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# Chickens Lay Eggs When They Feel Like It Or: The Back Story to Your Box of Eggs

by Lani Newcomb

Your egg carton is full of naturally colorful eggs. Why? We have colorful chickens. Chickens with green earlobes lay green eggs; chickens with brown earlobes lay brown eggs. White chickens lay white eggs. Young hens lay smaller eggs to start with, and since the color (which sometimes can be scratched off) is spread over a smaller surface the egg is darker. At about one year old, the eggs get bigger and lighter.

In their second year the eggs get even bigger and paler, and become more fragile because the amount of calcium in the shells is spread more thinly. These are more likely to crack or break, especially since they can be so big they barely can squeeze into the egg cartons and are likelier to get bumped. If you have a henhouse full of young pullets you can collect the eggs loose in a five gallon bucket because they're smaller and sturdier. The houses with older hens, not so much.

Eggs don't necessarily have to be refrigerated, until they are. Fresh eggs can sit for quite a while at room temperature as long as they don't have cracks in them that bacteria can crawl through. Unwashed eggs have a protective coating on them that reduces the amount of air that passes through the pores in the shell. Once you wash the eggs and lose the coating, the eggs age more quickly unless they're refrigerated. Once they're refrigerated they have to



Chicken on a walk. I have more holes in my fences than chickens, and at night I go pick them up where they're sleeping on trees and roofs and put them back in so they can walk out again in the am.

stay in there because they're no longer as hardy.

As eggs age, they gradually lose moisture inside. When first laid, the egg fills up the shell. As the weeks go by, the egg shrinks inside the shell as it loses moisture, and the space is replaced by air. The egg is still good, but the yolk tends to stick to the shell.

A fresh egg that has no air in it, if you put it in a bowl of water it will sink to the bottom and lie on its side. After a few weeks at room temperature it will take in some air, so when put in a bowl of water one end of the egg will rise up a little, and later on the egg will gradually bob up and float. It's still not a bad egg, just an air filled one. If it jumps to the

surface like a balloon, that's probably not an egg you want to crack into your frying pan, better to chuck it out in the garden.

Young hens usually start laying when they are 17-24 weeks old, depending on the time of year -- when the earth is coming alive in the spring, so do chickens, and they start putting out little eggs when they're barely 4 months old. Chickens that are hatched early in the year and come of age in the summer or fall when it's hot or the daylight is starting to decline might not start laying until they're six or seven months old.

Chickens lay eggs when they feel like it. They like it to be sunny and warm, but not too warm. They

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# Registered Dietitian and Farming Apprentice

by Sarah Waybright

I come to farming from the “fork” side of the farm-to-table movement - as a dietitian, I want to approach nutrition education through food, to show people how to eat better and not just tell them! The single biggest problem with the typical American’s intake is a lack of produce (one serving is the size of your fist for fruits & vegetables), so working on a vegetable farm seemed like a great way for me to get closer to the source and share what I learn about how to grow this foundational part of our diet.

Growing up on a large dairy farm in Pennsylvania, my family always had a garden – something I didn’t appreciate until I left home! In college at Franklin & Marshall, I followed the pre-med track and majored in neuroscience, but realized that becoming an MD didn’t really line up with the lifestyle I wanted. Learning that nutrition was an option as a profession, I went to Drexel to do my Master’s and graduated in 2010. I launched my brand WhyFoodWorks in February of 2012, and now I provide corporate seminars and do coaching



First days of spring: Sarah with hand hoe.

for DC-area companies on my days off from the farm. I also have a blog ([www.whyfoodworks.com](http://www.whyfoodworks.com) - every post features a recipe!) and some BIG aspirations for the future.

My dream is to have a functioning farm that’s also a wellness and retreat center, with a big kitchen to teach cooking, canning, and pickling classes. You can’t tell people how to grow and prepare food – they

have to experience it. Gaining confidence in working with food and mastering culinary skills leads to trying new things, and builds an appreciation for the effort food takes in a world where everything is constantly available. Farming, like cooking, teaches patience, timing, a strong work ethic, and how to be both self-reliant and function as part of a group: all things that translate to many other parts of life. I want to create a place that can offer the relaxation and escape people want on their weekends that will also entice, stimulate, and leave them experimenting more with their food and seeking to interact more with the people who grow it. It’s not clear when or how or where this magical idea will come to be – but I’m so excited that PVF welcomed me to take the first step to learning what it will take to make this a reality!

I always want to connect over food – find me as WhyFoodWorks on Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and Facebook. I’m also a potter (find me as StonewareBySarah on Facebook!), a yogi, and I’m trying to become someone who swims for exercise as a Reston resident.

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need 12-14 hours of light for best production, so in the shorter winter days unless they have additional light they cut way back. They fire back up around March, then really go to town through June. If the summer stays mild, they lay like wildfire the whole time, but if we have a stretch of really hot days they get grumpy and refuse to work. A week of 90 plus degrees, they can handle that. Two weeks, they quit. A

house with 100 hens will give you 90 eggs when the weather is prime. Go out on a dreary rainy day and the same house will only have 25 eggs, but the next sunny day they’re back up to max power. We make sure to have some houses with lights in them so those hens don’t slow down. Some houses are in the woods where there’s not much sun, but it doesn’t get hot so they don’t slow down. The houses with younger hens keep laying through all kinds

of weather variations, while the older hens don’t work so hard.

