

# The Daily Demands



Your ducks always want fresh food and water plus clean shelter.

By Cheryl Morrison

**T**he payback for keeping ducks is rich: pest control, manure for the compost pile, flavorful eggs and meat, and feathers for pillows and comforters. Ducks' antics provide ongoing amusement, and the birds add grace and beauty while gliding on a pond. In return for food, fertilizer, feathers and fun, ducks require little more than simple routines to meet their needs for food, water and shelter.



ROBIN VAN SNIJDERSTOCK

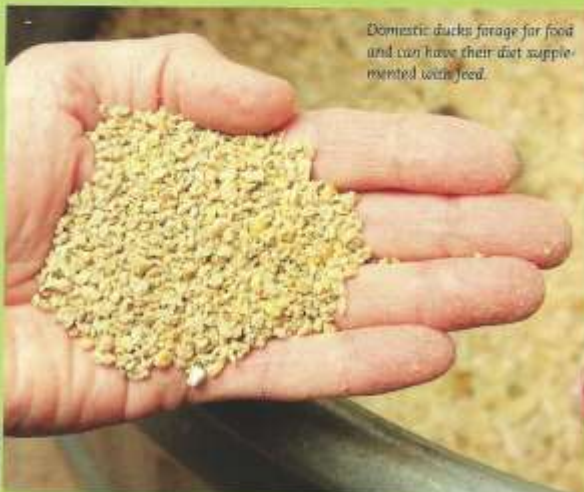
## WHAT'S TO EAT, MA?

The main thing is to always provide fresh food and water, says Jonathan Tollison of Tollison Family Duck Egg Farm in Greenville, S.C.

Homestead ducks often obtain much of their own nourishment by foraging for plants, insects, slugs and frogs. Quackers give new meaning to the phrase "bill of fare" as they use their bills to poke, pull and dig for food. As a flock increases, though, so does the competition for the foods that ducks crave, and that can make for slim pickings in the yard.

To keep his 48 ducks healthy and not too fat, Tollison provides three two-gallon feeders. "We pretty much measure those feeders, and as long as we have it full once a day, they'll empty it out fast," he says.

Kiyoshi Mino, who operates Lucky Duck Farm in central Illinois with his wife, Emma Lincoln, says they raise their chickens and ducks as naturally as possible. "We give them an opportunity to run around wherever they want and eat their natural diet," he says. As a result, he says, the eggs that their free-range ducks produce have better taste and texture than eggs from ducks that are confined and fed only a commercial diet.



Domestic ducks forage for food and can have their diet supplemented with feed.



Keep your ducks warm and safe by providing secure shelter.

## SHELTER TIPS

Many duck keepers use a "deep-litter" system to keep duck houses warm and comfortable. In addition to insulating ducks from cold floors, it throws off heat as bedding and manure accumulate and decompose. The method involves these basic steps:

1. Spread a layer of straw or other dry bedding over the floor, 2 to 4 inches deep.
2. Stir the bedding from time to time, and add a shallow layer of fresh material on top.
3. Replace all of the bedding at least once a year. — C.M.

Mino and Lincoln, who spent a year at The Farm School in Athol, Mass., began farming in 2011. They keep ducks only for eggs, which they sell — along with Asian vegetables they grow — through farmers markets and their community-supported agriculture operation. Eggs from free-range ducks are "totally different" from other duck eggs. Mino says: "The yolks are darker. They taste much better, and they have a creamier texture."

Mino and Lincoln buy feed to supplement their flock's food-finding efforts. Every day, they set out 50 pounds of it for their 40 ducks and 180 chick-



ens. The ducks "live with the chickens and get the same feed," he says. "We get organic feed from a certified organic farm not too far away from us." It consists mainly of soybeans and grains, including wheat, corn, and oats.

Many duck farmers set table and garden scraps out for their birds. Dr. William F. Dean of the Cornell University Duck Research Laboratory says a small flock might be able to survive on foraging and scraps, but the ducks probably won't grow fast or produce many eggs. For increased egg production or faster growth, he says, you need to provide some grain and maybe other supplemental foods.

Dave Holderread, who operates Holderread Waterfowl Farm in Corvallis, Ore., with his wife, Millie, says a duck's dietary needs change over time, and not providing the diets appropriate to different stages is a common mistake. "There are different needs for each stage in a duck's life span," he says, the three main stages being growth (up to 12 weeks), maturity (when they've stopped growing) and breeding. In his book "Storey's Guide to Raising Ducks" (Storey Publishing), Holderread devoted a chapter to the dietary stages.



