

PLAYHAVEN FARM LLC & GREEN BUILDING PROJECT



SUSTAINABLE FARMING : CHICKEN ADVENTURES, VOL. 1

PLEASE NOTE:

Everything included in "Sustainable Farming : Chicken Adventures, Vol. 1" has been transposed directly from the website. That includes references to the PlayHaven Farm LLC and Green Building Project (PHF&GBP) website pages, external websites, links to documents, etc. Because of how quickly things change on the internet, there are NO links from this document.

GETTING INTO PASTURED POULTRY (MARCH 2012)

One of the things that has been holding me back from getting livestock has been having to "harvest" when the time comes... which is to say kill an animal. The hubby (having had chickens as a youngster) suggested we start with chickens because (and I quote) "after having chickens, you won't have any problem with it." Well, I hope he's right.

I tell myself that so long as the kill is quick and as pain-free as possible, that it will be OK. After all, I am not a vegetarian, so I eat killed animals often. By raising my own meat, I can be sure the animals have the best life I can provide them followed by a prayer of gratitude and a quick death. (Which is pretty much what I wish for myself.)

SO, after a workshop on keeping chickens and reading several books, we are starting this year with several pullets (female chicks) for eggs and some cockerels (male chicks) for meat. We let our friends and family know about it and a few people have decided to let us grow them a few meat birds as well. Which means we bought the chicks, will raise them and process them for meat and our friends/family will recoup our cost for each of those birds. They know this is our first attempt and it is a risk that there might not be any meat birds when all is said and done... but if they do make it through, that will be nice.

I am afraid of birds. They freak me out for some reason. It doesn't make any sense and I don't know why. Starting with chicks is going to be therapy for me.

COOPS

We are raising our chickens sustainably. That means they will be raised on pasture and not kept in a building. We have built a coop for the hens: a Chicken Ark. It is basically an A-frame with a wire 'run' attached to it and it is small enough that we can move it from place to place in the pasture. We are making the nesting box area insulated to withstand the summer heat and the winter cold. The bottom has no wire so the chickens will have full access to the ground, insects, etc. (Pictures are on their own page: [Click here to go to the Chicken Ark and Chicken Tractor page.](#)) The Chicken Ark will be surrounded by an electric poultry 'net' fence so that the hens can range during the day without fear from predators. (Fingers crossed.)

The 'broilers' (which is what you call the meat birds) will live in a different pasture coop (called a Chicken Tractor) that will be a large rectangular box that we will also move every day and that also has no wire between the broilers and the ground so they can scratch and get insects, etc. as well. This coop is plenty large enough so the broilers won't need to range.

While providing the chickens with a lifestyle that is both 'chicken-like' and safe for them... we are also thinking about the fertility of the soil in our pastures. All that scratching, removing insects and pooping will improve the pastures without the problems associated with over use (because we move the chickens every day)... which are toxicity from the high potassium content in chicken poop, denuding the soil and irritability among the chickens (pecking).

BREEDS

I searched several websites to find hens that are very docile in addition to being good layers. I was surprised at the number of websites devoted to city chickens and chickens as pets. They were VERY helpful in my quest to find a chicken that I could hope to be less afraid of.

I decided to get five (5) Black Australorps and five (5) Light Brahmas. Both breeds lay brown eggs and are hardy for cold weather.

The broilers are Dark Cornish cockerels and we are getting twenty-five (25). I decided against getting the popular Rock/Cornish hybrid that seems to be the staple for broilers because they have some leg and other health issues that, as a beginner, I don't want to mess about with.

I found a couple recommended hatcheries in my paperwork from workshops (etc.) and decided to purchase the chicks from Murray McMurray in Iowa.

FOOD (FEED)

Raising chickens on pasture does not mean (unfortunately) that you don't also have to provide them with food (or "feed" as it is commonly known). BUT, it does reduce your feed costs by about 30% (I find from my research). Primarily, the chickens will eat insects, some grass and some sand from the pasture and we will supply them with small grains and lots and lots of fresh water.

Most (if not all) mainstream chicken feed uses cracked corn as it's primary ingredient. As you may or may not already know, I am allergic to corn products of all types... even baking soda plays havoc with my digestive system. And, I have discovered that eggs produced by hens fed a primarily corn feed also give me problems. There is no definitive research to confirm this, but my gut does not care. Lately I've been calling myself the "Canary in the Corn Mine", LOL. For anyone who doesn't get the joke, it refers to how miners for coal (in the olden days) would take a canary in a cage into the mines with them to detect poisonous gasses. Because it took very little of the gasses to kill the bird, the miners would have time to vacate and then deal with the gasses before it killed them as well.

It is my opinion that so many people with egg allergies may actually be reacting to the corn feed, but (as I said above) there is no proof of that. I buy eggs from pasture raised hens and have absolutely NO problem with them in any way.

All that information is provided to explain that we will be feeding our hens (and broilers) feed with no corn and no soy products. That means our costs will for feed will be about double what we would otherwise pay... so reducing that by 30% through pasture raising is definitely worth the inconvenience of moving the pasture coops each day.

CHICKS (MAY 2012)

Now we get to the cute part... the chicks. We had arranged with the hatchery to deliver our batch of chicks starting the week of May 14th. BUT, for whatever reason, I got an email Saturday morning (the 12th) that the chicks had been shipped! OH MY, we better get everything set up NOW. (Had planned to get it set up on Sunday.)

I called the Post Office as soon as I saw the email (around 9:00 am) and the nice man who answered told me he had just gotten the notice as well and was heading to Lexington to pick them up. I told him

I would be happy to meet him in Lexington, but he preferred I meet him at our local office at 11:00 am. That gave us time to set up the temporary pen in the basement.

Of course, everything happens at once and I had a wedding to photograph in the afternoon, so things got a bit hectic. Still, the chicks were only going to need me to supply food, water, and wood shavings so being gone for the afternoon on their first day would not be a problem.



At left is the nice man at the US Post Office with the box of chicks.

At right is the hubby who held the box all the way home. The chicks were very vocal; especially on tight turns and fast stops and starts.

I think every new driver should have to have a box of chicks in the car so they learn how to make smooth turns, stops and starts!



McMurray Hatchery - 800.456.3280 - www.mcmurrayhatchery.com				
NO SUBS				
Order filled by: Hunter				
SKU	Qty	Sex	Description	\$ 7
BBC	1		Broiler Booster - is under pad	
DAC	25	Male	DARK CORNISH	H
DAC	1	Male	DARK CORNISH - Free Extra	H
LFB	5	Female	LIGHT BRAHMAS	R
BLA	5	Female	BLACK AUSTRALORP	S
BLA	1	Female	BLACK AUSTRALORP - Free Extra	S
VACC	37		Vaccinate for Marek's Disease	
COVC	37		Coccidiosis Vaccination	
Chicks vaccinated for Coccidiosis. Feeding medicated feed will nullify the vaccine.				
	37		Total number of chicks	
All poultry originated from parent stock that were tested and found Negative for Typhoid, U.S. Salmonella Monitored and All clean. VBS Form 9-31 will be filed in each state. If requested, Pulmon Certificate will be sent separately. NPIP: 42-10				
				D



Above left: the chicks are packaged so that they share their body heat during the trip. They are packed freshly hatched so there is a “grace” period of about 72 hours for them to arrive at their destination and get food. We received ours about 12 hours from hatching.

Above center: the label on the box. We opted to vaccinate these chicks because we really are new at this. After talking with others and reading some more, we won’t be vaccinating in the future (if we do this again, of course). The “Broiler Booster” is a package containing powdered vitamins, minerals and enzymes to help give the chicks everything they need to thrive.

Above right: The temporary pen is made with corrugated cardboard (part of a “Chick Starter Kit” we got at Tractor Supply Company [TSC]).

There are wood shavings under the newspaper. The hatchery recommends putting newspaper over the shavings the first day to help the chicks acclimate and find the feed quickly. As we moved each chick from the packing box to the pen, we dipped their beaks into the water (which was amended with a little sugar... yummy) so they would know where the water is.