In her first year, a good brown egg layer might lay 250-275 eggs. They drop off fairly quickly, so in the second year she might lay 180 eggs, bigger and paler. The third year, maybe 50 eggs. But they don’t all follow the same pattern-- we know a lady who must be a Chicken Whisperer, because her girls live to be 12 or 13 years old and keep laying the whole time. Another friend has a flock of six

hens who are more than 4 years old and she gets 6 eggs every day, so not all chickens read the How To Manual before they go to work.

Therefore, in your box o’ eggs, you might find some smaller darker eggs, some green or white eggs, or a few larger paler ones. For entertainment sometimes we’ll sneak in a small super hard pointy ended guinea hen egg -- they taste amazingly superior, but they are very hard to crack.



# Farming From the Sidelines, For Now



Becky and big girl Rowan and baby Theo (who may be too big for a nap in a black crate by now).

by Becky Crouse Durst

I am a consummate late bloomer. (No pun intended.) I spent five years working for environmental nonprofits teaching people about least toxic pest control and the importance of being good stewards of the land before I actually got my hands dirty. That was in 2004, when I worked a part-time season on our Loudoun farm. I fell in love with it then, but I was scared straight from a year of unemployment and poverty, and I decided to go back to the world of desk jobs.

I worked at the farmers' markets from 2005-winter 2010. If PVF didn't need me, I found someone who did. I sold vegetables, fruit, flowers, wine, wine vinegar, mushrooms, and cheese. I just loved being there.

In 2009 it became clear to me that well-paying desk jobs were never going to make me happy. We planned my transition. And in 2010, I took the plunge and moved to Purcellville to live and farm full time. I moved to the Vienna farm in 2011. I helped manage the markets, the CSA, the roadside stand, and the crew (with Hana and Carrie).

I got married in 2012 (on the farm, of course), had my first baby in September of 2013 and cut back to part time, and then my second baby in March of this year. This season I'm home and only working on the computer side of things, but my garden looks FABULOUS and I'm going to run out of dirty things to do here soon. I'm starting to entertain the thought of introducing my youngest to the traditional farm baby nap in a black crate.

## My Story: Growing, Harvesting, Fermenting

by Katherine Stewart Herman

I began an interest in fermenting while working at Tree and Leaf Farm growing vegetables. I had access to 'everything' vegetable, so I began my experiments. For my first year class project at Sacred Plant Traditions, where I would continue to study herbalism for 2 more years, I fermented 20-30 different vegetables. On our final day of class, we had an elaborate taste sampling of my project. The exploration of fermenting in my class project helped lay the foundation for some of my knowledge, experience, and inspiration for my

cultures. I am also drawn to fermenting because it preserves harvests, has probiotic qualities, and makes the vegetables more nutritious.

I was first drawn to herbs due to my experiences in taking & being healed with 'Chinese' herbs when seeing an acupuncture practitioner. Once I started taking classes under Kathleen Maier at Sacred Plant Traditions, a whole new world opened up to me. I studied herbs & clinical herbalism with Kathleen for 3 years, after which I started Gathered Threads. I do hope to see clients one day, but first it felt natural to grow, harvest, and process herbs to provide for people



Katherine's newest project: 3 month old Nathaniel. since I have over 10 years of vegetable farming experience & knowledge. The herb share has a focus on health and wellness and teaching how to incorporate herbs into your daily rhythms.



# Notes from the Field: Salad Bowl

by Ecole Venskytis

The rain has ceased for a few weeks now, the heat more like midsummer, and we raise our hands before our eyes and squint at the sky, put our hats on, apply some more sunscreen and get down to the business of harvest along with summer and fall crop preparations, the stuff you may think of when you think of farming. This is sweaty work, though we may have forgotten until now.

The oh so blurry month of May with its weather mix of misty drizzle, downpour, steady on wet falling from the sky and daytime temperatures in the fifties was not conducive for planting our summer staples with much ease. These plants require more of the sun, a little more heat in their recipe for success. And driving a tractor into a saturated field is a fool's journey. We know better. So we spent our days of May completing tasks we had put off, placed at the bottom of the list or not even thought of until it was staring one or the other of us in the face—a rainy day list, over and over, and yep, over again, until some may have thought the long days of sun would never begin. I wondered.

And yet still, as farming goes, we also responded accordingly, tossing down our lists and being opportunists at every short break in the clouds. And consequently, our fields in Loudoun look like a patchwork of unique and somewhat randomly constructed gardens—a little lettuce here and over there too, some basil or scallions or okra to complete a bed in one

field and then another, crops finding their seasonal homes in places unplanned, perhaps, until one somewhat dry morning when we walked gently but quickly down the row and planted what we knew was ready and only by hand. The hope that remains is that we remember where to find it at harvest time!

Today, in June, I laugh to myself in recalling

yesterday morning's lettuce sampling in the field with Scout. Much of our crop is now tired of the heat, bolting and going bitter. (We decided to make sure that none of the yucky stuff made it to you.) But, we are not rabbits and so we got a little sick and goofy after so much salad! At this moment, though, I go the way of the lettuce, if it had legs, and take some shade, sit back and breathe in an unmistakable tired from a hot and sunny week of heavy labor and a little scrambling, with constant and determined movements to empty the greenhouse, get more in the ground, keep the weeds at bay.

A look back at the week, the newly mulched beds, the dirt under my nails, a month that had us sometimes shaking our heads or hands in frustration, and all that repeats for me is how good, how real this work is. A daily escape from the clouds, the mud, the bugs, the sun, the chill or the hot breeze by way of traffic, screens and conditioned air—that is not what I seek. The bare truth of living with the nature of things, to be humbled by the ever changing light—this is what meets me at the core. And I am grateful for the experience.



Scout, chief lettuce tester.