Ducks are inherently messy animals; clean their water dishes frequently using water and bleach.

JANET HORTON

## QUACKERS GIVE NEW MEANING TO THE PHRASE "BILL OF FARE."

### "... LIKE A DUCK TO WATER"

Ducks require water — lots of it. Like all farm animals, they need clean drinking water. Although they are happiest with water where they can swim as well as bathe and forage, ducks can make do with just a tub of drinking water that's deep enough to immerse their heads and keep their eyes and nostrils clear.

Even when ducks do not use their drinking dishes as wash basins, it's essential to clean the dishes and change the water at least once a day. Ashley Kinney, a rehabilitation supervisor at Wildlife Center of Silicon Valley in San Jose, Calif., says the center's staff washes drinking dishes in the dishwasher or by hand with a 1:32 solution of bleach and water. The center's dishwasher uses "super, super, super hot water," Kinney says, which adequately disinfects the dishes.

At Tollison's farm, they wash the ducks' dishes daily with soap and hot water. Once a week, they clean the dishes with a bleach solution, pouring a capful of bleach into a gallon of water.

Ducks will swim and splash around in any water-filled vessel they can enter, and keepers often put kiddie pools or tanks in their duck pens. Without fail, ducks will poop where they swim. They will also track mud and food particles into the water. Anyone who's new to raising ducks or contemplating it "should realize that they're messy," Tollison says. "They're not as cute as on TV."

Pools and tanks must be scrubbed and refilled daily, because ducks invariably drink from them even if their water dishes are full. At Tollison's farm, the pools are emptied and cleaned daily



LANA LANGLOIS/SHUTTERSTOCK

with soap and hot water, then disinfected once a month with a 1:32 solution of bleach to water.

Mino and Lincoln learned the hard way about hazards of dirty water after changing the water only every couple of days. "We were losing a lot of chickens," Mino says. "We had a couple of dead ones tested, and it turned out they were dying of bacterial infections. The ducks get sick from it, too."

On the advice of a veterinarian, Mino and Lincoln removed the pools from the bird pen. The ducks now drink from chicken waterers, which are impossible for them to climb into. "We spray them with hoses," he says, "and they like that."

#### THE DAILY DRILL

Tollison's farm includes about three dozen layers: a mix of Pekins, Khaki Campbells, Blue Swedes, Black Swedes, Cresteds and Cayugas. He sells eggs for hatching and ducklings to customers in California, Virginia and Pennsylvania as well as cooking eggs to a restaurant and a community college in his home state. (See "Feathered Profits" on page 76 for practical business tips.)

Tollison's daily routine starts with fresh food and water for the birds. "Then we go to the pool area and clean that out," he says. "Then we gather the eggs." His helpers include his 8-

### THEN THEY GO OUT — TO THE POND, THE MARSH, THE FIELD, WHEREVER THEY WANT TO GO.



If you need the spirit, cheer your ducks' spirits to forage for insects.



and 10-year-old daughters, who already know how to candle eggs. They separate the eggs to be incubated from those that will be sold for food, then bathe the kitchen eggs with an antimicrobial wash. (See page 30 for details about hatching.)

"We exercise our ducks, too," Tollison says, "and we visually inspect most of them to make sure they're fine and healthy. "On alternating days, Tollison and his helpers clean out the ducks' bedding. When cold weather arrives, they check the duck pen for drafts and make sure it's warm.

The routine that Jackie Wilson describes for the 125 pasture-fed ducks at Common Wealth Farm in Unity, Maine, is similar. She and her husband, Charles, have been operating the farm two years and sell their eggs at farmers markets.

The Wilsons secure the birds at night so that she and Charles don't have to hunt for the ducks

all over the property. In the morning, the ducks receive a five-gallon bucket of feed. "Then they go out — to the pond, the marsh, the field, wherever they want to go," Jackie says. "We feed them again around 3 o'clock, and they go out again to forage." At sunset, she says, "they come in of their own volition."

Routines vary from farm to farm, depending on whether they're raising layers or meat ducks, whether their eggs are incubated or sold for food, how the poultry houses are set up, and what ideas the farmers are testing or adopting. Virtually all farmers have routines, and as Tollison notes, ducks thrive on regularity. "They have their routine," he says, "and they expect us to do things in a certain order."

*Cheryl Morrison splits her time between New York City and southern Vermont, and roast duck is one of her favorite meals.*

*You might collect more than enough duck eggs every day. Check out egg facts on page 82.*