Once they were all in the pen, we brought our Newfoundland Dogs in one at a time to see what the fuss was all about. Phaerghus (5 yr old male) did not know what to make of them and kinda freaked him out a little bit. Isabeau (7 yr old female) was ready to climb in with them and had to be restrained. Probably reminded her of the baby bunny she found as a puppy; can’t be having that with the chicks!

Here are close ups of the three breeds we purchased. By the way, it took us a little work and looking at pictures on the hatchery's website to determine exactly what was what. Below left, the chick on the left that is mainly black with a light chest is a Black Australorp. The others are Dark Cornish. Even though the yellow one is so light, it is still called a Dark Cornish. I imagine the adult feathers will come in a different shade. In the photo below right, is a Light Brahma. Kinda reminds us of penguin chicks.



I am making a point of picking up all the girls so they get used to me (and I get used to them). So far, the chicks that I have been able to pick up have become easier to catch and pick up again. I think that is progress.



Even the first day, the chicks were active and all seem to be healthy.

Like all young animals, they are active for a short time and then they go to sleep.



It was funny watching them fall asleep. Some looked like ostriches because they start off standing up and their heads slowly go down to the ground. It's also a little scary for a newbie like me... they look awfully dead when they sleep. BUT, they wake up very quickly and start the moving, eating, drinking and then sleeping cycle all over again.



Here they are at 5 days old. They are all starting to grow feathers that actually look like feathers. Still cute, but acting more like birds (which kinda freaks me out a bit).

We've been dealing with "pasty butt"... this is where their poop gets stuck on their little rear ends and blocks the exit (so to speak). If they can't poop, they will die; so we have to remove the "plug". Poor little things don't like it, but someone's gotta do it!

We started adding "Chick Grit" on day 3. This will help them digest their Starter Feed.

Oh, by the way, we went ahead and purchased a commercial Starter feed with corn in it. It is kind of a test for us to see if I'll be able to tell in the meat birds that the chick food had corn. Once they get on the pasture, they will get the no-corn, no-soy feed.





A lot of stretching and strutting is starting. Plus they are beginning to use those little wings to help them run away from us.

MAN, can they run fast!!!

We are adding the “Broiler Booster” to the water. They get fresh water each day regardless of whether they drank it all or not.

It’s fun to watch the chicks drink. They get a little in their beak and then lift their heads up high and it looks like they are shaking the water down their throats. I don’t know much about chickens, but that behaviour indicates to me that they can’t “suck” like us milk-drinking mammals.



This picture was just to show that they are scratching and moving the shavings to find food and grit that has made it’s way down to the tarp.

The hubby says that the dark color contrast also prompts them to peck at the tarp.

10-DAYS OLD (MAY 2012)

The chicks are now ten (10) days old. They are looking very much like regular birds now... which is very disconcerting for me. They are also hopping about four (4) inches off the floor and their wings make that purring sound when they do that. While it doesn’t take all my efforts to do my chores with the chicks, I really don’t look forward to it. Once I’m down there and they settle down a bit, I’m better.

As for the chicks... they are ever so much more skittish! It takes a sound or a quick movement to send them all scurrying to the opposite end of the pen and hiding behind the feed bin or waterer. It makes me nervous that they might crush each other, but so far they are light enough that they just walk over each other with no problems.

The camera with flash activated is the worst predator they know right now. So I’m trying to get pictures without the flash and, believe me, there is just not good light without it. So, sorry for the poor light quality of these photos. I’ve done as much color correction as I dare.

We raised the light about an inch a few days ago because all the chicks were sleeping in a ring around the perimeter. Now they go under the light for short times and set up sleep quarters a little way outside it again. Will consider moving it again in a few days.





I also raised the waterer and feed stations. Gary found the terra cotta pot saucers and, inverted, they are the perfect height for now. The waterer also has a roll of duct tape on top of the inverted saucer so that the waterer doesn't leak. I tried resting it directly on the saucer, but it put pressure somewhere odd and began leaking. Once I got the duct tape role in place... no more problems.



The books say to set things up so they are at the same level as their backs.

I added a shallow wood tray (upper left in the pen) recently with a mixture of grit and diatomaceous earth (DE). They should be used to the grit now and this allows them to also get used to having a "dust bath". The DE will help with parasites both internally and externally (we use the flour version that can be eaten).

This was the only photo I was able to take with the flash before everyone went to pieces.

You can see that the wing is much more defined (see photo from 5 days earlier in the list).



They started preening a few days ago and are getting more meticulous... I suppose they are shedding the down and that seems like it would be itchy... I'd be preening, too!

The color cast was just too bad to use as it was, so I decided to make it a black and white photo so you can see what the wings look like at this date without the distraction of the awful color cast.

No wonder they are hopping so high and sound like helicopters!

The hubby has brought down some of our bunny hutch wire (hardware cloth) to lay over the ends (not under the light). This is mainly for my peace of mind since I have no idea if the chickens would be able to hop out of the pen.

I'd rather be safe than find a dead chick outside the pen because it couldn't get back to the warm.





The chicks are now 14 days old.

I hope you can see how they are getting bigger. Plus their beaks are starting to change shape and get that hook at the end.

Their wings are much more obvious now and they are definitely losing those downy, chick feathers.



It seems like there is plenty of room in the basement brooder, but the birds are sure telling us they want more room.

THE CHICKENS HAVE LEFT THE BUILDING! (JUNE 2012)

The Chicken Ark and Chicken Tractor are done and we decided to move the chicks out of the basement and into the chicken ark... transforming it into a temporary brooder since the coop portion is insulated and has a hook for hanging the heat lamp. The area inside the coop is about the same as they had in the basement (3 ft x 4 ft).

We ran an exterior grade extension cord from the barn and put flags along it so we would not run over it. The hubby also put some split rails along it in areas that would be more likely to get run over.

We used a metal tub with a piece of cardboard (with holes in it for air) to transport the chickens. It took two (2) trips and I'm sorry that I don't have pictures of that, it was interesting. I can officially say that I was not freaked out by the wild flapping when we didn't capture the chicks with wings tucked. (LOL)

The water was originally located over where the inverted clay saucers are. We waited an hour for the birds to settle down and no one was willing to venture out to the water. After an hour, we moved the water to the location shown right in front of the pop hole (opening).

It was fun to watch each one gain courage. It went something like:

- 1) stick head out of opening and pull back.
- 2) put body in opening and look around.





- 3) put body in opening and lean forward, then panic and race back.
- 4) step out (and down), panic and hop back inside.
- 5) come out, stand there (or take a couple steps) and race inside.
- 6) come out and get a drink, then saunter inside.

It was kind of what I imagine a song in rounds would look like visually. (You know, like “Row Your Boat.”)

Each chicken was doing some portion of the 6-step courage gaining program. They would bump into each other and push somebody out... causing panic and block each other in the going in or out.

I think I also know where the “Keystone Cops” got their mass confusion humor... from watching chickens!

The photo at left is from the back hatch that gives access to the light.

From the back hatch looking into the ‘wings’ of the A-frame.

We put the birds in by opening the lid of this area. It’s a bit cooler under there because those lids are not insulated (on purpose). This lets the birds decide how much heat they want.



Again, from the back hatch looking into the other ‘wing’ of the A-frame. The feeders are each set on 2 inverted clay saucers. The wood shavings are about 2 inches deep.

We were a little concerned about ‘piling’ (where the chicks can get packed into a corner during panic). But, after watching them race from side to side when I would lift the lid to put in feed or just check on them, my concern was lessened greatly.



Finally! Coming out to get a drink.

At right is the next morning. We wondered if any of the chicks would be too afraid to come out and drink and if that would mean we would lose any to dehydration.



We are happy to report that everyone is alive and well (at the time of this writing anyway).

Can you see the space between the bottom of the coop and the ground? The entire coop sits on top of the 2x4s that are the base of the wire run.

We discovered that the chicks are still small enough to get into that space. OH OH! But after a few minutes we saw the chick that went in, come out. PHEW!

