

It may not seem like winter's really here outside, although we've had a bit of snow here and there, but one look at the chicken coop, and we know. Sometimes with the change of seasons, chickens will molt and two of our six hens are doing just that. There are feathers everywhere and Pippa especially looks, well, bedraggled.

Pippa is one of our Silver Laced Wyandottes, meaning she has black feathers with white edges and right now she has fewer of them than normal. It would have been better for her had she molted earlier when there wasn't the chance of the temperatures dipping to frigid levels, but it will soon be over and she'll have brand spankin' new ones to keep her warm.

Layla, one of the Buff Orpingtons, is also just completing her molt, and is looking mighty fine and fluffy. Her fellow Buff, Goldie, molted a couple of months ago. The remaining three, Patty, Bianca and Violet, have yet to do it.

I hope now that they'll wait until spring, otherwise I might have to get them some of those cute little chicken sweaters I've seen online. (I'm kidding!)

We're often asked if we heat our coop in the winter and the answer is no. When we chose our chickens, we had three criteria they had to meet: good layers, calm disposition, and cold hardy.

Some chickens are better suited to cold climates and the two breeds we have are known to do well when it gets really cold. Chickens can get frostbite on their combs (on top of the head) and wattles (under the head) and the shorter and clustered combs (such as the rose and pea combs) are less likely to experience it.

In case you were wondering just what purpose those combs have, there are a few. Chickens don't sweat, so in warmer weather, they have to have a way to help cool their bodies down.

The blood circulates through their combs and wattles, where it's cooled and then recirculated through their bodies. Of course in winter this can be a problem and in some comb forms, the tips can get frozen and fall off.

Those combs serve another purpose too. Chickens see in color and are attracted to the color red so the more developed combs on a rooster help to make them more desirable to the females.

The color of the combs is also an indicator of the chickens' health. A comb that's pale or extremely dark can indicate a problem.

Winter is a time when hens will slow their laying or stop altogether. Egg production is dependent on day length and they require about 12-14 hours of daylight to produce eggs on a regular cycle.

Since our days aren't that long in winter, we have a light in the coop that's on a timer, which also produces a little bit of heat. It comes on at 3 a.m. and goes off at daybreak. Right now we're getting about 3-4 eggs a week from each of our six hens.

Some hen owners don't use supplemental light in the winter because they feel that it's better for their hens to go through their laying cycles in a more natural way. We prefer to add the light because the reason we got chickens was for them to lay eggs. We feed them so that they'll feed us!

Since we don't really know who's laying what eggs or how many, we can only assume that Pippa isn't laying at all right now. Molting is a little bit of a stressful time for a chicken and they stop laying for a little bit while they're going through it. When spring gets closer, their egg production will increase.

And there you have a little bit of Chickens 101.

## **New feathers for Pippa**

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