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FARMERS' BULLETIN-1112
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

CULLING FOR EGGS AND MARKET



THIS BULLETIN has been written briefly
and in simple terms for the beginner,
and especially for members of the Boys' and
Girls' Poultry Clubs.

Contribution from the Bureau of Animal Industry

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CULLING FOR EGGS AND MARKET.

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PROPER CULLING INSURES PROFIT.

EVERY boy or girl who keeps poultry naturally desires to make as much profit as possible. To do so it is important that every hen kept should be a good layer and that all cockerels except those for breeding purposes (as well as pullets that lack vigor and vitality) should either be eaten or canned for home use or be sold as soon as they are large enough. Selecting or "weeding out" the hens that are poor layers from those that are good layers and picking out for market the cockerels of the flock that are the least likely to develop into good breeders is commonly spoken of as "culling," or culling for eggs and market. If you are to succeed and make money from your poultry it is necessary that you learn to cull your flock accurately so as to keep only such birds as will pay a profit on the feed they eat.

WHEN TO CULL.

The best time to cull the hens is during August and September, (usually from August 15 to September 15), for at that season it is easier to tell which ones have been good layers and which have been poor layers. At that time of the year hens which show signs of laying or are laying and have not molted are usually the ones that have been the better layers during the entire season, and the hen that lays best during her first year will usually lay best during the second and third years. She is, therefore, the one that should be kept. It is not often advisable, however, to keep hens of the heavier breeds, such as Plymouth Rocks, Rhode Island Reds, and Brahmas, beyond their second year, or of the smaller breeds, such as Leghorns, and Anconas, beyond their third year, as they seldom prove profitable.

In addition to culling the entire flock in August and September, you should always be on the watch for hens that are sick or very thin in flesh, or that show signs of weakness or poor vitality. When discovered, cull them out at once.

HOW TO TELL THE GOOD AND POOR LAYERS.

There are a number of indications or characteristics that help to distinguish a good laying hen from a poor layer. However, they may not all be decisively apparent and all may not agree in the same fowl. Therefore it is necessary to take into consideration all the different indications and to depend upon the agreement of a majority

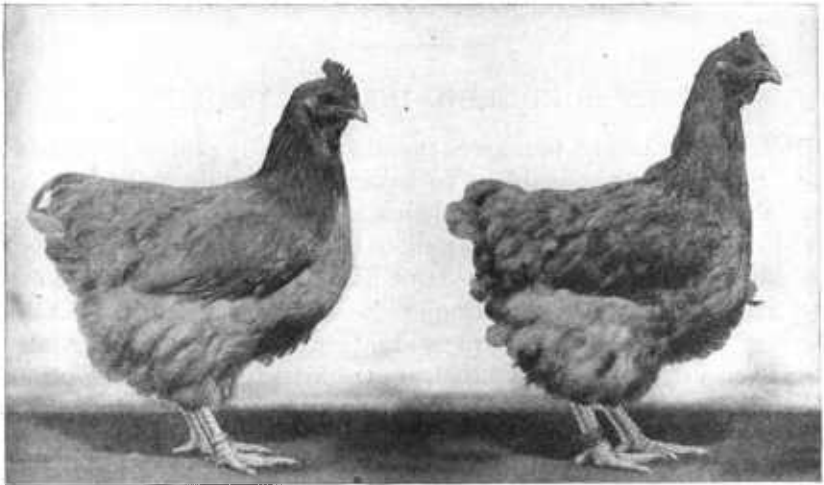


FIG. 1.—(Left) Hen that has not molted in August and September and is still laying, which indicates that she is a good producer. (Right) Hen that is molting in August and September and has stopped laying, which indicates that she is a poor producer.

of them rather than on only one or two if you are to determine accurately the good and the poor layers. The following are the principal tests or characteristics, and each one should be considered carefully.

Molt.—The manner in which the average hen molts, or, as it is sometimes expressed, “sheds her feathers,” is almost a self-applied test. It is one of the signs or characteristics that are most noticeable and is a reasonably safe guide to follow, as most hens stop laying or nearly so during the time they are molting. The better producers continue to lay late in the fall and therefore do not molt until late. The late molters also molt rapidly as a rule (see fig. 1), while the early molters, which are usually the poor layers, molt slowly. Hens that have not molted by August or September will show dirty, worn, or broken plumage, while those that have molted early show fresh, clean plumage or growing feathers at this time. It is usually ad-

visable to keep the hens that molt late, particularly if the other tests indicate that they are good producers, as they are almost always the best layers and best breeders, and to discard the early molters, which are almost always the poor layers.