It's very difficult to photograph through the wire using auto-focus. Guess it's time to do some manual focus.

Hope you can make out the two (2) chickens checking out the grass.

As I write this, the hubby came in to tell me that many of the chicks are out in the grass and several of them are on the look out for flies. YIPPEE!



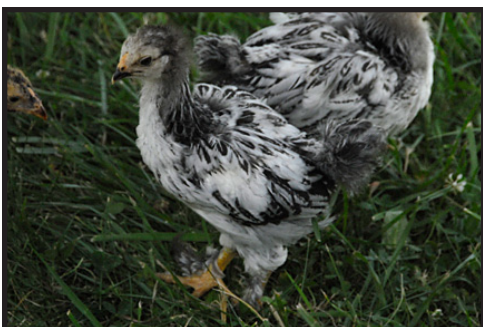
MOVED TO THE CHICKEN TRACTOR (JUNE 2012)

Well, it did NOT take long for the chickens to outgrow the Chicken Ark brooder. Luckily for us, the weather is warm enough that on June 10, we were able to move them from the Ark to the Chicken Tractor. Oddly, there was another thunderstorm that night. I wonder if moving the chickens generates a storm (LOL). The birds are already used to the hanging waterer, so that was no big deal for them.



I moved the chick feeders in on their inverted saucers as a short term fix until I could find a hanging LARGE feeder. Which I did and they adapted to it very well. Thank goodness, because it was a pain to deal with those little free-standing feeders in the chicken tractor. The chickens LOVE to run the length of it and kept knocking the feeders over. Plus I had to remove them each time we move to new grass.

We put a couple of concrete block cap stones at each end on top of the corrugated panel roof pieces to hold them down and discourage critters from trying to get in from the top. The entire structure is rather heavy so it presses down into the grass very well to make good contact with the ground. This helps protect the chickens from even more predators. As you can see there is LOTS of space for the chickens to roost now. AND lots of space to run and scratch, etc.



The Light Brahma is beginning to look very lovely.

The Black Australorp has not come into her own yet, but her feathers are starting to get a lovely black lustre to them.

The Dark Cornish have less brown on their bodies now and it's getting more difficult to tell them from the Black Australorps. Thank goodness they have yellow-orange feet!



Everybody is in the Chicken Tractor. Safe and happy. They have lots of shade during the day -- good thing cuz it is HOT in the sun. They get a really nice amount of morning sun (as you might be able to see in this picture taken mid-morning of the next day).



Some of the chickens like to lay in the sun, others don't... it's their choice. Let's see, as of today (6-21-12) the chickens are almost 6 weeks old. At 8 weeks, they will come off the Chick Starter/Grower feed and start on the small grains without corn in it.

ADDED INDEPENDENCE (JULY 2012)

It's not because today is the 4th of July, it's because things just worked out nicely that way. LOL Before you see the expansion, here are a few pictures from last weekend.

The chickens are growing up. Many of them are showing signs of combs on their heads and the you can start to see the "chicken-ness" about them around their heads and the way they move.



This is a Light Brahma on the left and a Dark Cornish on the right. They LOVE their roosts! Not only do they hop up and off them, the fly from one to the next.

Note that the roosts have been rounded on top so that when they lay on it, it doesn't cut into their chest; so it doesn't bruise them.

They are getting VERY good with their wings. This boy decided to fly from the roost to the support piece that the waterer hangs from.

We tried to shoo him back in, but instead, he walked over to the metal panel and slipped his way over to the edge where he learned to fly to the ground very quickly.



There he is, separated from his buddies and he does NOT like to be separated from his buddies.

We see this sometimes when we are moving the Chicken Tractor... a chicken makes their way out from under and then panics because they can't figure out how to get back in. We just lift the side a little higher and they scurry back to their friends.

This is the morning of the 4th of July. The projected high is 100 degrees Fahrenheit, so we decided to get this done early in the day. We put up the pop-up shade tent to add a bit of comfort from the sun, but the noise of the wind in the canopy proved too much for the birds, so we took the whole thing down.





The plan (which worked very nicely, thank you) was to put all the chickens outside of the Chicken Tractor first. Catch them one at a time, put a numbered band on each boy, and then clip one wing (of both boys and girls) so they can't fly over the fence. They will still be able to get up to the roost.

Here you see the hubby opening the top at the back which sent a bunch of them scurrying away from that, and this time happened to put them outside.

These are all girls... the black ones with the black feet are the Black Australorps and the white with black edges is a Light Brahma.

The girls were more comfortable outside than the boys.



Very quickly, everybody found the pop-hole and headed back inside.

These are both Dark Cornish boys.



At least it gave me a chance for a couple of nice "butt" shots.

These are a Light Brahma and a Black Australorp.

We had to use a big board to shoo them out of the Chicken Tractor, then we closed the pop-hole to keep them from going back in.

Catching them was funny! We got pretty good at herding them into each other's waiting hands. (If I do say so myself.) After all, we DID catch every single chicken! Unfortunately, it was just me and the hubby doing the catching, banding and clipping... so there are no pictures of the process.

There are LOTS of videos on YouTube about clipping wings. The big thing to know is you only clip ONE wing on each bird - that is what keeps them from flying. If you clip both wings, the birds are not 'lop-sided' and can still fly.

We only banded the boys because we want to be able to pick out which ones are the trouble makers and which one is the most docile. The trouble makers go first at processing time and the docile one may get to become a rooster.



That is me in the picture. Proof positive that I am able to work with the chickens.

After each bird was clipped (and banded), we released it into the Chicken Tractor where there was food and water waiting for them.





It took us about an hour to get everybody done. So the last few chickens were getting pretty hot and thirsty!

We closed the top and left them with full shade again and with the pop-hole OPEN.

I sat in my chair to watch what they would do (for a few minutes) and only saw these girls chase a bug out the pop-hole. They quickly made their way back inside and no one has been outside the Chicken Tractor since!

It's been 4 hours since then and it is REALLY hot; so while chickens may not be the smartest birds out there, at least they know to stay in the shade where it is less hot.

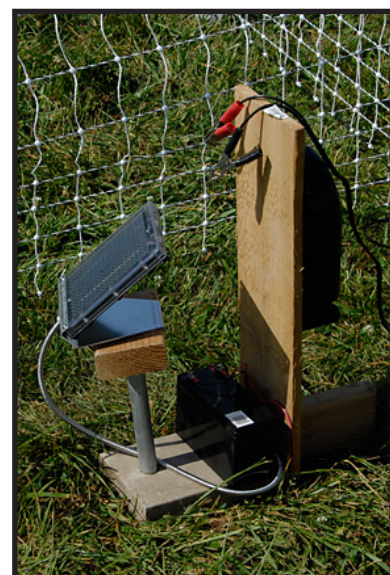


At left is the Patriot P5 Battery Energizer and at right is the 12 volt battery with solar charger. We initially planned to plug into AC but discovered we can't use extension cords with this set-up. So we went to TSC (Tractor Supply Company) and bought the 12 volt battery and charger for \$60 (+/-).

The hubby made the stand from scrap lumber and tubing. It's not hooked up in the pictures because it is still charging.

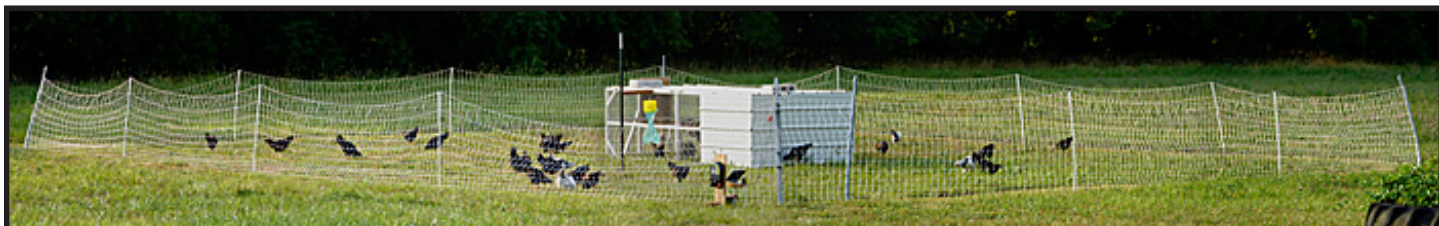
Fingers and toes crossed that it all works.

