

Start your own chicken flock

By Charles A. Sanders

One of the first types of livestock which many homesteaders undertake raising is the chicken. There is certainly no other species of animal more suited nor more beneficial to the homestead than the chicken. Meat, eggs, fertilizer, waste disposal, and pest control are among the qualities of the home flock.

Chickens are generally grouped into three types: meat birds, layers, and dual purpose breeds. When we started out in the poultry business, so to speak, we knew that we wanted dual purpose breeds—ones that would be good eating birds and good layers of brown eggs. We began by looking through the catalogs available from a couple of the reputable hatcheries. Selecting the types of chickens you are going to order is not as easy as it sounds. Out of all the feathered makes and models available, we settled on a dozen each of Silver-laced Wyandottes, Rhode Island Reds, and Buff Orpingtons. We knew that we wanted birds of the heavy breeds, for we were planning to butcher about two-thirds of them, then keep the rest as a small laying flock. We ordered straight run birds. That means that the birds are not sexed, but boxed and shipped just as they come from the incubators. Since we would be butchering most of the birds, anyway, we felt that there should be plenty of layers to pick from for the laying flock. They're cheaper when ordered this way, too.

You have a few other choices in acquiring your birds. In the spring, many feed mills or farmer's co-ops offer low priced chicks when you buy 50 or 100 pounds of chick starter feed.

The selection of breeds is generally somewhat limited with these offers, but they can be a good way to get your starter flock. Be sure, however, that before you take advantage of these deals to find out whether you are getting meat birds or laying breeds. For the record, meat birds put on weight much more quickly than laying type chickens. Be sure that if you are wanting layers, that the chick offer is not



for males, or cockerels, only. Some of the large laying bird hatcheries use these chick offers to get rid of the male chicks which, obviously, they cannot use. Folks at the store should be able to give you the information you need.

The sale barn or auction house is another source of your starter flock. Be aware, though, that many folks come to these sales to get rid of their old hens and burnt-out roosters. Many chicken 'collectors' also frequent these sales and will often run the price up on the more colorful and unusual types of birds. There will, however, probably be several boxes of young pullets and chicks of the more common breeds. Those more common varieties of homestead-type chickens should go at a more reasonable price.

You may also be able to work out a deal with neighbors or friends to provide some starter birds for your flock, either as mature birds, usually older broody hens and randy roosters, or as newly hatched chicks.

The source I would recommend is the mail-order poultry house. Probably every one of us has seen in our favorite homesteading magazines the advertisements of the large hatcheries. These mail-order hatcheries provide a catalog with a much larger selection of chicken breeds than you will probably find available otherwise. The large hatcheries offer the added benefit of not only providing lively chicks, but can vaccinate them, clip their beaks and generally provide better service. It's their business. And, as surprising as it may seem, the mail never runs slowly with an order of day-old chicks. Almost without exception, mail-order chicks arrive thriving and peeping away. With chick orders, you will be notified of the shipment date by the hatchery. Then, expect to receive a first-thing-in-the-morning

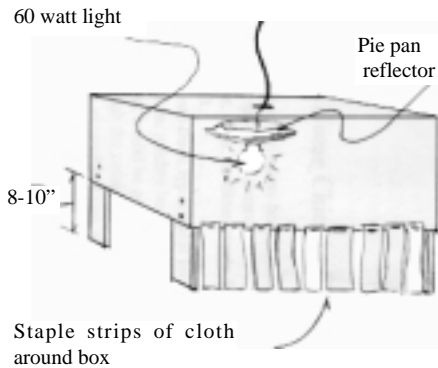
call from the folks at the post office when the birds arrive. You will probably be able to hear the chicks just as soon as you enter the building.

Assuming you are starting with newly hatched mail order chicks, let's look at getting them off to a good start.

Preparing for your birds

Before your order of chicks arrives, be sure that you have all the equipment for brooding them in place and working. When the post office calls for you to come and pick up your box of chicks, there will be little time to hustle around getting things set up.

