

Chicken Flock Transitions

It's nearly December already and we haven't had our first freeze yet. But, there is a chance that the predictions may be wrong and we have one tonight. For the past 2 years we have had our first freeze by November 15th. We are only a few days past, and I'm holding out on our green tomatoes, sweet peppers, and hot peppers that aren't quite ready. I'm also created temporary low tunnels for nightfall in the event of a freeze. I suppose I must cut some of the herbs too, if I plan on preserving them for winter (it did end up freezing as I'd predicted! It tends to be roughly 4 degrees cooler in my backyard probably due to the greenbelt). Which meant a busier day in the garden removing all of the frozen plant mass. The bees and butterflies, especially the Monarchs, have been migrating through here the past few weeks. I saw the last hummingbird pass through and our regular clan mid September. They seemed to be on schedule. I read that if you keep a feeder up throughout the year you may likely see a few of the more rare species. I may test this out this winter just to see.

We have a new flock of 12 chicks. This will be our 4th flock to date. So far our second flock was by far the most superior health wise and we selected them from Ideal Poultry in advance. For whatever reason we didn't fare well with our selectively

bred spring flock in 2016. They weren't given an immunization shot and perhaps that's what did them in, or the heavy rains and potential chemical run off from neighbors, who knows. Our place has been pesticide free and "organic" for 7 years now. There were a multitude of issues with this flock and after contacting experts from various purveyors including Fertrell and Penn State experts, and doing a necropsy, our tests were inconclusive. We didn't send them to A&M either.

The interesting thing is that the first days of a chicks lives are imperative and you may not see results of their first 5 days until weeks or even months later. So perhaps it was the feed, this seemed to be a concern when we lost a few chicks. We didn't have this issue in the past using our favorite local feed mill, but all ideas aren't off the table. We found ourselves giving them regular Vitamin E doses in their water when we thought it was feed issues. Again, any developmental issues that happened in the chicks first 5 days could have very well been the culprit.

We once again ordered a flock from Ideal and after 2.5 weeks old they are happy, lively, vivacious, and flighty as ever. In due part to the fact that we have Americaunas and they tend to be wilder to the core. We had a 20% success rate with our selective breed flock of Barred Rocks last spring, pretty brutal. One gloriously handsome Rooster that we recently culled (we aren't supposed to

have chickens, and he was no exception since he crowed at all times of the day and night, but we did almost have him for 1 year, he was spunky scaredy cat too), and one hen are all that remain from that flock.

We have a small backyard flock; 12 elder hens (3-3.5 yr olds, 8-2 yr olds, 1-nearly 1 yr old), and 12-2.5 wk old chicks (4 Black Australorp, 4 Cuckoo Marans, 4 Ameraucanas). We have learned a lot, and experimented a ton! From building multiple brooders and chicken coops, to experimenting with various dual purpose breeds, visiting multiple farms, researching how to sex chickens, to culling them and dissecting them, attending workshops, tours, clubs, fairs, and events. We are not chicken experts but we have had our share of trials and tribulations that would make one give up. Since we are a fan of pastured organic chicken egg production we also joined APPPA last year and nearly launched a joint venture with a neighboring farmer to go into a larger small scale pasture raised chicken egg production operation. I wasn't quite ready to handle that operation on my own but it's in my husband's mind that's what he wants to do when he retires. We shall see. Until then, we will keep our backyard flock manageable and try to be as simplistic as possible. I must note that this time instead of using a 250w heat lamp we used a heat mat and it has cut our energy bills in half. Once I placed the chicks in the brooder on our back patio, I also added a reptile black light

for additional warmth. They seem to be fine and we are pleased with the savings and the hassle. Plus they have normal sleep patterns without a light on all of the time. One thing that has remained constant throughout all of the changes is that we harvest rainwater and the chickens love it as their main source of drinking water.