The fence is really for keeping predators away from the chickens... not so much keeping the chickens fenced in.



GROWING UP (AUGUST 2012)

The chickens are growing, they don't look much different, only bigger. I'll get some more close-ups soon. For now, here is the whole fence with chicken tractor set up. The chickens LOVE it. And even though they are losing the cut wing feathers and growing new ones (which means several can fly/hop to the top of the chicken tractor) no one seems interested in going outside the fence.



The bag with the yellow top is a Japanese Beetle lure/trap. The bottom of the bag is cut open so the beetles fall to the ground. Some of the chickens figured it out quickly, some don't seem to get the automatic bug dispenser thing. Sometime after this, I cut the bag shorter in case it flapped too much

(scaring them). As of today (8-3-12) we removed the trap cuz we are seeing practically zero Japanese Beetles (the season is past). But we have LOTS in the freezer for treats during the winter.

We leave the fence in place as we move the coop inside it every day. Once we've covered the maximum amount of ground possible, we move the fence so the coop is then at the other end and the process continues. Basically the pattern goes moving it sideways (it's width) and then to the next row (it's length) to go back the other direction in a zig-zag pattern. The covered end faces west to give the birds the maximum shade.

Recently I visited a farm with pasture chickens and they did not cover the entire top with an opaque material (only about 1/8th of it) and only covered one end and about an 1/8th of the side (we do 1/3rd of the side). They also had it facing so the covered end was to the south. So those birds had very little shade and none in the late afternoon. They also had no roosts. And their water was left uncovered in the sun and there was algae growing in it.

Here I thought our chickens were roughing it and it turns out they are living REALLY well. YIPPEE for us. :-) Too bad for those other birds. :-(

SOME RECENT INFO FROM MY JOURNAL:

As of July 5, feeding the small grains recipe...

Sunflower 15%, Millet 17%, Wheat/Oats combined 54%, Beans 10%, Kelp 1%. They recommend Alfalfa 4% if not on pasture, so saving that bag for winter.

The birds are eating about 24 cups (6 quarts) each day. They continue to get a minerals supplement added to their water, but we're 'pulsing' it so they get it every other day. I discovered I was giving them grit more often than they require, so changed it to once a week about a 1/2 cup in a pile so they can freely choose it.

The hubby is opening the pop-hole when he gets up (around dawn). I go out and feed the birds after I get up and have fed the dogs (an hour or so later). That lets the birds forage for a while before they get the feed.

We move the coop each afternoon once the hubby gets home and we change their water then as well so they have cool water for the evening and morning. (This is a big deal since the temps here have been over 100 degrees 16 days in July.)

Then the birds make their own way into the coop and settle in for the night around dusk. The hubby goes out and closes the pop-hole once they are inside.

We leave the fence electrified at all times except when we are working in it and when the battery comes off on the weekend during the day (while we are home) to be charged to full. The solar charger is great, but it's good to top it off.

Wheat looks to be difficult to get with the drought. So will continue with just oats if necessary. Also decided to 'pulse' the kelp because they are leaving a lot of it in the feeder.

They are going through 3 to 5 gallons of water each day.

The first boy to crow is #57. He is a bully and we already had our eye on him. His favorite sparring partner is #59, so those guys will be in the first batch of processing.

Trying to determine which of the boys seems to be the best "guard". There always seems to be one male "on patrol" outside or right at the pop-hole when the rest race inside due to a hawk calling. So far, we've noticed #74 and 75 more than once in this job.

July 20: increased the feed another 50%. The heat seems to make them eat more -- some days they are not eating it all and some days they eat it fast. But then I noticed they are throwing a lot of seed to the ground. So some days I give them 9 quarts, some days 12 quarts (just sort of winging it now).

Changed the way I feed them to putting one 3qt scoop of the mix scattered on the ground before filling the feeder. This has changed some of the bullying issues. Even the littlest Dark Cornish (#66 - who we have decided is a girl) who is pushed away from the feed by everyone gets some feed this way. If there is any left in the bucket after filling the hanging feeder, that is also spread in the grass.

None of the birds appear to have hit "maturity" yet. Some of the boys have more comb and it is bright red. But no one looks like the pictures of adult chickens of their variety yet. We figure the boys have another 4 weeks. So we will be processing close to the beginning of September.



Here is a more recent picture of the whole set-up. We put the chicken ark into the fenced area to give the birds some extra shade outside of the chicken tractor in the early mornings and late afternoons. We don't have it open.

COMING DOWN TO THE WIRE FOR THE BOYS (AUGUST 2012)

I took these pictures on August 10th which makes the birds 13 weeks old. Some resources suggest that the Dark Cornish don't gain much weight after this point, but it's been 2 weeks since I took the pictures and as I compare the photos to what I see outside, they boys are definitely looking bigger and more mature.



The boys have really come into their own! GLORIOUS COLORS! The photos left and right are to show you how different they can look from each other. Some are very, very dark with lots of iridescent blues and greens; while others have more brown mixed in.

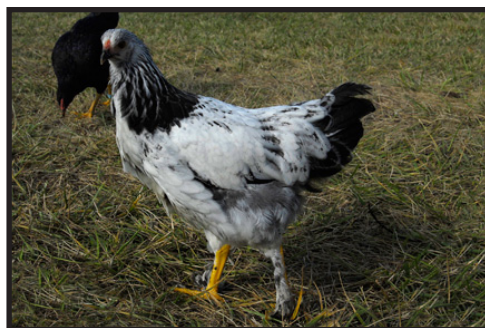


This photo is great to show the difference between the male Dark Cornish (foreground at left) and the female Dark Cornish (behind and to the right).

Their feathers are very different, not to mention their heads and tails. The girls feathers have a rounded tip.



Here are the three girls: (left) #58. She is very dark with LOTS of blue and green iridescence. (center) #64: Not quite as dark as 58, but lovely all the same. (right) #66: She is the most brown of the three and she is also MUCH smaller than any of the rest of the birds. This is the girl that everyone was picking on and chasing away. Thankfully, she seems to be less skittish about making sure she eats. I've actually seen her push through a group to get a tidbit. Good for her!



These last pictures show the maturing Black Australorps and Light Brahmas. They certainly are getting prettier and prettier.

We are wondering if the Black Australorp in the photo at right (in the right foreground) is a male. If you compare it's head with the one in the background, you see the crown and waddle are markedly different. We don't see any difference in the shape of the feathers (like in the Dark Cornish) and the Australorps head color ranges from black to a little red to a lot of red. They also all have at least a little comb. Guess we'll just have to keep waiting on that one.

I started picking up feathers that are not soiled some time ago. To date I have about a bucket full.

I've even found a fun little game to play with (primarily) the boys. First a little preface to the story: the chickens like to eat the downy feathers they molt; and, I was trying to figure out a way to mark the feathers that I don't want to collect rather than keep picking them up and finding them not suitable. So I decided to strip the shaft on the ones I'd rejected. As I was doing this, the chickens made mad grabs for the pieces! Some of the boys actually took them from my fingers.

So, our game is that as I walk around looking for feathers and I find one that I don't want, I strip the shaft and let the feather piece fly in the breeze. The chickens leap and run and peck to get it. They REALLY seem to be enjoying this game and I REALLY enjoy playing it with them.

Since I'm not sure exactly what I'm going to do with the feathers, I've decided to let the hubby make a "plucker" and NOT harvest feathers when we harvest meat.

If my calculations are correct, we will start harvesting meat the week after Labor Day. I'm not really looking forward to it, but I know the chickens have had a great life and am so very grateful to them for providing us with meat.

I do think the girls are getting less patient with the boys and probably won't be sorry to see them leave.

