

Chicken Nesting Boxes Know-How



Using chicken nesting boxes encourages hens to lay eggs where you can find them. Without nesting boxes, your hens may hide their eggs outdoors, where predators could find the eggs before you do – if you find them at all. Or your hens will lay on the coop floor, where the eggs are likely to get dirty or cracked, making them unsafe to eat and unsuitable for hatching. Plus, a broken egg invites the chickens to sample a taste. Then you end up with egg-eating hens – not good! So, let's see what it takes to supply chicken nesting boxes in your coop.

What a hen looks for when laying eggs

In designing your nesting boxes, first consider the environment a hen looks for when she is ready to lay an egg. Must-have features include these:

- Ready availability
- Easy Access
- Darkness and seclusion
- Safety
- Adequate size
- Softly padded
- Clean and parasite-free

Let's look at each of these features in depth.

How many nesting boxes should you have

A hen that must wait her turn may give up and lay her egg on the floor. To avoid traffic jams, offer one nest for every four hens in your flock. If your flock has four hens or fewer, supply at least two nests to give them a choice.

Initially place nests at floor level for pullets just starting to lay. Floor eggs are most likely to occur when pullets haven't yet figured out where the nest boxes are or what they are for. To minimize floor eggs, install nests early enough for your pullets to get used to them before they start laying.

Nests should have easy access

After your pullets learn to use the nests, raise the nests at least 18 inches off the floor. You could either set them on a platform or firmly attach them to the wall. Chickens are less likely to play in raised nests, potentially soiling and breaking eggs.

Once the nests are off the floor, install a perch in front of the nest openings for hens to fly onto. Place the perch far enough from the nest opening that a hen resting on it can't poop into the nest. For most breeds, the perch should be no closer than 8 inches from the nest opening.

Nests may be higher than 18 inches, for instance if you have a second tier above the first. In that case, supply a simple ladder the hens can use to climb from the floor to the upper level.

Hens like darkness and seclusion

As tempting as it is to think that hens lay eggs for our culinary pleasure, the truth is they lay eggs to produce chicks. They therefore instinctively choose a darkened and secluded place in which to hide their eggs.

A nest that's away from direct light suggests just such a place. It also discourages chickens from loitering and engaging in nonlaying activities. Darkness also helps conceal eggs from flock mates that might be tempted to **peck and taste**. If necessary you can shield nests from bright light by hanging flaps of fabric in the openings.

Locate nests where normal flock activities won't both a laying hen. For instance, installing nests away from the pophole reduces distractions from the comings and goings of flock mates.

Hens seek safety

A laying hen seeks safety, not only for her future offspring, but also for herself. A nest that's enclosed on the top and all sides, but the front allows a hen to watch for danger from only one direction.

Place chicken nesting boxes inside the coop for maximum protection from predators. If you wish to have nests that **open from outside the coop** for easy egg collection, fit the hinged cover with a predator resistant latch.

A nest should be big enough, but not too big

Some hens like to buddy up while laying and will pile together into a nest that's big enough to accommodate more than one hen. Although some chicken keepers favor one large community nest, any nest big enough for more than one hen at a time inevitably leads to broken eggs.

So, most chicken keepers opt for individual nests. Each nest should be large enough for a hen to stand and easily turn around. A nest that's slightly large is better than one that's too small and cramped, which can result in broken eggs.

A good nest size for Leghorns and other lightweight layers is 12 inches wide by 14 inches high by 12 inches deep. Heavier breeds need larger nests – 14 inches wide by 14 inches high by 12 inches deep. For bantams, a reasonable size is 10 inches wide by 12 inches high by 10 inches deep.

Hens like cushy padding

Hens like to lay in cushy nesting material. If soft nesting material isn't readily available, they will try to scrounge some up. A thickly padded nest box supplies comfort for the hens, keeps eggs clean, and prevents eggs from breaking.

Chicken keepers vary in their preferences for nesting material. Many favor **nest pads**, such as plastic turf pads or excelsior nest liners. Others prefer **pine shavings**, shredded paper, or even well dried grass clippings. A sill along the front bottom edge of each nest opening will hold in loose nesting material and prevent eggs from rolling out of the nest.

Nests must be clean and parasite-free

Ease of cleaning nests is an important feature, for both your sake and that of your hens. Nesting material eventually gets matted down, kicked out, or soiled, so be prepared to clean it out occasionally.

Removing and replacing nesting material also gives you an opportunity to check nests for mites and other parasites that bite and irritate laying hens. You might including a potpourri of **nest herbs** to help repel insect pests.

Unlimited nest designs

In my long-ago first coop, my nests were wooden fruit crates turned on their sides. Now, in the largest coop on our current farm, we built a double tier of wood nesting boxes attached to the coop wall. In our smallest coop, which is cramped for space, we fashioned a pair of nests out of a **space-saving corner cabinet** from the hardware store. In both coops we added a sloped roof above the nests to keep the chickens from roosting and pooping on top.

Our third coop has a row of nests that are accessible from outside the coop. Exterior nests offer the advantage that we can collect eggs at any time, even after dark, without disturbing the flock. Also, the chickens have more floor space indoors, and they can't roost on top of the nests.

Specific nest designs can be whimsical and fanciful or simple **square boxes**. You can use just about anything, ranging from a pet carrier, an old dresser, a computer shell, or a **5-gallon bucket**. Or you could construct nests from scratch, using new or salvaged lumber.

If you aren't into DIY construction, you can buy all manner of ready-made nests, some of which have a **roll-out** or roll-away feature to keep eggs safe until you collect them. The specific design is not as critical as choosing chicken nesting boxes that suit the needs of laying hens.

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