



# ORGANIC POULTRY PRODUCTION: EGGS

**The market for organic poultry products is strong and growing.** Integrating either small-scale or large-scale production into your farm system can be both enjoyable and lucrative. Various direct-to-consumer markets or selling through marketing agencies are options. Contact your marketing agency or explore your market options to accommodate any special production requirements (breeds, feed types etc).

**Organic poultry may be grown starting from conventional day-old chicks, ducklings etc.**

Parent stock need not be organic, conventional hatcheries may be utilized. Check with your supplier to choose different breeds that lay brown, white or green eggs.

**Chicks must be treated organically**, including organic feed, housing and treated with only allowed health treatments from the second day of life. If you buy any poultry older than day-old, such as ready-to-lay pullets, they must be documented as certified organic and then treated organically for their entire lives in order to produce organic eggs.

**Organic poultry must have daily access to the outdoors**, as weather permits. Access areas are not mandated to have vegetation providing feed value, as with ruminants. However, access to pasture can be a selling point and is claimed by some to produce healthier birds and better-tasting poultry products. Any land the birds have access to must be certified organic (no prohibited materials for three years).

**Feed** must be either purchased as certified organic or produced on your own certified organic farm. Any agricultural products in feed or feed supplements must be organic. This includes secondary ingredients such as soy oil or wheat middlings. Non-agricultural natural ingredients such as kelp, grit, calcium or fishmeal must be approved for use in organic operations. No synthetic preservatives, colors, flowing agents or dust suppressants are allowed. Feed may not include mammalian or poultry slaughter byproducts. Adding flax meal to your ration can increase the presence of Omega 3 fatty acids in the eggs.

**Medicated feeds including hormones or antibiotics are not allowed in organics.** Health



issues should be treated through prevention, as most poultry diseases are very difficult to treat. Sanitation is the best form of defense in disease management. Healthcare alternatives include vinegar in water or turmeric added to food for coccidiosis, homeopathy, probiotics, herbs or hydrogen peroxide. Note that agricultural substances added daily/routinely to feed or water such as vinegar, turmeric, etc. (not just to treat medical situations) must be certified organic. For more information see ATTRA resources.

**Farm biosecurity** is very important for preventing transfer of diseases from farm to farm, from wild birds to domestic birds and from one batch of poultry to another. When working with multiple flocks on your farm, move from young to old and not vice versa.

**Vaccines** are allowed, although are mostly used in larger operations. Typical vaccines that may be considered include vaccines for: *Newcastle disease*, *coccidiosis*, *mycoplasma*, *gallisepticum* and *mycoplasma synoviae*. Vaccines may be administered via water, through the air or orally.

**Parasite control:** Laying hens may show symptoms of lice predation. Lice can be controlled through cleanliness in the hen house, including the use of bleach or lime in nest boxes. Providing dust baths of diatomaceous earth are used by some for lice control.

**Cannibalism** may be caused by overcrowding or ration imbalance. Correct these conditions to reduce the problem. Poultry will peck at bloody spots, so if a bird is injured it should be isolated from others.



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**Predators** are often a significant factor for small-scale poultry production. Predators can include raccoons, dogs fox, coyotes, mink, weasels, opossums, rats and aerial predators including owls and hawks. Poisons are not allowed. Common control methods include tight structures, electric fencing, guard animals and flashing lights.

**Housing** must allow exercise, freedom of movement and reduction of stress. Hens must be provided with natural light. Stationary houses, moveable pens or moveable houses may be used. Layers may not be caged and must have access to the ground or floor. Some buyers require housing that allows at least 1.75 square foot of floor space per bird inside the hen house, and 2 square foot per bird outside. Hens enjoy roosting at night, which may be made of wood, plastic or metal. If roosts are used, at least 50% of the henhouse should allow access to the floor to allow scratching.

**If bedding is used during brooding or housing, it must be certified organic** if it is agricultural and an item the poultry will typically consume (i.e. hay). Typical bedding may be wood shavings (not from treated wood), organic corncobs, organic hay or straw or organic corn fodder.

**Physical alterations are allowed as needed to promote the animal's welfare**, but must be done in a way that minimizes pain and stress. Alterations may include beak trimming when very young (laying hens), or wing clipping (heirloom turkeys, laying hens).

**To maintain an economically viable laying flock**, management must take into consideration careful timing of the introduction of young pullets for consistent egg supply. Pullets will generally not begin laying until 20 weeks old. Care must be taken to regulate consistent light, warmth, feed ration ingredients and protein percentages to ensure consistent egg production. Many producers find light supplementation in the fall and winter helps maintain a steady egg supply. If supplementation is used, it is best started in early fall when the light is starting to wane. Certifiers require light be no more than 16 hours per day.

**Laying hens will often moult after their first laying season, and every year to year and a half after that.** The moult will take them out of egg production for 3 to 4 months. Many producers sell year-old layers as stewing hens and start with new pullets each year. Forced moulting by denying food, water or light is not allowed.

**Eggs may be collected from traditional, hand-gathered nest boxes or from roll-away nests.** Eggs may be fertilized (rooster present) or not. Eggs must be stored at below 50 degrees F. Eggs may be cleaned with approved cleaners, using water that is at least 10 degrees warmer than the eggs, as long as the residue of the cleaner left on the eggs has been rinsed off with potable water. Re-use of egg cartons is allowed as long as no residue of prohibited materials. Some states or marketing venues do not allow re-use of cartons.

**Documentation.** Records must be kept on source and age of poultry, feed and supplement use and sources, use and source of any health products, vaccinations, mortalities, outside access, house sanitation practices between flocks, collection of eggs and sale of finished product.

**Certification.** Any operation selling \$5,000 or more in organic product per year must be certified. You must contact an independent third party certification agency such as NOFA-NY Certified Organic LLC, fill out a farm plan and have an annual inspection. For more information see the NOFA – NY “Guidebook for Organic Certification” or fact sheet series on certification.

**Marketing.** Those following the National Organic Program may label their eggs as “organic.” Labeling and packaging must meet organic and state labeling regulations. The USDA organic seal may be used; the certifier’s name must be on the package.



NOFA-NY ORGANIC FACT SHEET

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**More information** on small-scale poultry production can be found from:

- NOFA's *Humane and Healthy Poultry Production, A Manual for Organic Growers* (Available from Chelsea Green)
- <http://www.kingbirdfarm.com/>

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