

Free Range Egg Production

Free Range eggs are produced from hens allowed the opportunity to graze and forage on pastures. You can now find free range eggs on your supermarket shelves next to the commercially produced ones. However, you will pay a little more for them with good reason.

Eggs have always been produced free range, either by home garden producers or on a slightly larger scale. During the 1950's, the intensive cage system of egg production was introduced. This system allowed Producers to 'farm' eggs from a maximum number of chickens in a minimum area, therefore keeping labour and feed costs to a minimum.

Since the inception of the intensive system, people have voiced their disapproval of it; however, they have continued to purchase the product, and even today, commercially produced eggs from the cage system account for approximately 85% of egg sales.

Free Range Egg Production enterprises are on the increase throughout the UK. Both organically minded and conservative broad-acre farmers are looking toward Free Range Egg Production as an alternative source of income.

The methods of Free Range farming are diverse. A typical programme however would be as follows:

'Day old' chicks are purchased and raised under lights. By the age of 4 weeks, they are allowed outside but still have access to their light, as coldness is still an issue. At approximately 6 weeks, the chicks are transferred to their transportable shed, where they grow and develop until they start to lay eggs at the age of approximately 20 weeks.

The transportable sheds are in paddocks between 2 -10 hectares in size. The sheds are moved around the paddocks on a regular basis, as hens don't usually wander far from their sheds. Depending upon the operation, some farmers enclose their hens at night, others leave the sheds open and employ a dog to guard the hens.

Eggs are collected 3 – 4 times a day, every day of the week. They are taken to a cool room to be stored. Twice a week, the eggs are graded, sorted, candled and packed ready for distribution.

The hens are transferred to new paddocks after approximately 12 months for Free Range grazing. These used paddocks must then be rested to allow grasses to regenerate and utilize the fertilizer deposited by the chickens. The paddocks are rested for at least 12 months, otherwise over-grazing occurs, which is detrimental to pasture and soil.

After this brief overview, we can ascertain that Free Range Egg Production is rather labour intensive and does require fairly large amounts of land. These are probably only two of the factors contributing to the higher prices for Free Range Eggs.