If you want an economical and steady supply of homegrown eggs that are nutritious and tasty, you’ll need a flock of chickens, right? Well, not necessarily. No doubt about it, chickens have proven their worth as fine producers of savory eggs and should not be discredited. However, during the last decade, a growing number of us North Americans have been discovering what many Asians and Europeans have known for a long time: under many circumstances, ducks have advantages over their cackling relatives as producers of eating eggs.

Some Facts & Figures
Relatively few people in the Americas realize that, on the whole, ducks are more proficient layers than chickens. While poultry researchers in North America have spent the last 100 years and countless millions of dollars on improving the productivity of chickens, ducks—for all practical purposes—have been ignored. Despite all the attention chickens received, it’s unusual for a commercial flock of Leghorns to average over 250 to 280 eggs per hen in a year’s time. On the other hand, Campbell ducks of good strains often average 300 or more eggs per bird during the course of 12 months.

Duck eggs also weigh five to eight ounces per dozen more than chicken eggs. In spite of the fact that some literature on the subject states otherwise, practical experience and tests conducted by institutions such as the University of Nebraska clearly show that duck eggs retain their freshness during storage considerably longer than those of chickens. On various occasions, we have refrigerated well-cleaned duck eggs for four months and longer with no detectible change in flavor.

It is true that, when raised in confinement, a 3-1/2 to 4-1/2 pound duck will consume 20 to 30 percent more feed than a similarly sized Leghorn. But, due to the larger size and greater number of eggs produced by ducks, trials have shown that with proper management, ducks are still more efficient when the quantity of feed to produce a pound of eggs is calculated. Since ducks are considerably better foragers than chickens, the efficiency of ducks is further enhanced when they are allowed to rustle free foods in bodies of water, pastures or grassy yards.

Ducks are also incredibly resistant to disease and cold and wet weather. The average mortality rate in home flocks is significantly lower with ducks than with chickens. Due to their greater hardiness, ducks require less elaborate housing than chickens—yet another advantage. And, because egg-type ducks are not accomplished high jumpers, they are easily confined with a two- or three-foot high barrier.

What About Disadvantages?
If you have never raised laying ducks, you’re probably asking, “Okay, what are their drawbacks?” After raising and comparing all species of domestic poultry over the course of the last 20 years, I’ve yet to run across a major disadvantage in ducks under most small flock conditions.

Waterfowl do like to wash their bills and heads frequently, so their drinking water should be changed at least several times weekly—and preferably daily. If crowded in a small pen with a dirt floor during wet weather, they will turn their quarters into a muddy mess. But, adequate bedding (such as sand, straw or wood shavings), larger pens or the use of wire floors takes care of this problem.

People who have close neighbors are sometimes concerned about noise. On the whole, ducks of the egg breeds are no noisier than chickens, especially when raised in small flocks consisting of six to eight birds.

“But aren’t duck eggs strong-flavored?” is a common question. The flavor of eggs...
is controlled by the diet of the producing birds. If ducks (or chickens) are fed a ration containing fish products or the birds are allowed to feed in bodies of water or pastures where they can pick up pungent natural foods, the eggs can be tainted.

When duck and chicken eggs are produced with similar feeding and management, the taste of the end product is virtually indistinguishable. Over the years, we have served thousands of scrambled, fried, poached, deviled, soft boiled, souffléed and creped duck eggs to meal guests and at potlucks, picnics, wedding buffets and youth camps. In my recollection, not once has anyone suspected they weren’t dining on chicken eggs until we told them otherwise. Interestingly, before being told that they were eating duck cuisine, we’ve had numerous people mention that the eggs were exceptionally good.

The shells of duck eggs are slightly more difficult to crack and are pearly white rather than chalk white as in chicken eggs—but I can’t see these as disadvantages. The albumen of duck eggs is somewhat firmer and usually takes slightly longer to whip up for meringues and angel food cakes than the white of chicken eggs.

Choosing a Breed

There are a variety of duck breeds that make adequate layers. However, for top efficiency and year-round production, Campbells, Welsh Harlequins, Indian Runners, Magpies and Anconas from strains selected for egg production are usually the best choices. Pekins are good seasonal layers of jumbo-sized eggs, but due to their large size and corresponding hearty appetites, they require nearly twice the amount of feedstuff compared to the above mentioned breeds.

Campbells, and their close relative the Welsh Harlequin, are generally considered the best layers of all domestic poultry. Individual females have been known to produce 360 or more eggs in a year’s time, although flock averages are nearer 275 to 325.

Egg-bred Campbells are available both in Khaki and White color varieties. Khaki Campbell drakes (males) have iridescent greenish-bronze heads and khaki bodies, while ducks (females) are varying shades of khaki brown with dark

Feed

To keep ducks laying the year around, they must be supplied an adequate amount of laying feed that provides a minimum of 15 to 16 percent crude protein. Most chicken laying rations prove satisfactory, although those that are medicated have been suspected of causing illness—even death—in ducks, especially when birds are raised in confinement and cannot dilute the potency of the medications through foraging. To reduce waste and prevent ducks from choking, pellets are preferred, but course crumbles normally work out okay. Fine, powdery feeds should be avoided.

