secrets in successful chicken-rearing: first, dryness; second, variety in diet; third, constant small meals.

Early chickens especially must be fed constantly, and even when as old as two months they must have the same care.

Feed last thing at night and very early in the morning.

A lady wrote to *Poultry*, I think, last spring, saying that the reason she got such fine spring chickens was that she fed them constantly and always kept a lamp burning in the stable where they were. She then put food down beside it, and the chicks went when hungry and had a good meal.

You can see that as early chickens are not a natural production, unnatural means must be provided.

An ordinary hen in spring would in nature be about searching for food at three or four in the morning, so we must not expect winter chicks to fast from evening until even our own breakfast-time.

Well-fed birds should be ready to kill at about four months old, when they should fetch a good price, one which will compare very favourably with the price received for a four months' old May chick, whose food has cost very little less.

If you have time, interest, and convenience by all means try your hand at spring chickens; but remember that they must be kept dry and clean, and that they need a good deal of patient attention.

Nothing is more dismal and wretched than to see a lot of poor little chicks brought into the world to linger perhaps only a week or two in damp and dirt, the poor mother herself trampling them to death in her very endeavour to fulfil her task.

If you can't rear chickens, give all your spare time to seeing after your hens; give them every comfort, and they will repay you well, even better than the chicken-rearing. But I know there are some girls who like to try their hands at everything, and it is for these I write.