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Cheaper by The Dozen?

As chicks arrive in farm stores and egg prices have increased at the grocery store, you might be thinking about getting chickens. But before you buy chicks, here are a few things to know.

Chicks need warmth. For the first few weeks, chicks must be kept at about 95°F. This usually means keeping them inside under a heat lamp or brooder. Once they grow their adult feathers, they can be moved outside into a chicken coop. They will need a coop that will keep them warm in the winter, provide shade in the summer, and, most importantly, protect them from predators. Coops can be purchased ready-made or built yourself; dozens of coop designs for flocks of all sizes are available online.

If you want to start getting eggs immediately, getting adult hens may be a better fit, as pullets (chicks that are hens) won't start laying eggs until they're about 5 months old. Getting hens that are a "layer" breed is also important if egg production is your goal. This means the breed has been developed for egg production. While all chickens lay eggs, "layer" breeds will produce more eggs than others. When purchasing chicks, there will be the option to get "straight run chicks" or pullets. "Straight run chicks" have not been sexed to determine their gender, so you will be taking your chances on getting hens or roosters. While chicks labeled "pullets" are hens (although it's not a 100% guarantee).

Trying to figure out how many hens you need to meet your egg consumption needs? Six hens will lay, on average, three to five eggs a day. However, egg production is not consistent year-round. Chickens go through a molting phase where they shed their feathers and look rough. Hens stop laying eggs when they are molting because their energy is going toward growing new feathers. Egg production will also decrease in the winter due to reduced daylight. However, a light can be added to the coop to help keep egg production up.

While chickens are great recyclers and can eat many kitchen scraps, they will also need to be fed feed formulated for chickens to fulfill their nutritional requirements while growing and to achieve peak egg production as adults. If you want to run the numbers to see if owning chickens will save money vs. buying eggs from the store. A chick will eat about 13-15 lbs. of feed before they start laying, and adult chickens eat, on average, a quarter pound a day. If you have six hens, they will eat about 42 lbs. of feed a month, and a bag of feed costs about \$20.

If you want more information on raising chickens, contact Adaven Rohling, Diversified Agriculture and Natural Resource Agent Wildcat District, at 620-331-2690 or adaven@ksu.edu.

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