Have a circular brooding area set up. This can be made from pieces of cardboard, metal, or most any other material as long as it provides a draft-free



A homemade box brooder

environment and is tall enough to prevent the lively youngsters from hopping out over the sides. (Think about a few weeks down the road, when the little buggers really begin hopping and flopping about.). Although many a bunch of chicks has been brooded in a box behind the old kitchen stove, most folks agree that it is important to use a circular area to prevent the chicks from piling up in a corner and suffocating their siblings. We used a large plastic wading pool about 5-6 feet in diameter for our initial brooder area. As recommended by the hatchery, we suspended a 250 watt red heat lamp about 18 inches above the bedding. It worked well until the birds were old enough to turn into the chicken house. The important thing is to introduce your chicks to an environment which is about 90-95 degrees. The heat bulb should be raised about one inch per week (thus lowering the temperature) until the birds are old enough to do without it altogether. A cheap thermometer is needed to help you monitor the temperature in the brooding area. We plan to experiment with lower wattage bulbs and a brooder with our next batch of birds. The important thing is to maintain the 90-95 degree brooding temperature.

A suitably sized brooder box can be placed within your larger circular enclosure and also allow you to use a lower wattage bulb (60 watts or so). This can do the job and save you some

money. Use what you have that will get the job done. [see illustration]

Two waterers which screwed onto quart fruit jars provided fresh water for the new chicks. I read once that one of the two waterers should be filled with milk to help prevent coccidiosis, a bacterial disease. Of course, the nutritional value of the milk should also make the chicks grow much faster, too.

Fresh feed was placed in a small feeder away from the light. A loose top bar on the feeder prevented any chick from roosting atop it and soiling the feed. You can purchase one of these or make one quickly and easily in your workshop.

We fretted, searched, and pored over books and articles to come up with a suitable bedding material for our delicate new charges. We didn't have any of the recommended materials available to us. We finally took the advise of an old Amish farmer at the feed mill and just used ordinary clean straw. It worked very well. Beneath the straw we placed a layer of newspapers and every couple of days the bedding was changed to help keep the chicks thriving and healthy. Other recommended materials include ground corn cobs, wood shavings, rice hulls, or any commercial litter. Do not use sawdust for litter. The chicks will eat it.

When your birds arrive

Immediately upon receiving your shipment of chicks, take each one and dip its beak into the waterer and allow it to drink if it wants. They will most likely be quite thirsty after their journey and this procedure serves not only to give them that needed water, but also to acquaint them with their source of water.

We experienced a bit of a problem with cannibalism among our batch of chicks. Overcrowding or excessive heat is said to contribute or cause this problem. I don't think that either of those were factors in our case. It

seems to have occurred with one of the initially weaker birds as the victim. Eventually, even after applications of pine tar to the victim, we ended losing two chicks to cannibalism. To remedy the problem, we used regular toenail clippers to slightly nip off a bit of the top beak of the survivors and applied a touch or two with a styptic pencil to stem the flow of blood. I do not know if the styptic pencil (alum) was somehow a cause, but we ended up losing a total of four more chicks after the "operation."

Once the young birds had begun getting their primary wing feathers, we were able to move them to the new chicken house. The timing was not so much determined on any particular point in the bird's development but rather the stage of construction of the chicken house. There, the young birds had more room to scratch and run and adjusted quickly. Fresh feed and water were supplied and the same heat bulb was suspended from the rafters.

Upon completing the fenced chicken run, the small sliding door was raised and the chickens were allowed to come and go at will. They soon had removed every piece of greenery from the area and welcomed all grass clippings and kitchen scraps. The first night or two, some of them failed to grasp the concept of going back inside before dark and I checked them to find them huddled in a corner of the pen. I gently tossed them back into the chicken house and after a couple of days, all of them would gravitate back inside as darkness neared.

Chicken house features

One feature which I added to our chicken house, and heartily recommend to anyone building a similar building is a clean-out door. Ours is designed a bit differently due to our site and circumstances, but works well. In one corner of the building, I built in a small door (about 2 ft. by 2 ft.) hinged at the top. Turn buttons keep it closed from the outside. The

door, being on the end of the building which is highest off the ground, allows us to move the wheelbarrow directly beneath the opening and shovel the old bedding and manure right into the 'barrow. With the chicken house being directly adjacent to our garden, it is easy to get the material right onto the ground where it will do the most good.