I'm still debating about whether to keep a rooster or not. I put a little questionnaire on Facebook to see if marketing eggs as unfertilized is worth while. Not much response to date and what there is don't care. One of my FB friends gave me some information that I did not know because of the question... she says that if there is no rooster, one of the hens will take on the responsibilities that a rooster would normally have and not lay eggs. I find that fascinating. We will end up with more hens than we expected, so having one not lay isn't a deal breaker. She also mentioned that eggs need to be refrigerated after collecting them, so even if they are fertilized, no embryo will develop.

I also had an interesting conversation at the Integrated Pest Management class I took with another participant regarding chickens eating beans. I mentioned that it seemed like a waste to put beans in the mix since the birds were pretty much leaving them in the feeder or scattering them on the ground. The other person asked if I was cooking the beans and I told them no, they were just cracked. This person has a farm and a large number of hens for eggs. He proceeded to tell me that uncooked beans will splinter in the chickens throat and puncture it; so our chickens are smart not to eat them.

I found that interesting because we feed a raw bones diet to our dogs and have to explain to people that RAW bones are OK to feed, but cooking bones changes the molecular composition and causes them to be brittle and splinter... possibly puncturing anywhere along the path from mouth to anus. Anyway... I did not dispute his claims, but I was a bit skeptical about them. When I had a chance, I hit the computer and did research on raw vs. cooked beans for chickens. Oh My Goodness! The information was SO varied. One person even said not to feed raw beans because "chickens can't pass gas". The things that people will believe.

I did find factual information, however, that discourages feeding raw beans to chicks. NOTE, I did not make a typo... it's CHICKS that I typed and what I meant. There is a chemical that inhibits trypsin (an enzyme used in digestion) which can be fatal in chicks. Older birds produce so much more trypsin than chicks makes it less likely that the small amount of inhibitor from beans will adversely affect them. Another component in beans is hemagglutinin and I have not been able to determine exactly why it is detrimental. The studies I've seen list it as part of vaccines, which I would assume is a good thing. The information relating it to virus says that it is binding agent for a virus to attach itself. So, I really don't understand that part.

Anyway, NOWHERE was there any mention about splintering and puncture.

Since "broilers" are harvested as soon as they have hit maturity, it is safe to think of them as "chicks". Hens and roosters are older birds and are fully mature.

What I took away from my research is that, to be on the safe side, if you want to feed beans to chickens it is a good idea to boil ("aqueous heat") them for 15 minutes and let them cool to air temperature before feeding; this eliminates the problem chemicals. FYI, this is for fresh beans, if the beans have been dried, you should soak them overnight first.

Since beans are an excellent source of protein, I'm going to put that barrel aside until late fall and incorporate them into the hens' feed during the winter. After all, I'll need to soak the alfalfa pellets, I might as well soak (etc.) the beans as well.

I spent some time in the chicken yard on September 20th taking photos of the mature flock the day before we started processing the Dark Cornish boys. This is a nice group image... everyone getting along fine with each other. I'll put more of the photos from this session at the bottom of this entry, for your enjoyment.



I FEED THE CHICKENS, THE CHICKEN FEED ME (OCTOBER 2012)

I've been obsessing about chickens. It was because of the dilemma that if one is going to eat meat, one must kill to do so. Of course, the idea of someone else doing the killing brings that point a little further away from the person doing the eating.

This is, of course, something I knew we would have to do when we decided to raise chickens for meat. That was many months ago though and, like Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, my thought, was "Fiddle-dee-dee, I'll think about that tomorrow." Well, it's tomorrow and I've been obsessing.

The raising the birds was easy. It's nurturing, plain and simple... why you are nurturing doesn't matter. You want to raise healthy animals, give them the best life you can keep and keep them safe from predators.

Butchering is not in my nature. But, knowing it had to be done, I geared myself up for the task and did the best I could to minimize the trauma for both the birds and me (and the hubby). Focusing on the logistics helped. As in, what equipment do we need, where best to set up, what time of day to do it, how to catch and contain the birds, is there a running water source, do we have enough ice? etc. etc. So, we were prepared physically and I was prepared emotionally when we started the butchering.

It was a Friday morning, a beautiful day in September and the boys were about 17 weeks old. The hubby set up one of the big dog crates in front of the pop-hole in the chicken tractor. It has 2 doors, one on the end and one on the side. He set it up on it's side with the side door on top and bungeed the pan in place. He then put a barrier on either side of the crate so the birds had to enter the crate upon leaving the chicken tractor. He did this with 2 different crates and caught about 20 birds first thing (around sunrise). We then reached into each crate and removed the girls that were among those caught. Which left us with 15 boys which we consolidated into the bigger of the two crates. (These are crates big enough for an adult Newfoundland, so they are very roomy even with 15 birds in them.)



We have a "sled" that is very handy for hauling leaves and brush etc. that we lifted the crate full of birds onto and then the hubby bungeed them together. He pulled and I pushed and it was a pretty darned smooth ride for the birds from the chicken tractor to the area by the garage where we would be doing the actual processing.



It is recommended that you withhold food from the birds 8 to 10 hours before processing so there is little undigested food in the craw, etc. Since they had eaten all their feed before we closed them in the chicken tractor the night before, this was not an issue. And they had had access to water all night, so a few hours without water before processing would not be a big deal.

We planned to process/butcher (same thing, easier on me to continue using process) at least 12 of them that morning. BUT, we are newbees and so it took longer than we expected it would. We left the birds in the shade to calm down and we finished getting everything ready. I will admit that neither of us was eager to get started... although I will say I was eager to get it done with so I was a bit more anxious to start than the hubby was.

THE PROCESSING PROCESS AS DONE BY NEWBEES

In total it took us three (3) hours to process six (6) birds --- so about 30 minutes each. It would have been quicker if we had more people.



In hindsight, the better division of labor would have been:

- Get a bird from the crate, put it in the “kill cone”, secure it’s feet and cut the jugular for death and draining of blood.
- Scald the carcass to loosen the feathers (here is where we probably caused some of our delay because the correct length of time allows for easy plucking and yet does not cook the meat -- I was erring on the side of not cooking the meat).
- And then Pluck the feathers (we used a home made plucker driven by an electric drill as the motor. The hubby designed it beautifully, but it was hard for me to use because I had to hold the bird up to the “fingers” and manipulate the carcass to get to those hard to reach spots.).
- Remove the feet and stubborn feathers, etc.
- And Eviscerate the carcass (remove the internal organs).
- Inspect the carcass and put it in the cold water to chill.



If we had had four (4) people, it would have moved along more quickly; but, it was just the two (2) of us, so we had to move from job to job. And that meant extra time cleaning up because the hubby (who was doing the eviscerating and “clean” area jobs, was also doing a “dirty” area job.

After those three (3) hours, my back was hurting too badly to continue. So we released the remaining crated birds with the rest of the chickens.

We cleaned everything using bleach and soap and water in preparation for another round the following Monday. Then we rested while the chickens in the cold water finished chilling. When they were sufficiently chilled, we vacuum packed them and put them in the freezer.



You Lucky Boys -- Back to the Chicken Tractor.

It was a bad weekend for me. The thought of having to do this again was bad enough, but of having to do it three (3) or four (4) more times -- since there were a total of 23 birds and we had only done six (6) -- was weighing heavily on me. We spent time working out ways to increase the speed with just the two (2) of us ... improving the plucking devise for one (so that I could sit to do the plucking and relieve my back of that pain) or finding a drum plucker that we could rent or borrow. When I actually was sitting in front of our plucker in the effort of figuring out improvements, I simply broke down into tears. I knew at that moment that no matter how we improved the process, I could not bear to do it again.

I am blessed to have a wonderful man as my husband. Instead of trying to convince me that I COULD bear it, he helped me not feel guilty about not wanting to bear it.

We both agreed the best thing for us is to pay someone else to process our chickens. I put out a cry for help on the Growing Growers listserv and also called the various farm agency people I know and friends. Thankfully, we received much great advice from these people and also several leads for processors. On Monday morning, instead of processing chickens, I was contacting these leads hoping that someone would be able to add our remaining 17 birds to their schedule. Everyone has been so understanding and empathetic! Can't tell you how many people told me that the last time they processed a chicken themselves was as a child helping on the farm. I am not alone in this!