Feed can be left in front of the birds at all times in a trough or hopper feeder, or it can be given twice daily in quantities that the ducks will clean up in 10 to 15 minutes. The first method insures that the ducks are never deprived of feed, while the second system helps prevent feed loss to rodents and encourages the fowl to forage during the day. However, laying birds cannot be expected to continue laying consistently, particularly during cold weather, if their intake of concentrated feeds is inadequate.

To produce mild-flavored eggs, feed containing marine products should not be utilized. Dr. George Arscott, head of the Oregon State University Poultry Science Department, also urges that cottonseed meal not be used in breeding or laying rations since this protein supplement contains a toxin that can reduce hatchability and produce strange coloration in eggs, especially if the eggs are stored several weeks before being eaten. You might also want to keep in mind that feed stuffs such as corn and dehydrated or fresh greens cause bright-colored yolks, while wheat, oats and barley result in pale yolks.

While producing, ducks are very sensitive to sudden changes in their diets. To avoid throwing your birds into a premature molt and drastically reducing egg production, it’s wise to never change feeds while ducks are laying. If the brand or type of feed you’ve been using must be altered, do so gradually, preferably over a span of at least a week or 10 days.

Water

High-producing ducks need a constant supply of reasonably clean drinking water. Both the number and size of eggs
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Housing

With their well-oiled feathers and thick coating of down, ducks are amazing resistant to cold and wet weather. Their dense plumage, particularly on the rear end, makes them nearly waterproof. Ducks and geese are much more resistant to cold and wet weather than chickens, which have a much smaller amount of down.

The duck house can be a simple shed-like structure (approximately three feet high) and does not require furnishings such as raised nests, perch- ing platforms, or feeders and drinkers. The most important aspect of the duck house is that it be safe and comfortable for ducks. Ducks do not need bathing equipment, but can be a nuisance to clean due to the large number of birds. A spacious and dry shelter is essential to keep ducks healthy.

The duck house should be at least four feet high. In areas where temperatures occasionally fall more than 5º to 10º F below the freezing level, it is advisable to provide a minimum of 13 to 16 hours of light daily by turning the lights on before daybreak and off after nightfall. To prevent unsanitary mud holes from developing around the watering area, the duck house should be locked up at nighttime in a yard that is tightly fenced with woven wire or net-ting at least four feet high. When ducks are housed at night-time, they are susceptible to predators, thieves such as weasels, raccoons and large owls are known to roam, it is much safer to lock ducks in a yard that is at least four feet high.

Ducks need a minimum of 13 to 16 hours of light daily by turning the lights on before daybreak and off after nightfall. To prevent unsanitary mud holes from developing around the watering area, ducks must be housed at night-time. During cold weather, when drinking water freezes, an electric water warmer (a popular and useful device) can be used or lukewarm water can be provided. A minimum of two or three- to five-gallon bucket placed below a slowly dripping faucet or outfitted with a float valve works well. Larger duckflocks (along with Mini Silver Appleyard ducklings) are the hardiest of the bantam duck breeds. Photos courtesy of Holderread Waterfowl Farm & Preservation Center.

Day-old Australian Spotted ducks (Blackheads on left, Greenvails on right). According to John C. Kriner, Jr. and Stanley Mason developed the diminutive and exquisite Australian Spotted in Pennsylvania during the 1920s. Henry K. Miller started his own strain in the 1940s. Mature weights typically are 36-38 ounces. This exceptionally hardy and beautiful little duck is easily tamed and the females are good natural mothers. Australian Spotted ducks do rather well being kept in moderate cold climate—ducks develop a thick coating of down in areas where temperatures regularly fall more than 5º to 10º F below the freezing level.

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tion—especially in cold weather—ducks need to be exposed to a minimum of 13 to 16 hours of light daily. However, for laying ducks, the intensity of light required is low. A minimum of 10 hours of light daily seems to be the upper limit for ducks.

One reason egg-laying ducks have not been widely successful in the United States is that high-producing stock has often been rather slow coming on in this country. One Last Word

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The Homestead Duck

In the duck family, White Pekins are by far the most popular meat breed. The famous Long Island ducklings are Pekins. But homesteaders are a diverse lot, and almost any breed can be found on small farms.

Some people prefer duck eggs to chicken eggs. Most ducks are seasonal layers, so if duck eggs interest you consider a breed such as the Khaki Campbell or the Indian Runner. These lay as well as some chickens. As with hens that lay at a high rate, these breeds are not valued for meat because of their small size and slow growth. Khaki Campbells, with proper housing and feeding, have laid as many as 360 eggs per year. Like the Leghorn hen, they don’t make good setters because they’re rather nervous.

Since most ducks lay in the early morning, they can be penned up at night and released in mid-morning to forage. They will eat a great deal of grass if allowed free range. Nests should be 12 x 18 x 12 inches deep.

For meat, white feathered fowl of any variety are usually preferred because they dress out more attractively. In ducks, this means the White Pekin and the White Muscovy.

Other breeds are used by homesteaders, of course. These include the Muscovy, Mallard, Rouen and others that are less common.

Pekins, which lay about 160 eggs a year under proper management, weigh about eight to nine pounds at maturity – the hens being somewhat smaller than the drakes. They are usually butchered at about six pounds (much more tender then, and more efficient feed conversion) which should be at about nine weeks of age. Some breeders claim their strains reach seven pounds in seven weeks on 22 pounds of feed…showing once again the importance of genetics, even to homesteaders.

Muscovies are somewhat larger. They lay about 40 to 50 eggs a year.
