

Hungry Hens are Healthier Hens: A guide to reduce feed and increase the nutritional content of your eggs.

You aren't actually going to starve your chickens it just might feel that way at first if you have always had feed out for them.

A statement I hear all this time is...

"I leave feed out all day for my hens and they still wander around foraging."

If they always have access to feed and never feel HUNGER, they won't forage much for food they will just lightly snack on bugs and plants out of boredom. Chickens are curious so they will wander around just for something to do. They will scratch up bugs and roots but rarely eat them if they always have access to bagged feed. More on this frequently asked question as you read through the guide.

Who is this guide for?

This Guide is not only for those who want to lower their feed costs but also those who want to increase the nutritional value of their chicken eggs.

This guide has taken me over ten years to put together with plenty of trial and error. It took me years before I realized chickens need to be fed less than most people are feeding them.

This guide was written specifically for laying hens not meat birds as they have different nutritional needs. You can choose to read the story below on how I came up with this guide or you can just skip to the bottom for quick feeding tips and tricks for healthier hens which costs less money. I recommend reading through the entire thing.

In this guide I'll show you many ways in which you can help your chickens eat more than just bagged feed. Science has always been my jam so I love to segregate our hens and test out different methods of feeding to see what will yield the richest, healthiest eggs and after many years I've discovered its moderation, variety, and limiting processed feed

Over the last 15 years we have tried out many methods of raising laying hens on our 15 acres. We have had fenced in runs, movable chicken tractors, and free-range hens. At any given time, we may have all three segregated by ages so I know who are the older hens and who are the younger ones so we always have eggs.

The story of our chicken farming journey and why I call myself an expert.

Let's start at the beginning. In the mid 2000's we bought our first chickens. We lived in the city at the time in a postage stamp backyard. Our chicken coop was small, and our attached run was 300 square feet. Our chickens quickly ate all the plants in their run leaving it a barren dirt wasteland. I didn't always feed them chicken scraps because I wasn't sure at the time what was safe for them. I

had also read that I should always have chicken feed out for them to eat at their leisure or they would starve.

Our chickens seemed healthy, and we enjoyed our first backyard chicken eggs. The yolks were a deep yellow instead of the pale yellow from the store. We thought we were doing just fine. Honestly, we were, this way of feeding and caring for chickens is by far superior to the tasteless factory farmed chicken eggs we ate previously.

After raising chickens like this in the city for a few short years we spontaneously bought our current homestead at auction. We now had a house (AKA the money pit), 15 acres, a barn and a small coop on site. We moved our chickens into the already on-site coop without any fenced in run and let them free range all 15 acres. This was scary at first, we were afraid for their lives but we quickly noticed how our deep yellow eggs yolks became and even deeper shade of yellow even orange. This was a shock at first, but we quickly realized they were richer in color because they were eating a more varied diet. They now had access to all the plants, bugs and rodents they wanted. Yes, chickens will kill and eat small animals.

Another shock came our way when we realized our chickens were losing weight. We thought they were sick at first, especially after we noticed the color change in egg yolks. After weeks of observation and no chicken casualties we quickly realized they were eating less processed feed and more natural things out in nature. On top of that, they had all the room they wanted to stretch their legs and run around living their best lives.

We now had happier, healthier, leaner chickens that produced even richer vitamin packed eggs. They were not sick they were healthier!

Just a reminder: you are what you eat and what they eat and so on. So, if you eat eggs from healthier chickens your health will improve as well. But this is an entirely separate topic that I won't go into here in this chicken feeding guide. Also, I'm not a doctor.

The following year on our homestead we went all in and purchased 110 sexed barred rock chicks from a hatchery after building a massive coop that could house 200 hens.

We purchased 110 because we read that we may lose 10% of our flock in the early stages of life by being trampled or just having sick birds. We didn't lose a single bird!

Once old enough, we let our laying hen's free range but after a few months we noticed the ground around the coop became a barren dirt wasteland just like our fenced in run had become in the city.

We fed and watered them within 12 feet from the coop, but they didn't venture more than 20 feet from the feed containers. We slowly kept encouraging the chickens farther out by moving their feed each day. They continued mainly sticking close by the feed all day and not foraging much. At this point we were of the mindset that we needed to keep feed containers full, so we don't starve our chickens.

I was left with the question "Why were they not foraging?"

Chicken feed is the Burger King, Chick Fil A, Taco Bell etc. of the chicken world. As humans we can survive on fast food and processed foods but at what cost?

If most of society had access to free fast food, and processed foods just outside our door each day would they eat it? YES, of course they would. They would not have to make a grocery list, go to the store, spend money, spend the time and energy to cook then prepare the food.

I believe our bagged chicken feed was the chicken version of fast food. Why choose the healthier option when it takes more work to hunt for food. The feed was fast and always ready!

Chickens are flock animals, if the majority are eating feed at the feed bowls the rest will stay in line with them (safety in numbers.)

I cut their feed by a third – they started foraging more.

I cut their feed by half – they started foraging even more spreading out across 7 acres instead of ¼ of an acre.