When I built the roosts, I reverted to some old-time advice. Long ago, I'd been told that sassafras poles used as roosts will help repel mites. Apparently the wood contains oils which help to repel the little critters. If so, fine. If not, they still make great roost poles, for they grow abundantly in thickets and become straight and tall as they stretch and compete for sunlight. The larger ones (2 inches or so at the butt) make the best roost poles. Incidentally, the smaller ones (1-1½ inches) make terrific bean poles. Speaking of mites, we occasionally perform routine maintenance to help prevent or control the little critters. Whenever I scoop out the old litter to be used on the garden, I give the chicken house floor a good sweeping. Once it is good and clean, I go around the perimeter of the whole chicken house floor at the base of the walls and pour a band of ordinary motor oil. I pour more oil on the length of each roost pole. I also sprinkle a foot-wide band of rotenone around the floor perimeter and add a sprinkle or two into the nest boxes when the nest straw is changed.

Nest boxes

Another thing I had given some thought to was how I would make the nest boxes. The answer came when I read somewhere that ordinary 5-gallon plastic buckets could be used for the nests. I cut a couple of support boards to cradle three of the containers in one corner of the chicken house. After tracing the shape needed, I cut three crescents from scrap 1 x 4 stock and nailed them into the opening of the



Nests made from 5-gallon buckets with a roost pole in front

bucket to provide a short banner to keep straw...and eggs ... inside the nest where they belong. A friend I visited later had merely cut the original plastic bucket lid into the same shape and did the same job. Neat. The finished nests were anchored with a couple of nails to the supports. One additional thing I added was a roost pole in front of the boxes, not so much for the birds to rest on as to provide a surface to come and go from.

Good feeding of your flock is an important concern. After the birds are mature, you will need to switch from a growing mash to a laying mash if egg production is your goal. The high-bred hybrid meat birds will be ready to butcher in about 10-12 weeks. Layers should begin production in about 20 weeks or so. This gives you an idea on the time table for switching feeds.

We like to keep our flock confined to the run as much as possible, however, on very hot days, we let them run loose and find shade and scratch where they will. At first we were concerned about the birds raiding the garden, but some improvised fencing took care of the problem before it

occurred. Another alternative is to let the chickens out just an hour or so before dark. They will have plenty of time to roam about and scratch and feed, then will mosey back to the chicken house on their own as darkness approaches. That has worked very well for us.

Our intentions from the beginning of the chicken raising project was to get about three dozen birds, raise them to butchering size, butcher about two dozen and keep the rest of the flock as egg producers for the family. We have ended up with birds in the freezer, and more eggs than we can use. By posting a sign out on the mailbox, we can sell every extra egg that we get. In fact the demand is greater than the supply. We intend to correct this problem next spring when we order some more birds.

Hints and tips

Locate your chicken house as close as practical to your house and barn. If you locate it just an extra 25 feet away than need be, then you will end up putting in about 25 extra miles of

walking over a year's time. That equals about eight hours of extra effort.

Pay attention to the shape of the eggs you get. Old-timers say you can predict the sex of the chickens which will hatch from them. Reportedly, the longer eggs will produce rooster chicks and the more rounded ones, hens.

If you have birds which tend to fly out over the top of the chicken yard fence, you can easily remedy the problem without tying a brick to their leg. Slip in after dark while the birds are on the roost and take up the winged escapee. With a pair of scissors, clip a couple of inches off of the primary wing feathers on one or both wings. The resulting loss of lift should keep the offender grounded.

Chickens need about 14 hours of daylight each day to maintain egg production. We extended egg laying through most of the winter by adding a cheap timer to a 60-75 watt lamp in the chicken house. The timer was set to add a few hours of light each evening to reach the needed 14 hours.

Be absolutely certain to have a good supply of fresh water available for your birds at all times. Failing to do so will squelch your egg production quickly.

Consider putting a capful or two of apple cider vinegar in your chickens' water. It will provide minerals which they need.

If you want to sell eggs, consider getting breeds which produce brown eggs. For some reason, many folks prefer the brown shelled eggs over the white ones. As I tell people when they

ask about the difference, I do not know of any difference in the eggs other than the package they come in. But brown eggs do sell well.

Back in 1944, E.B. White gave the following advice for keeping chickens:

1. Be tidy.
2. Be brave.
3. Walk, don't run.
4. Never carry any strange object.
5. Keep Rocks if you are a nervous man.
6. Keep Reds if you are a quiet one.
7. Do all your thinking and planning backwards.
8. Always count your chickens before they are hatched.
9. Tie your shoelaces in a double knot. Δ