

From Scratch-Home Made chicken food- an easy, healthy alternative to commercial feed

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Since moving to the farm three years ago, I've completely changed the way my family eats. Gone are packaged, processed foods, chips, and anything junk like. We eat a lot more fruits and vegetables, whole foods, only local and in season, raise our own eggs, chickens, turkeys and pig for meat. So why is it that it was only a few months ago that I noticed the long list of ingredients on the bag of processed chicken food that I've been using?? Lots of recognizable ingredients, and many not, all crunched up and magically glued together into pellet form. I started wondering if that was really the best I could do for my poultry, and decided it probably wasn't. I set about researching poultry dietary needs, looking for recipes and trying to find information on home made vs. commercial feed. I only found bits and pieces, not solid pros or cons, and many recipes, each one different from the next, and none of them very clear or easy to follow. Feeling overwhelmed and unsure, I spent months reading everything I could find. When I was down to my last bag of commercial feed, I set my self doubt aside and just jumped right into choosing ingredients, measuring and mixing, watching what the chickens liked and how they reacted (quality of poop, egg production, general appearance, signs of hunger or health issues). We've been using this new whole feed for 5 weeks now and I am finally confident enough to share the results and the recipe with you!

The first thing I considered is that back in the day, there weren't feed stores all over town for people to buy their "complete" feed. These were people who depended on their chickens for food, not just as backyard pets, so clearly there are alternatives to feed pellets, that have been around forever. I was really disappointed in the scholarly literature that I read. Almost always, they cautioned against experimenting with feed and just sticking to the "complete and tested" commercial feeds.

My best, first break came in Carla Emery's The Encyclopedia Of Country Living. She encouraged readers to grow their own animal feed and poo poed the idea that commercial feed is the only way to go! She didn't provide a recipe, so much as a blue print of what chickens need. For proper growth and egg production, a chicken's diet needs to be 17-20% protein. Traditional feed contains corn and soy, which have their own issues (GMO) and corn is high fat and low protein. So why feed it to the chickens at all? I decided to eliminate both corn and soy from the mix. This way, I can buy conventionally grown ingredients and not have to worry about Franken foods. (I choose not to go organic because it's cost prohibitive for my operation. I don't want to sell \$8 a dozen eggs, I want to offer affordable, fresh and healthy eggs.)

Protein comes in SO many forms and ideally you can offer the chickens a variety of sources. Wheat, Oats, Barley, rye, sunflower seeds, milk products (expired milk or yogurt), eggs, meat, worms and bugs all offer good protein. Another source is fish meal. Hard to come by and very expensive, I decided against this. I really wanted the fish meal used for gardening to be the same thing, and from what I learned, it is, except that the way they process it isn't fit for chickens AND they risk exposure to heavy metals. If you know a fisherman, getting their cuttings would be a score! I've read that chickens need animal protein and that they don't. I know how mine love to go after little mice and frogs, which leads me to believe that they're into it, but I think they can be healthy without adding animal protein to their feed. (ps- bugs and worms count as meat) Because my chickens don't get out into fresh pasture, often, I do think they would benefit from more bugs, so I'll soon be breeding Black Soldier Fly larvae as a supplement for them. Yup, maggot farming. Mmmm. We also give the chickens everything left over when we eat crab, as well as the entire chicken carcass after we make stock. **THEY EAT THE ENTIRE THING!** Legumes, if you can find them in bulk, are a great source of protein. It's not cost effective for me with 50 chickens, but if you have just a few in your backyard, it's totally worthwhile to feed them dried lentils or peas (fresh peas, and their leaves and pods, too). You can cook them first, but it isn't needed.

Greens need to be a part of the chickens daily diet. This is a hard one to mix into the dry formula, but if they are ranging around, or you give them plenty of weeds or kitchen scraps, they should be ok. I also put a flake of alfalfa into their coops every few days.

Vitamins and supplements. A really important thing to remember is that chickens don't have teeth. They have a hard gizzard, against which they grind their food to digest it. For this to work, they need to be eating little pebbles, sand, or other grit. If you're feeding whole grains, you should assume that they can't get enough grit in their foraging, and should give them some. Because they also need selenium and minerals, I chose a grit with minerals that's readily available at the feed store. I started out mixing it into the feed, but it was heavy and didn't mix in well. Now I just throw handfuls of it into the run every other day or so. Same goes for Oyster Shells, which act as grit and also give them the calcium that they need to produce hard egg shells. I put some in the feed, too. You can mix these 2 together and have a dish always available for them, but my chickens always spill it, so I just avoid the middle man. I also use Flax seed. It has lots of Omega 3 and makes their feathers gloriously shiny! Kelp is another one. Super expensive (\$84 for a 50# bag) but used sparingly, so it's ok. Kelp is full of minerals. I use just a little to top dress their food. They go nuts for it! Oh, and don't forget vitamin D (which is added to feed!). Chickens need a little sun every day.



Here's the recipe that I came up with. Note that it changes and flexibility is good. If, for example, one grain price suddenly goes sky high, just drop it until it comes down. Variety is the spice of life, anyway, right? All ingredients should be purchased whole, not cracked, crimped or rolled. Once the shell is broken, they start to go rancid and lose nutritional value.

3 pounds Rye (this is grass seed to normal folks-but get it at the feed store, for quality assurance)
9 pound Barley
9 pounds Oats
9 pounds Wheat (winter red is best, if available)
4 pounds black oiled sunflower seeds (sold as bird seed)
3 pounds Flax
2 pounds Oyster Shell

mix everything together in a plastic bin or feed sack, until well distributed.

Prices vary from area to area, so I'm not including very detailed costs here. 50 pound grain bags are about \$15-20 here, 20 pounds of Flax is \$22, 50# rye is \$36, 30# sunflower seeds are \$25, oyster shell is \$10 for 50#, grits about the same. I believe I'm paying slightly more than I was for the commercial pellets, plus I get to eliminate corn and soy, and all the other ingredients I don't want. My egg production DOUBLED in these 5 weeks, even during a bitter cold snap that lasted a week. Before some hens were missing feathers and looking ragged. Now they have full, bright and shiny coats! Also, I'm using less feed than I used to. Consider the difference in humans, between eating processed food, and whole food that our bodies have to work on for a while...same goes for chickens. Where I was going through three 50 pound bags a week, I now use about 50 pounds of whole food per week. I'm using this food for the chickens, turkeys and geese, all with great results!

As I mentioned, I'm going to be farming BSF larvae to supplement their diets. I've also started making fodder, which is a genius way to increase their nutrition and reduce your feed bill. All you do is sprout some of the grains (takes about a week for them to become a solid mass of roots, seed and grass), then feed them. The conversion is crazy, something like 2 pounds of grain becomes 13 pounds of fodder. This method is literally saving some cow farms in the midwest! I'll have more info and pictures on this soon...