

Re: So many questions...Starting with coops

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.agriculture.poultry/2005-03/0252.html>

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Date: 03/14/05

Date: Mon, 14 Mar 2005 10:25:54 -0800

"Ann" <annbal@newsguy.com> wrote

- > *If anyone could answer a few questions that have been puzzling me I'd appreciate it.*
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- > *1) I've read of a 'dropping pit' below roosts. Is that open to below?*
- > *Wouldn't that be drafty for the birds in winter?*

Don't know what this is specifically, but you do want to avoid winter drafts. In big commercial operations, the birds are in wire cages that are enclosed in a big building that is climate controlled, so perhaps that's the usage?

- > *2) Is an 8x8' coop large enough for 10-12 chickens?*

You mean for sleeping/laying in, right? (Because you mention 'run' below). Height is an issue – chickens like to roost up on stuff. How tall would this structure be? And they like variety – some like boards, some like branches, some like high nesting spots, some low (at least, IME). I think the recommended number is 2 square feet per bird, so this should be large enough, but you want to consider your access (for cleaning/egg gathering), their access, and their entertainment.

- > *3) What I'd like to do is build my coop on 4x4 timbers, sort of like rails, on cinder blocks with a solid floor (predator proof). Is this a good plan?*

I can't quite picture where the cinder blocks go in relation to the rails, but predator-proof is good. The best coops I've seen are like tall, airy sheds (if that helps) – best as in easiest to access and clean.

- > *4) The run....I want the chicks to be safe outdoors. It sounds like I should put up a wire fence, burying the wire around the base, with a flare to the outside. I'm planning on the run being 14x20'.*

Depends on your predators. My main local concerns are racoons and rats. I buried wire around the base, but the racoons don't dig and the rats go anywhere they want. My point being, burying wire may or may not be

necessary. In my case, it was a ton of work for little return. (Those rats are pernicious!)

Realize that 10–12 birds in this area will reduce it to BARE dirt in no time flat. You'll want to prepare for that situation, because they'll be grumpy birds when it rains and turns into bare mud. Jill I think puts a heavy bark down. I keep a thick layer of hay in my pen (that I have to 'muck out' regularly).

Also remember that chickens like to take dirt baths. All they really need is some sunny dirt, but you need to make sure their pen gets enough sun for this AND it has enough shade to keep them from baking in the summer. My run is a little too shady for chicken preferences, so when I'm home, I let them into the yard as often as I can. Keeps the slug & snail population to nill, does damage some plants, but I'm not a gourmet gardener, and I do have to wash up the patio after they've been out, but they love to get out and scratch in a new area (and the south wall planter is their favorite bathing spot).

> 5) *I'm thinking of putting the brooder in the garage, safe from my cat
> and other bad guys. I think that's the best place for them, there's
> electricity and I can rig up a nice pen for them at first with the
> heat lamp, etc.*

I started my chicks in a cardboard box in a spare bathroom. Then I cut hole in the side and expanded it to two boxes (as they grew). I kept the door shut, and I kept a lid on top to keep them from jumping out. This was easier to keep warm.

My dog was immensely curious and snatched one up in her mouth once (I didn't know she could move that fast) but I grabbed her and she dropped it safely. Anyway, be aware of your pets. My cats were too old to notice the chicks, but younger cats would be endlessly fascinated, and patient. Place your brooder in a secure cat-proof area.

After they grew more (and feathered more), I moved them to a 'pen' in the garage, which was a little colder. They still had a light if they wanted it, though (and they look so cute all piled up together near it. Concerned about them being cold, I added a second light, but they continued to pile together under just one – I think it was the piling more than the warmth they were after). This 'pen' will need to be draft free, too. I used (as I recall) plywood boards on end clamped together with some boxes, bricks, and branches for them to play on (so they'd leave the feeder and waterer alone).

Make sure you keep a thick, clean layer of pine shavings (or hay) under their feet for a long time. When I moved my chicks to the garage, their base layer got thinner as the space got larger. I started having trouble with poorly developing feet and was advised (here in s.a.p., thank you all) that they needed to stay on softer stuff than a concrete floor until fairly well developed. I poured a bunch more shavings in and their feet got a lot better. Clean is important for all the chick diseases (as I'm sure you're

hip to).