I want to put myself into a local network of resources and so we chose to work with an Amish farmer in Jamesport MO to do the processing. They are able to add us to their schedule this coming Saturday. We'll put the rest of the boys in the big dog crate (like before) and transport them in our van first thing Saturday morning. The farmer will process our chickens and we will get our chicken carcasses with giblets for a fee of \$2.50 per bird. WELL WORTH THE COST and travel! We will also take coolers with ice and water to chill the birds on the drive home. I am very relieved!!

CHICKEN DINNER!

We defrosted the first of the chickens we processed ourselves for dinner last night (Sept 30... proverbial Sunday Night Chicken Dinner, LOL). I removed the last of the stubborn feathers and the hubby cut it into pieces (thigh, leg, wing, breast (cut in 2), back (cut in 2). I gave the neck and extra skin to the Newfs -- RAW (only feed RAW chicken bones to dogs, cooking them changes the molecular composition of the bones and that causes them to be brittle and splinter. Never give COOKED bones to dogs!).

I heated the oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit and put the chicken pieces on a non-stick, edged cookie sheet with powdered garlic, paprika and dried parsley flakes sprinkled over the skin. Nothing else - no oils, no butter, no marinating. I baked the chicken for 40 minutes (after 20 minutes I turned the cookie sheet so the pieces at the front became the pieces at the back).

The resulting meal was WONDERFUL! Not only was the chicken moist and tender, it was FLAVORFUL. Both the hubby and I prefer dark meat, but the hubby also ate one of the breast pieces and said it was delicious. There was not enough fat left in the pan to require draining. Our chicken was obviously very lean! The hubby said the skin was a bit chewy. I did not eat the skin (even though it used to be one of my favorite parts... I may never eat skin again); but I did find that the skin on the wing was very elastic and required a knife to pull the wing apart. I take this as a wonderful proof that our chickens get to BE CHICKENS and that means using those wings to fly!

I found the dark meat very tasty -- it was somewhat similar to the taste of turkey. I think that might be because our chickens are Dark Cornish... what used to be known as Indian Game Birds.

Even better is that I feel great; I did not have an allergic reaction! You see, part of the reason we did this experiment of raising our own meat chickens is because I have food issues with corn, gluten, wheat and several other things. Usually when I eat chicken, I get an allergic reaction (primarily phlegm and sore throat) from chicken. Even pasture-raised chickens usually get feed that includes corn.

My chickens DID NOT get any corn from the time they went on pasture at eight (8) weeks. They had some wheat at first, but it was soon gone and we did not get any more. Our birds ate whatever they found in the pasture and were supplemented with sunflower seeds and whole oats in addition to a water supplement that had antioxidants, minerals, etc. to aid their immune systems and keep them healthy.

So, for me the experiment was successful. It's not proof-positive that allergens carry through to us from what the animals we eat eat themselves... but that's only because we didn't do this scientifically with a control group, etc.

You are what you eat! And you are also what that animal eats!

EAT HEALTHY, EAT LOCAL, SUPPORT FARMERS WHO GROW FOOD!

(I have ranted elsewhere how corn and soybeans are NOT food crops.)

EXTRA PHOTOS (OCTOBER 2012)

Here are the photos I promised earlier. They are all copyrighted by me (as are ALL the images on this website, please contact me if you would like to use, share or purchase any of them.



I'm not sure if you can see this very well... Do you see the light green patches of grass among the darker grass? They are all in rows from left to right and somewhat from top to bottom (at an angle). That is where the birds threw seed (oats, beans, sunflowers) out of their feeder in the chicken tractor. The seed is GROWING! So not only did we end up with fertilized pasture, we also (unintentionally) are integrating, oats, beans, and sunflowers into it. YIPPEE!!



The Dark Cornish are SO alert!



This is a WORKING chicken!



A balance bird... lovely breast but not TOO much breast.



Black Australorp -- they seem to be camera-shy.



This is "Mr. Chirpy" -- I didn't name him, he told me his name.



All the Light Brahmas in one photo --- too bizarre!

Light Brahmas gossiping... I can imagine SO many captions!



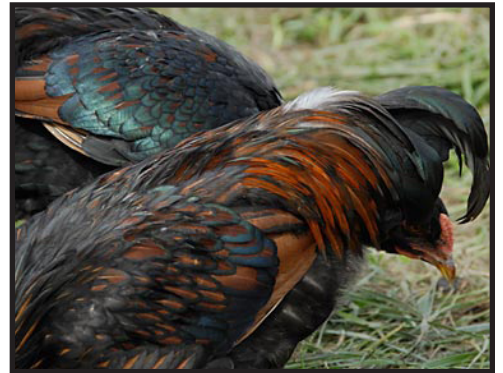
I love this mix with little #66 in the bottom center.



Foraging for bugs and other tidbits.

I took a close up of this boys plumage. And, a lucky shot --- juxtapositioned against the wing of another boy.

I was very tempted to keep this boy. The only one who had those brownish-red feathers over his rump. (I didn't... hurrah for photos!)



FROM PASTURE TO FREEZER (OCTOBER 2012)

So, to put things into perspective... it's been two (2) weeks since we processed the first six (6) Dark Cornish boys. During that time the remaining boys have gotten more and more "cocky"; and by that I mean they have become more demanding in a carnal nature (i.e. sex). They are even jumping on each other in their frenzy (not just the girls) and they grab hold of the other birds neck in their beak. This is very startling to the recipient and several birds have lost feathers at the neck in the act. The more the boys become roosters, the more sure I am that I don't want a rooster on the farm. I hope the hens will share my opinion.



We decided to do things a bit differently this time regarding capturing the remaining boys. As you see in the photo above, we rearranged the poultry net fence so that we divided the boys (on the left with the chicken tractor) from the girls (on the right with the chicken ark).

For anyone who is interested in how we made two (2) areas with one (1) fence, it goes like this... one continuous line that starts on the left and goes east 2 segments (angled south somewhat), across to the south 2 segments (angled west somewhat), west 2 segments (so that post is in line north to south with the first post), north 3 segments to the starting point, west 1 segment, south 3 segments and finally, east 1 segment to end at the corner directly south of the starting point.

We did this in such a way that the girls would have fresh pasture, while the boys would not. We hoped we could simply hold up the fence for each girl as she decided to head for fresh pasture while keeping the boys out. This tactic did not work. Shooing away the boys also shooed away the girls.

We ended up catching each girl and placing her over the fence into the new area. The previous photo is taken just before sunset and you can see that the girls are confused that they cannot get back to the chicken tractor for the night. Luckily, a couple of the girls had bedded down in the chicken ark a few times and they soon figured out they could all fit (if a bit crowded) in the ark's coop area. We put water in the fenced part of the ark for the girls which is then closed to protect them even more.

We prepared everything to capture the boys the night before so as to have it all ready to go at 5:30 a.m. The van got a tarp inside to collect waste, feathers, etc. Coolers were washed and ready to load with the ice in the freezer. Hitch storage to hold extra coolers going out and used, folded crate etc. coming back ready to attach. Money and directions in my purse.

Here is the crate bungeed to the sled. There is a metal panel leaning on the left side. There are also two (2) boards to the right of the crate.

How we worked things this time was to open one end of the crate (not just the door) and fold it back so that the crate is placed with the open end in front of the pop hole of the chicken tractor (on top of the two (2) boards) with the crate end out of the way to the side. The crate was then bungeed to the wire of the chicken tractor so that it could not slide away.



The pop hole was down as usual for the night, but we did not secure it with a bolt, which made it easy for us to open in the morning. Once the pop hole was open, the hubby opened one (1) of the roof panels enough to shoo the boys off the roosts with an old broom handle. He then climbed into the chicken tractor and closed the roof panel above him. Good thing he is not claustrophobic (LOL). Then it was just a matter of maneuvering over each roost (bent over) and shooing the birds ahead of him using the handle and his hat so they made their way through the pop hole and into the crate.

