

MOLTING - THAT'S ONE UGLY CHICKEN!

What is molting?

Once or twice a year, chickens will lose all their feathers as new ones grow in. They will stop laying until the molt is completed. The process of molting can take between two and six months depending on the individual chicken.

What causes molting?

Molting is a response to the shortening of days that tells the hens to prepare for the winter. It's the bringing in of the winter coat that may fall out throughout the year but is brought back in to fill out and protect the chickens from the elements. Disease and stress can also cause molting; these molts, however are often partial.

Early Molters and Late Molters

Early molters are hens that will begin molting early and can take up to six months to finish their molt. Egg production will drop significantly or disappear for this entire time period making birds who are early molters poor layers and not well suited to profitable egg production. Late molters may go up to a year before they molt and are often finished with the molt within two or three months. Late molters may also significantly drop or stop production altogether; however because they begin molting later and are through sooner, the number of eggs produced by a late molter is far greater than the early molter will produce.

How can you tell them apart?

Telling early and late molters apart is fairly simple. An early molter tends to have shiny and unbroken feathers because they are being replaced more frequently. Early molters often have a greater "show" quality about them. Late molters tend to look a bit ragged, with broken and dirty feathers. Your faithful layer will probably not be the prettiest bird in the flock.

Patterns in Molting

When chickens go into a molt, there is a specific feather loss pattern they will go through. The feather loss starts at the head, passes down to the neck, breast, body, then wing and tail. The best way to determine how far along a hen is in a molt is to look at the feathers on the wings. The wings have two main sets of feathers, the primary feathers and the secondary feathers. There are ten primary feathers that reach from the tip of the wing back ten feathers to the secondary feathers. By judging how many have fallen out at a time, you can guesstimate about how much longer your hen will be molting and your egg production down.

Good Molters and Bad Molters

Good molters will not only lay late, but when they molt, they will lose their primary feathers in groups of more than one. Primaries take six weeks to grow in fully and two weeks to drop out. A good molter will lose groups of two or three or more primaries every two weeks until the primaries are gone. This decreases the amount of time necessary for the primaries to grow back, as they will grow back in the same numbers they dropped out. A bad molter starts early and loses their primaries one at a time. This slow drop out rate increases the re-growth rate from 12 weeks to up to 24.