Shanks and beaks.—The shanks or legs of hens that are naturally yellow in color in such breeds as Plymouth Rocks, Rhode Island Reds, Wyandottes, and Leghorns are pale and faded in August and September if they have been laying heavily. Some will look more faded than others, but all will show a decided loss of color if the hens have been extra good producers. If the shanks are still yellow in color the hen is almost sure to be a poor layer. Occasionally, how-

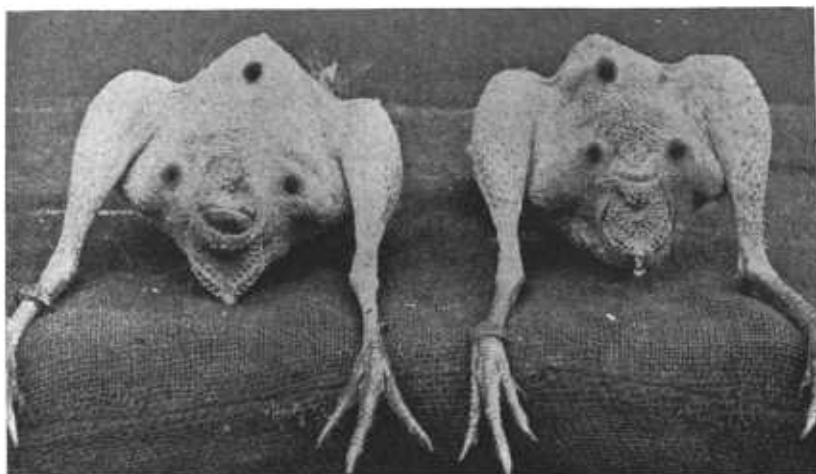


FIG. 2.—(Left) Hen showing large, moist vent and wide spread between pelvic bones and between pelvic bones and end of keel, which indicates that the hen is laying. (Right) Hen showing small, puckered vent and narrow spread between pelvic bones and between pelvic bones and keel, which indicates that the hen is not laying. The dark spots on each side of the vent in the illustration are used to show the ends of the pelvic bones and the spot higher up the end of the keel.

ever, a poor layer, as well as a sick hen or one in poor condition, will be found with a pale or white shank.

The same rule or principle applies to breeds having yellow beaks, although the color fades more quickly from the beak than from the shank. The lower part of the beak bleaches faster than the upper part, but may be used as the guide where the upper half is colored too much with black or horn color, as is often found in Rhode Island Reds.

Vent.—In yellow-skinned breeds the yellow color of the skin close around the vent is lost very soon after the hen begins to lay and returns again soon after she stops laying. A white or pink vent usually means that the hen is laying, while a yellow vent means that she is not laying. The vent of a hen that is laying heavily is also

large, expanded, and moist (see fig. 2), while that of a hen not laying is small, puckered, and dry.

Comb and wattles.—When a hen is laying or nearly ready to lay, her comb and wattles are plump, full of blood, somewhat waxy in feeling, and bright red in color. When she is not laying, the comb is shrunken, pale or dull in color, comparatively hard, and covered with whitish scales. A dark or bluish color usually indicates sickness.

Pelvic bones.—The pelvic bones are the two bones, somewhat pointed (see fig. 2), which can be felt on each side of the vent. When a hen is laying, these bones are rather thin, flexible, and spread



FIG. 3.—Hen showing a spread of three fingers between the pelvic bones, indicating that she is in laying condition.



FIG. 4.—Hen showing a spread of more than 4 fingers between the pelvic bones and the rear end of the keel, indicating that she is a good producer.

well apart. When she is not laying they are closer together, feel thicker, and are less flexible. A hen which shows thick or stiff pelvic bones, even when laying, is more likely to be a poor producer. The spread or distance apart of these pelvic bones varies slightly in different breeds, but it is a valuable indication or guide in telling the layer from the nonlayer. When a hen is laying, a boy or girl should be able to place three fingers of the hand ($1\frac{1}{2}$ inches or more) between these bones (see fig. 3), but if she is not laying, the spread would probably measure less than $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches or less than three fingers. The difference in size of boys' and girls' fingers must always be taken into consideration.