The egg yolk changed color yet again and was a deeper yellow, and mostly dark orange. Some yolks were so orange we were shocked. Our chickens were basically fed a breakfast of bagged feed and then they were on their own for the rest of the day hunting and searching for food.

How do humans stay healthy?

1. Eat a diet of whole foods limiting processed junk
2. Exercise
3. Get fresh air

How do chickens stay healthy?

1. Eat a diet of whole foods limiting processed junk
2. Exercise
3. Get fresh air

This is what we have been missing. Our chickens were overfed bagged feed and not exercising enough because they didn't need to forage.

***There are BLUE ZONES in the world where there is a higher concentration of people who live longer than average. The commonality of these groups of people was eating a whole food diet and exercising more. Some areas people needed to walk more; other areas people spent ½ the day gardening (which is a fantastic way to be more active.) This was exactly what I was doing with my chickens, I was creating an environment with more whole foods and more exercise. A blue zone for laying hen.*

You can watch the documentary “Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones on Netflix. I highly recommend doing so.

Feeding Time

(Please make note that this is not an exact science and that I'm not an animal nutritionist. During this process you will need to observe your hens to get the right ratio of bagged feed.

If your chickens start eating their eggs, are lethargic, or die you may not be feeding them enough. I feel this statement is a no brainer but added it anyhow.

Each breed has its own nutritional needs some layers are dual purpose which means they are a heavier bird that will have more meat when it comes slaughtering time (if you chose to do that) but if you aren't why did you get a dual-purpose breed? (Another topic for another day.)

There are other specialty chicken breeds that are more finicky with their food needs, I'm not addressing them. I'm just addressing the nutritional needs of your basic laying hen breeds.

My favorite laying hens are:

1. Rhode Island Red
2. Barred Rock
3. Isa Brown

More on choosing the right breed for your needs in my paid guide to be released late this fall. Sign up for my newsletter at Betsyharloff.com for a notification when it's released and also the notification when I move my homestead content to www.eclipsed-acres.com

Chicken feed (from bags at the store)

Before I jump into supplemental feeding, I want to address what type and how much to feed your chickens.

There are many choices of feed (I've tried most,) and what I've learned is that they eat a little more of the cheaper stuff and a little less of the more expensive stuff. Recently I noticed companies adding marigold petals to their feed for dark orange yolks. While marigold does offer some nutritional benefits companies are advertising that these will create dark orange yolks, they will; but without boosting your flock's nutrition that much. To get true dark orange yolks that a signal an significant nutritional boost you want your chickens free ranging and eating lots of plants and bugs.

Honestly, I think all feed has its pros and cons and I like to vary the feed I give my hens because each type of feed has slightly different percentages of what's in it. This way I can ensure my chickens are getting even more of varied diet just from feed.

I NEVER use medicated feed. More on this topic in my paid guide to be released this fall.

“But, Betsy, my feed is very expensive and has everything my chickens need.”

I hear you, BUT did the company itself tell you that? Or did you read on their website or the bag?

They want to SELL their feed. No company it is saying, “Buy this mediocre feed for your hens today.”

Each chicken is supposed eat ½ cup of feed per day I feed roughly ¼ cup per bird or less in the spring, summer and fall (I'm in Ohio.)

I measure it all out in feed scoop(s) then make lines or just memorize how full it needs to be.

I usually wet my chicken feed down in the summer months to ensure more hydration. This also takes up more room in their stomach, making them feel full sooner. You will need to add wet food to a bowl not a chicken feeder or it will just gunk up. I use black rubber bowls. We use them for watering in the winter as well because ice pops out easily.

I scatter dry feed in on the ground in areas that I want my chickens to forage in, or areas I want cleared. They'll scratch it up real good for you. Put them to work!!!

Feeding babies and young chickens:

I always fully feed my babies starter/grower. At just 1 week old I toss in dandelions, root and all so they can start learning at a young age that plants and bugs are food. The entire dandelion is edible by chickens and humans. Throw in the whole thing including the dirt clump attached to the root because it usually has bugs in it.

Once they are fully feathered out, I feed them just enough that they run out a few hours before they go into roost for the night. At that time, I toss in whole dandelions, grape leaves, kitchen scraps or a pile of worms I dug up. This lets them explore these items when they are just hungry enough to possibly try it.

Kitchen scraps

I utilize all chicken scraps. There is always a plate, bowl, or bag on my counter full of uneaten things from the humans that live here. I know a lot of you compost and want to save scraps for that purpose but if you feed it to your chickens, they'll compost it for you. (More on how I use chicken poop in my garden in my comprehensive guide which will be released later this fall.)

Ways to save scraps on your counter. I usually have a container next to my sink,

1. Thrift a cute container, Goodwill always has cookie jars or other items. I never use plastic because it holds odor opt for glass, Stainless steel, or ceramic.
2. Use a gallon freezer bag, you can even store this in your freezer in the hot months and give frozen scraps to your chickens
3. Use an already dirty pot, bowl or plate from feeding your humans to store items for the day and throw in the dishwasher later. Just remember to bring it back to the house. I forget quite often and leave my containers outside.

