

## Encourage Hens to Hatch Eggs

<http://www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/encourage-hens-to-hatch-eggs.aspx>

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I've tried using a foster broody hen to raise chicks, and it can make brooding chicks easy. To use a hen to hatch eggs (or foster chicks), you first need a broody hen. We've heard of different things people have tried to encourage broody behavior (sitting on eggs to hatch them), so in a recent survey, we asked our poultry advisory group which methods have worked for them. You can see all the results of the survey, but here's a quick look at the highlights.

Nearly 100 people took the survey. Thirty-seven people said cooping a hen in a small, dark space with a nest of eggs works *sometimes*. Twenty-nine people said increasing hours of daylight with artificial lighting works *sometimes*. Sixty-six people said selecting for

broodiness in a breeding program works *every time* (27 people) or *sometimes* (39 people).

But people who took the broody hen survey said that Buff Orpingtons, Silkies, Dorkings and Ameraucanas tend to go broody easily. In the Survey of Chicken Breeds and Hybrids, Silkies, Aseels, Modern Games, Old English Games and Cochins were rated as best breeds for natural incubation.

### **Some of the comments people made when asked about other methods they've successfully used to encourage hens to go broody:**

"I find just leaving wooden eggs in the nest will encourage nearly any hen who has broody ability. I don't even have to confine them. I do find that if I locate the nest box or house in a quiet, dim area, broodiness happens faster."

"If a hen is not from a breed type for broodiness, she will not be inclined to set. When the seasonal conditions are right, the hen will set, and are difficult to discourage. To encourage, mark some eggs and leave them in the nest so she thinks there is an adequate clutch to set on. I rely on hens that are broody often and hatch eggs. Then the chicks usually grow up to be broody."

"Once they pick a nest to lay in, just let the eggs collect, when they have enough they will sit. We date the eggs as they are being laid so we can remove the oldest if it takes the hen a while to sit. Hens hatched from a broody are much, much more likely to sit on eggs themselves."

"You cannot really encourage a hen to go broody. Either she is genetically inclined to go broody or not. Increasing daylight hours after a laying cycle can trigger the genetic broodiness."

"Pick the hens that have the tendency to set. Move them to a quieter house with easy access to food and water. Give them each a clutch of eggs and let nature run its course. Setting has generally been discouraged in commercially available hens for good reason: They stop laying when they are broody! Don't worry, you can't breed all the nature out of Mother Nature."

"Used golf balls instead of eggs; worked better than eggs in a lot of cases. Just add the real, fertilized eggs when she becomes broody."

"Allowing the hen to gather a large clutch of eggs will cause broodiness in almost any hen. Physiologically they need this to go broody."

**Comments people made about hybrid meat chickens (Cornish cross chickens) and broodiness (using broody hens as foster mothers to raise meat chicks and keeping hybrid meat-type pullets as layers):**

“I’ve never had a meat bird go broody or raise chicks, but I have one Cornish Rock hen now that lays a very large, brown egg daily.”

“Meat type crosses are generally not very good members of your poultry family — lazy, not inclined to hustle for a meal — and generally not reliable brooders — selectively bred for many generations to not be broody. Meat type chicks can be successfully brooded by a hen, but, again, they are lazy, so need careful help to survive satisfactorily.”

“I use my banty hens to brood my meat bird eggs. They can’t sit on many, but they are such good biddies that I have better luck doing it this way.”

“They are NOT good hens to breed from, or as layers. They are structurally built to be harvested at a very young age. They haven’t been bred for anything else. They will lay, and they will have cross-bred chicks, but they rarely live long enough in good-enough health to raise those chicks. The hen gets so big, she has trouble walking, then she has trouble standing. She will also usually develop some sort of heart condition, making breathing difficult, until she goes down and can’t get back up again. Then you either harvest her at that point, when she isn’t very appetizing, or you put her out of her misery. In my experience, they did not go broody, I took the eggs and hatched them in the incubator.”

“Unless you can slip chicks under the hen at night, don’t do it. They will kill strange chicks. IF the hen was setting on eggs or dummy eggs and you can take them all away and replace with day-olds in the middle of the night, it should work very well.”

“I have tried to keep them for longer than the market age but have never been too lucky. It seems that their size stresses their body too much and causes heart failure.”

“I have kept red Cornish cross chickens as layers — the white ones usually get too big and die on their own. They lay and are very popular with my roosters. They haven’t been broody, but they are not quite a year old now. I have some of their eggs in the incubator now. I have successfully used a Silkie hen to raise meat bird chicks — 20 at once!”

“Meat-type layers do not lay well. That is, if you can keep them alive long enough to get old enough to lay. You have to keep them on a very restricted diet. Even more so if you want decent size eggs to try hatching. These birds have a tendency to get too fat and the fatter the bird the smaller the eggs will be.”  
“Keeping hybrid meat birds as layers is not workable. They get too large and don’t maintain good health. Eggs are few and usually infertile.”

“To keep hybrid meat-type pullets for layers means you must keep them on a low calorie diet to keep them from getting to fat. In the industry, they keep them on a starvation diet so they will live long enough to lay eggs and not get too fat. They are good layers if you get the engineered hybrid meat layers breeder birds. They are hard to get and very expensive. Even then, you must be very careful about not getting them too fat. They are meant to lay only one season and then be killed. I think they would get broody but would be poor sitters because of the deformed body shape. With such a short keel bone, I think they would break a lot of eggs. Using broody hens as foster mothers to raise meat chicks makes no sense to me. They grow at such a rapid rate and the food they need to consume to stay alive would be very hard to manage with a standard bred brooder hen. I have hatched commercial hybrid meat birds and the eggs hatch well. They have been selected and engineered to do so. It is all about having a semen tested rooster that the big guys use. The meat-type Cornish Rocks you buy at your feed store are not the same as the breeder birds they use to produce them.”

“We do not keep meat birds that long as it can be very inhumane due to the fact that the Cornish cross birds put on too much weight and usually have joint and heart problems, and some die of heart attacks. It isn't a good thing to keep them long enough to see them lay eggs. Meat birds are usually intellectual property and it is wrong to breed them anyway. I tried it, however, and the progeny do not come out the same and it is tough on the hens. Usually the Cornish cross roosters cannot mate as they are too fat, so you have to get a different breed to mate naturally with the Cornish cross hen. They also do not lay very many eggs as they are bred to be meat birds not production layers. Really bad idea!”

“Meat type pullets do not lay well; they must be kept on a very restricted diet to get to laying age. They don't go broody often and only have about 85 percent fertility at best. Crossing two Cornish Rock crosses that you raise will not give you the same growth as the chicks you buy due to the genetics.”