Size of abdomen.—A hen that is laying well usually eats well, and therefore her intestines are fuller, more expanded, and require more room than when she is not laying and not eating so much. When

laying, the egg-producing organs are also of greater size and require more room. To provide this extra room the distance from the pelvic bones to the rear end of the keel, commonly called the "breastbone," increases (see fig. 2), as well as the size of the abdomen, which is the lower rear part of the body shown in figure 3. This distance from the keel bone to the pelvic bones also varies according to the breed or size of the bird, but a hen of the smaller breeds, such as the Leghorn, that is laying well should have sufficient room between the keel and the pelvic bones to place 4 or more fingers ($2\frac{1}{2}$ inches or more), and in the larger breeds the full width of the hand (3 inches

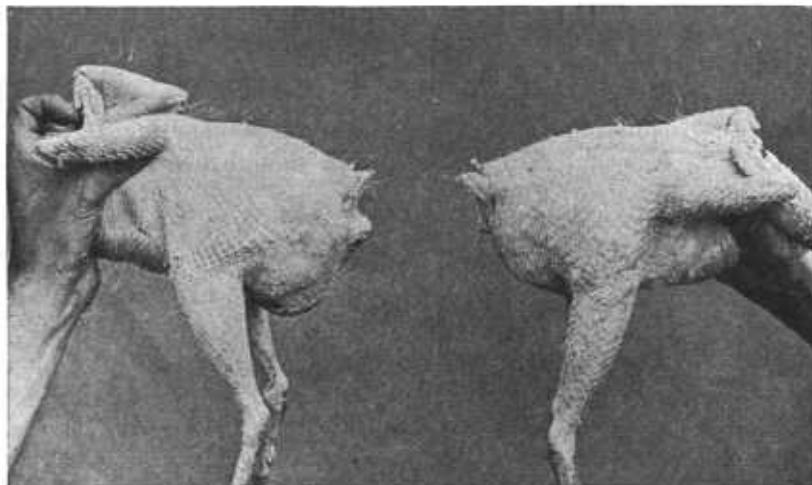


FIG. 5.—The same hens as in figure 2. (Left) Hen showing full, flexible, expanded abdomen, indicating that the hen is laying. (Right) Hen showing hard, contracted, or drawn-up abdomen, indicating that the hen is not laying.

or more) of the average boy or girl. (See fig. 4.) A smaller distance or spread between these bones would indicate that the hen is not laying.

Flexibility of abdomen.—When a hen is laying, the abdomen (see fig. 5) is flexible or soft, owing to a smaller amount of fat which is carried at this time. When she is not laying, the abdomen is contracted or drawn up and is harder and less pliable.

A GUIDE IN CULLING.

To cull out the nonlaying hens from the flock and make sure that it is done correctly requires considerable care in applying the different tests. For that reason boys and girls are urged to study very carefully the instructions given in this circular so as to become familiar with them all, if the work is to be done thoroughly and well. In brief, the hens to cull and the hens to keep are described in the two following paragraphs, but in every instance several of the dif-

ferent tests or characteristics should agree, and a hen should not be selected or discarded by any one characteristic alone.

The hens to cull.—Cull all hens that are sick, weak, inactive, lacking in vigor, poor eaters, with shrunken, hard, dull or whitish-colored comb; with thick, stiff pelvic bones that are close together; small spread or distance between rear end of keel and pelvic bones; full, firm, or hard abdomen; and those that have molted or begun to molt in August or September. In breeds having yellow legs and skin the discarded hens should also show yellow or medium-yellow legs and yellow beaks and vents.

The hens to keep.—Keep the hens that are healthy, vigorous, active, good eaters, with plump, bright-red combs; large, moist vents; thin, pliable pelvic bones spread well apart; a wide spread between pelvic bones and rear end of keel; large, soft, pliable abdomen; and neither molted nor molting in August or September. In breeds with yellow legs and skin the hens kept should also show pale or white legs and pale or white beaks and vents.

MARKETING SUGGESTIONS.

Hens and cocks.—As soon as the culling is finished, which should be during August and September, all hens culled out or discarded as poor producers or nonproducers should be marketed at once. No hen, regardless of age or breed, should be kept after you have found out that she will not pay a profit. Cock birds not wanted as breeders should be marketed immediately after the hatching season is over.

Cockerels.—All cockerels raised each season except those selected to keep for breeders should be eaten, canned, or marketed just as soon as they are large enough. If the chicks are hatched early the cockerels should reach broiler size in June or July, when there is a good demand and prices are high. Cockerels saved for breeders should be vigorous, strong, active, and alert, and those that have grown most rapidly and are the best developed. If a bird does not possess these qualities he will not make a good breeder.

Pullets.—Pullets that are weak, undersized, and poorly developed should also be eaten, canned, or marketed, as they will not make profitable producers; but no thrifty, well-developed pullets should ever be disposed of in this way, for it is these pullets when kept for layers and breeders that will net the greatest profit.