Restaurant scraps

Ever eat out with friends or family and there is a lot of food left on the table that no one wants to take home? I ask the server for a box, or several boxes and pack it all up and feed it to my chickens.

If I'm feeding a LARGE number of scraps to my chickens, I lower the amount of feed for that day. If they have already been fed, I lower it the next day. Alternately if I don't have many scraps, I feed a bit more.

My chickens average about 4 cups a day from kitchen scraps.

Grocery markdowns

I shop the clearance and markdown sections of the grocery stores to supplement food. Chickens love kale, leaf lettuces, and basically anything green and leafy. This is especially important in the colder months. If your run doesn't have any plants growing in it grab those large containers of marked down arugula, mixed greens, spinach etc.

What I do differently in the winter will be in my full paid guide. Sign up for my newsletter at Betsyharloff.com for a notification when it's released this fall.

Foraging

“My chickens always have feed available and they still forage.”

I hear this all the time and like I stated before, well-fed chickens will forage but they won't eat the number of plants and bugs that I prefer my hens to eat. I know farmers who don't give ANY feed to their hens in the spring, summer, and fall. I personally want to MAXIMIZE whole food found in nature and supplement with bagged feed as little as possible. This always riles people up.

“You do you, Boo,” I'm just trying to educate and show you another way to feed your hens.

I'll say this one more time for those in the back...

“No matter what you are feeding your backyard flock they are going to be in better health than ANY factory farmed bird.”

“How can I get my chickens to forage?”

This should come naturally to them but here are some tips:

You can lead your chickens to worms and live grubs all day but if they are not hungry (you always have feed out) they will most likely not try it.

1. Start sprinkling food where you turn a rock over at and call them over
2. Sprinkle food where you see bugs or worms and call them over.
3. If you find some worms throw them on top of their feed

Eventually they will try and understand that bugs and worms are food.

Always sprinkle food near rotting logs they are FULL of creepy crawlies.

Morning and evening are the best times for chickens to hunt for bugs and plants. It's cooler and damper encouraging bugs and worms to come out. This is when I would start training chickens to go forage just call them over and sprinkle a small amount of food in areas where bugs and greens are found.

Afternoon is the hottest time of day, and most chickens won't forage much in the blazing sun. Also, bugs tend to go deeper into the soil at this time of day. If you can arrange it, put feed out at this time.

Be patient with this process, they will need to learn where to find food (bugs and things) Soon, your chickens will be eating more natural things that are found outside, getting more exercise, having to work for their food, and being healthier birds. #winning

Get a rooster.

Heck, if you bought chicks from a feed store you probably got a rooster even though you didn't want one. Roosters will protect your flock, but they are also very chivalrous. They hunt for food and call

their ladies over to feast with him. I have even noticed our rooster hold food in his mouth only placing it on the ground when a hen arrives.

Fenced in runs

As long as your run is clean(ish) scatter food all over the inside, so they have to scratch and peck to find it.

Chicken scratch is a great activity for your hens to get more exercise and offer enrichment. Happy hens equal healthier eggs. I would limit the use of cracked corn scratch to only 1x a week because corn is full of pesticides, herbicides and are GMO unless you can get your hands on some organic chicken scratch.

Add in lawn scraps, your chickens will dig through it searching for bugs and plants to eat.

In the fall throw in huge piles of leaves for them to dig through, bugs love wet leaves. I would suggest putting it in there at night then hosing it down well, so the bugs get in it overnight. In the morning sprinkle a little food on top of the leaves and your chickens will have feed and bugs for breakfast. YUM!

Rotting logs are an amazing source of food and enrichment. Wet them down to encourage bug movement, roll them over, smash them open etc... Switch it for a new log whenever they seem to lose interest.

Hang fresh cabbage in the coop high enough that they must jump for it. This provides extra nutrients, exercise and enrichment, it's a win, win!

Add rocks and boards to your run that you can flip over in the morning uncovering bugs and worms. If your chickens are not interested, sprinkle a little feed there.

There are a ton of ways to sprout and grow green things for your chickens which will be included in the paid guide.

A few free ranging tips

1. Early morning, and dusk are the best time for chickens to forage but it's also the time most predators hunt as well. So, if you don't have a farm dog to keep them away be warned.
2. If you feed your chickens outside of a run, vary where you put it for these reasons:
 - a. They must go find it, so they get more exercise.
 - b. They won't rip up the grass if you move it daily.
 - c. Predators look for patterns and predictability to hunt. By switching up where and when you feed you are less likely for an animal attack to happen where you feed them.

Whether you have free range chicken, a movable chicken tractor, or a fenced in run I hope this guide has provided you with some new ideas to bump up the health and nutrition of your flock. Please consider sending me a review at betsyharloff.com, by email betsyharloff@gmail.com or a DM on Instagram @eclipsedcres.

Be sure to sign up for my newsletter on my website betsyharloff.com to be notified when I have the full paid comprehensive version available that will also include a bonus winter chicken feeding guide, monthly coop refresh and monthly health maintenance of your flock.

Take a screenshot of this free guide and send it to me on IG for a drawing to receive the paid guide for FREE.