Also, be aware that they'll grow FAST. We had this little group of chicks, and they were so cute and playing in our hands in their banana box. Then it seemed like every week we needed to add more space for them, even though they weren't feathered. They were in a car-sized spot before I moved them outside.

> *I'm so afraid of getting things all set up and losing them to
> predators. My yard is surrounded by woods, we've got hawks, foxes,
> coons, dogs, etc. all waiting to eat my babies (when I get them).*

I think foxes do dig, so the buried wire is probably a good idea. Your _chicks_ will be safe from these critters, because they'll be in the brooder in the garage, but the 'girls' will be a fine looking meal to these predators. I had a neighbor's dog break through a fence-board into my yard and kill two of my birds while I was gone for just a few hours.

I've had young eagles perch in the trees in my yard trying to figure out how to get one my tasty morsels. I have to say, though, the chickens were instinctively extremely wary. AAMOF, it was their absolute resistance to coming out of the bushes that first alerted me to a threat overhead.

I've watched cats slink along the fence, looking through the overhead netting, tails whipping, and little teeth chattering. I have a plastic netting overhead (some garden fencing as I recall), and a mixture of wood and wire fencing on the sides.

All that said, my nephew's wife has a load of chickens, she keeps them in this big open top, unburied bottom fenced pen in a _very_ wooded area and she claims she's never lost a chicken to any predators. Don't know how she manages it. I'd be paranoid, but she's lost fewer birds than I have. They do have a big, outdoor dog – maybe he keeps the predators away from the pen. My dog is indoors at night, so mine wouldn't have that protection.

> *I
> do work outside of the home, so no one would be here during business
> hours. I can let them out and feed them in the morning before work
> and my husband gets home a bit earlier, getting them inside at night
> should be no problem.*

A few more thoughts (as if I haven't put enough already).

I put my henhouse inside their run. My cousin and nephew's wife made the coop one wall of the run. This way you don't have to worry about letting them out or putting them in. They just do it themselves. I think most people have to lock their hens in the house a few times overnight when they're young to convince them to sleep _inside_ (mine all wanted to sleep on top, which was safe enough, but messy (to the top) and not so warm). I also used to close them in at night when it was really cold, but I've since installed a red light in there that I leave on when it's freezing. I leave

the door open for ventilation, and then they can snuggle up against each other and the light or nearer the door, depending on the temperature.

Don't know how early it gets dark where you are, but where I am, it's dark at 4:30 in the winter, and the girls go to bed before dark (even though I have an automatic outdoor light in their pen – it never seemed to improve laying, but it makes it handier for me to clean up their food and tend to them in the evening.) My point is, no one may be home early enough for when they want to go to bed. This is the appeal of the coop–pen together – they can bed themselves down when they want. Otherwise they'll sleep on some other roost, and then not learn to use the coop.

Also be aware that young chickens sleep *_soundly_*. I used to joke that you could play football with them once the sky darkened. Sometimes it seemed like they fell asleep one step into the coop, because it was darker. They were hard to rouse from this state (but easy to grab and move) so another reason to let themselves put themselves to bed. As my girls have aged, they're not as heavy sleepers, but when they were young, it was pretty amusing.

*> Is this doable? Is it safe for me to get chickens? I'm feeling a
> bit unsure. I'm sure I'll have more questions once I start to build,
> thank you all for any advice you can offer.*

This is totally do–able. Just be thinking as you build about manure, warmth, ventilation, shade and sun, sanitation, egg collecting (nest boxes), roosts (my girls love the sawhorses best) and other entertainment (confined birds will pick less when they are more entertained), protection from predators, and chicken poop.

The thing I like best about chickens is being so close to non–mammals. Dogs and cats are loving, but they have similar habits and needs as humans. When I watch chickens strolling about the yard, I see dinosaurs in miniature. Dinosaurs who eat rocks to aid their digestion. :-)

Selene
full of cents today