As soon as every one was in the crate, I closed the pop hole. We then opened the roof panels at that end so the hubby could stand up and slipped the piece of metal panel between the crate and the pop hole to act as a temporary wall. We unhooked the bungee cords and (holding the metal panel in place) slid the crate along the boards (being careful of chicken feet) far enough away that we could swing the end of the crate into place. We then pulled out the metal panel and reattached the end of the crate.

We had already driven the van up next to the chicken yard, so we just set the crate of chickens on the sled (bungeed them together), opened the fence at that point, and slid the crate over to the van. Transfer the two (2) boards into the back of the van and unhook the crate from the sled and LIFT the crate and slide it into the back of the van (again watching out for chicken feet).

While the hubby then moved the barrier portion of the poultry fence out and opened it so the hens would have access to the chicken tractor, I fetched the daily ration of feed and filled the waterer like I do every morning.

We were ready to leave with the birds at 6:30 a.m. and drove up to Jamesport, arriving just before 8:30 a.m. (having stopped for gas and coffee).

I did not take any photos at the Amish farmer's place. They may not have minded, but I didn't even ask. They have a lovely farm and a great set up to process their chickens. It was so nice of them to help us out. We got there just as they were finishing up another woman's 10 birds... it was great timing. We learned a whole lot watching them work with our chickens. I think they started on our birds close to 9:00 a.m.

First... chickens are not as delicate as we had assumed. It was amazing to watch one of their young boys just reach in and take hold of whatever appendage presented itself. No fear!

They do LARGE batches of birds, so their setup accomodates several birds to a scald and then all of those go into the drum plucker together.

Children on a farm are a great benefit! And these children knew what to do, how to do it, and were respectful of their parents.

The hubby watched the eviscerating closely and picked up some tips... especially to use a special tool to remove the lungs. I've added it to his "wish list". (LOL) Since we had not known how to process the giblets (heart, liver, gizzard), it was very helpful to watch them do this.

OH, speaking of gizzards... the farmer was amazed at how large the gizzards are! We can only assume it has to do with the Dark Cornish being EXCELLENT foragers. (One of the reasons I chose them... in addition to being fabulous meat birds.) They also commented about how healthy are birds are. YIPPEE!

We talked with the couple and we all laughed a great deal throughout the processing of our 17 birds.

Since we vacuum pack each bird, we didn't need them to package the birds. So after we put the ice into the coolers, we added water and the birds (they had already started the chilling) and the two (2) zip lock bags of giblets. As the hubby loaded everything into the van, I paid for their service and we said our good-byes. It was 10:00 a.m. when we drove out. We decided to stop for ice in the first town, just to be sure all the birds were completely immersed/covered.

WOW, what a different experience from the last processing session. The drive and payment were definitely worth it.

This experience will definitely play a part in our decision of whether to have meat birds ever again.

Vacuum packing? I have a "Food Saver" that lets you vacuum pack stuff. So it's just a matter of having enough of the rolls that are big enough to accomodate a 4-lb (or so) whole chicken. I love my Food Saver!! You have to be careful to cut a straight line so that you get enough space for the sealing strip to work when making your bag from the roll. Then you also have to be sure to remove all the excesss moisture so that it doesn't make it's way into the vacuum channel and keep the sealer from working. I only had to make one (1) extra bag and repackage that bird due to having too much moisture messing up the seal.

A funny memory just hit me... we used a couple of big stock pots when we got home. One to carry chickens from the cooler to the kitchen and one to hang each bird from after the hubby had removed the neck and glands and was waiting for me to finish packaging the previous bird. The funny thing is that he hung them using their wings over the edge of the pot. They looked like they were enjoying a hot tub. Wish I'd gotten a picture! Too funny.

We discovered that the scale we were using was off a bit (low by about 3 oz.) and found a better one. So now we know all our birds weighed between 3 and 4 pounds.

WHAT ABOUT THE HENS????

The hens seem to have acquired a liking for the chicken ark. Even though they could have gone into either structure last night, they chose the ark. Good thing that we insulated it when we built it (see the page about building the coops). We had our first freeze last night and the ladies were nice and warm in the ark.

The hens seem to be a little lonely for the boys. We discussed this at the Amish farm yesterday. While the girls will probably appreciate not being put upon by the boys; they probably miss their protectors. I've noticed this morning that the girls are not foraging very far from the ark or tractor. I imagine as they get used to putting out their own "look out", they will overcome this.

We stopped at the store on the way home last night and I bought some freeze-dried meal worms as a special treat for the ladies. They have never really warmed up to me and I am not above bribing them!! OH how they LIKE those little worms!! I started by just spreading some at my feet today. Hopefully, soon they will be eating them out of my hand.

No, no eggs yet. I expect we'll be seeing eggs in the next couple of weeks. I did notice today as I cleaned out the chicken ark that they did not poop very much in the nests that have the wooden eggs. That may have been because the little wooden eggs scare them away from using those nests... but it could also be they know not to poop where they lay their eggs. So I moved the three (3) wooden eggs so they are all on one side. A test to see if it was a fluke or not. (It was a fluke, LOL.)

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HENS! (OCTOBER 2012)

We moved the girls to their winter location on Sunday morning. A lovely, overcast day after a lovely day of rain! (We ended up with just under 2 inches of nice soaking rain on Saturday.)

You know the expression: herding cats? Well, herding chickens is about as difficult. The winter location is about 300 feet north of the pasture and is on the north side of the house/yard. Which meant going around the "big dog yard" to get there.

We decided to move the fence first... leaving the flock with their chicken tractor but being TRULY free-range. This includes mowing the grass short enough that it doesn't touch the electric netting. Once we had the fence in place, the hubby moved the chicken ark. I used the meal worm treats to entice the girls to follow me and it worked for about 15 feet before they ran back to the area they knew around the chicken tractor.

Long story short... 5 of the girls followed me as I followed the hubby when he moved the chicken tractor. (I tapped the green feed bucket and walked backward. They seem to do best with straight lines. Big sigh when we closed the fence behind them. The rest of the girls were lead by me with the bucket and the hubby behind using the screened "a-frame" door as a barrier/guide. There were several stops to catch bugs, but we finally made it to where these girls could see the girls in the new location and with the fence opened up again, they RAN in to be with them.

It's really a shame that there was no one to take photos of this, but I simply couldn't lead, tap and film at the same time.

The winter home as seen from the front porch of the house. (You are looking to the northeast.)





The winter home as seen looking toward the north-northwest.

This is a nicely sheltered area from the north winds.

We will be putting up a temporary 10x10 “shed” just to the left of where the chicken ark is to put the chicken tractor in. The chicken ark is insulated and will sit just to the southeast of the shed for more protection. Then the straw bales will be stored behind the chicken ark on the east side of the shed (covered with tarps).

I’ll add pictures of it when we do that.

Do you want the good news or the bad news first? Let’s get the bad out of the way.

We feel really sad and have to report that we lost one of our hens... the little Dark Cornish girl: #66. She is so small that she is the best flyer and she (once again) made her way over the poultry fence and couldn’t figure out how to get back in. She was able to get through the woven wire fence in our backyard (unknown to us) and when we let the dogs out near dusk on Sunday night, they raced toward her and she took off in panic to the south. Once we realized what was happening, we got out the flashlights and made a search; but to no avail. The hubby has even driven around the acreage on the tractor over the last 2 days searching. Heavy sigh. We miss her. ...and then there were 13.

The good news is we discovered our first EGG yesterday! It’s nice and clean, too. After taking the photo, it went into a carton in the refrigerator.

We don’t who started, but this is an indication of more to come.

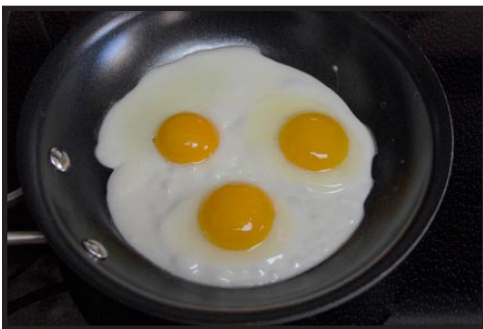
This morning when I went out to do chicken chores, I congratulated them and noticed they were a bit unhappy. Then I remembered when I started making eggs as a teenager and all the hormonal changes that meant. Poor hens!

They got an extra handful of meal worms (LOL).



SUNNY-SIDE UP, PLEASE (OCTOBER 2012)

We are pretty sure only one (1) of the hens was laying eggs. We call her “Red” and she is a Black Australorp. The name comes from her very red comb and waddles. It just seems to fit her. We ended up with four (4) eggs that first week and since then... nada, nothing, zilch. I guess I have to research putting in a light so the hens will get the ‘day-light’ they need to produce during the winter. That will make for another entry. But, for now, here are the first three (3) eggs cooking.



Aren’t those lovely yolks! That is what yolks should look like, DARK orange and very healthy.

We had read Joel Salatin describe how good eggs should separate easily. And we got to see it when I found I’d gotten a bit of shell in with the egg that is in the upper left of the photo. (I crack them into another bowl first.)

I scooped the egg into my (clean) hand and, VIOLA!, the white slipped off easily and left the yolk in my fingers.

The taste test: Yes, I ate them, and NO! there was absolutely no adverse reaction! Yippee!!

ADDING LIGHT TO THE SITUATION (NOVEMBER 2012)

As you can see from the last entry, the egg production was looking pretty sparse: one (1) egg almost every day. So obviously we needed to make some adjustments (assuming that it wasn't just the youth of the hens). We've decided to put some light into the Chicken Ark with a timer so that it comes on around 3:00 AM. Everything I've read says we need the chickens to have at least 12 hours of light and this is the solution most often presented. For the heavy-set birds we have, they recommend 5 watts.

I don't know if doing that started the second hen or if she just 'came of age', but we are now consistently getting 2 eggs just about every day. Yippee! This morning we noticed a different hen 'dancing' around and inside the ark by herself... thinking she is 'coming of age' as well. If this is the trend, pretty soon the eggs will be more numerous and more often!

We looked at the various options in lighting from the highest point of an A-frame with the highest efficiency possible. Under cabinet strip lighting looked promising until we saw the price (oy vay). We don't need THAT much light.

Thank goodness it's the Holiday Season, everywhere has strings of LED lights for sale. We picked a short strand (25 lights) that uses 1.92 watts for the reasonable price of \$8.50. The timer was also available because of seasonal outside lighting and it cost \$15.00. There was only one that we could set the hours on or off without there being a light sensor; a feature that is easy to find for an indoor timer, but not so much for outside (the normal holiday timers use a light sensor to turn on at dusk and stay on for a set number of hours). I decided to just fold the strand so that all the light is inside... no sense lighting the outside advertising their presence to would-be predators.

So, now the light goes on at 3:00 am and stays on until 7:00 am since sunrise is right around 6:30 am (so far).



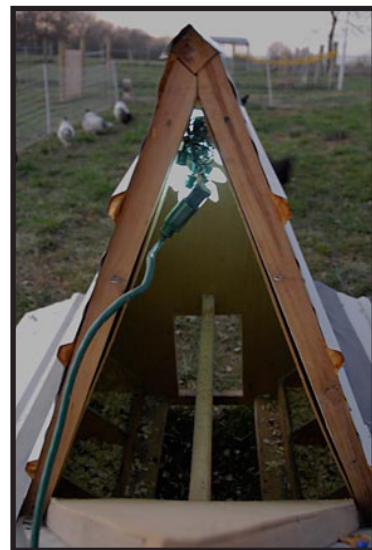
This is just after dawn (we were slow getting up this morning). The girls are usually sitting outside the coop waiting for us to remove the screen door.

They can really move!

We moved the hens on Thursday (11-15-12). This is the spot we moved from. They had it nicely eaten, trampled and picked clean of bugs.

I know the bugs were done when the hens started pouncing on the Japanese Beetles (that I had lured, trapped, killed by 2 (plus) weeks in the freezer and stored there).

Those beetles aren't as delicious as the freeze-dried mealworms, but are still insect protein and they eat them when there's nothing tastier at hand.





Love this shot! I don't know why the one in front had her tail feathers down, but it made for an interesting photo (not to mention their heads in alignment).

B-B-B-BRRRR! (DECEMBER 2012)

Sometimes I really feel for our chickens... e.g. the first night after we put them outside in the 'brooder' converted Chicken Ark there was a major thunderstorm. The most recent reason was yesterday's weather: snow and straight line winds; translation: BLIZZARD. Our girls had experienced winds before but not snow; so when they came out of the Chicken Ark pop hole they did not know WHAT to do! I was able to get one photo before dashing out the door...

This was at 7:00 am, their light comes on at 4:00 am and they are usually waiting outside the pop hole for us to open the 'door' so they can range. The hubby opened it and the girls were so confused that they all just huddled as you see here.

I took the photo (as I promised on our Facebook page) and ran for my cold weather gear. I am NOT going to have a bunch of frozen chickens after all the hard work I've put into them! (Besides, I CARE for them.)



It was easy to pick up each hen and carry her into the shed that shelters the chicken tractor and put her down by the food and water (that far in there was barely any snow). There were still four (4) smart girls inside the ark and I could not get hold of the Dark Cornish so I used my broom handle (I was also sweeping a path.) to 'encourage' her off the roost and into the Ark with the other girls.

One of the Brahmas was blocking her way, so I also used the handle to shift her to one side and the Cornish raced in with the Brahma behind her. Phew! While there isn't food or water in the Ark, at least they were sheltered and sharing body heat in the insulated structure.

I spent a little while with the girls in the Chicken Tractor and decided to ask the hubby to help me shift the girls from the Ark to the Tractor before getting their daily food ration. (There was plenty of seeds on the ground under the feeder in the mean time.)

Not to come across as a martyr, but just to point out that livestock MUST be cared for no matter how you feel: I'm on day six (6) of a nasty viral crud that hits the upper respiratory area (the hubby also has it but is five (5) days ahead of me), so I was really bundled up. Actually, between the 100% humidity and the cold, I felt pretty good while I was working outside (and then I went back inside and everything started 'running' again).

Anyway, between the two (2) of us, we managed to either carry or herd the remaining hens into the Chicken Tractor. I gave them an extra scoop of Sunflower Seeds among their Oats and a double ration of their Roasted Navy Beans. They definitely needed those carbs and oils in addition to their protein to keep their body temps up! I also went out a few hours later and gave them a double ration of Japanese Beetles. They were VERY happy to get them. Oh yes there was also part of a pumpkin from the day before that they pecked at.

The snow stopped by 10:00 am but the wind was fierce all day; we ended up with about 3 inches accumulation (they said on the local weather report). The hubby found the snow shovel and kept clearing the blowing snow away from a path between the pop holes of the Tractor and Ark. Four (4) of the hens had to lay eggs and braved the trek from the Tractor to the Ark to do so.

After a few hours, all the girls seemed to have the hang of roosting in the sheltered Chicken Tractor so their feet were covered in their feathers. A few ventured into the snow a few feet, but it was basically: step, step, tuck foot into feathers and stand for a moment, step, step, tuck other foot into feathers and stand for a moment, run back to the Tractor.

I waited until early afternoon to clean the Ark and took extra wood shavings so that I could put them not only in the nest boxes, but also in the open to the ground area in the middle that had drifted snow in it. Don't want them to be sitting in snow over night.

At dusk, we ended up having to carry and/or herd about eight (8) of them from the roosts in the Tractor to the Ark. With temps getting down to 18 degrees Fahrenheit, they need to be huddling all together in the insulated Ark overnight!

We talked later about finding a translucent covering to put over the screen material of the Ark to help shield the pop hole from wind and act sort of like a greenhouse covering. The forecast is for temps in the teens (10 to 19) overnight for the next several days, so anything we can do to help the girls stay sheltered is good.

We also decided to unplug the light so they will (hopefully) sleep until dawn and not feel the need to venture out of the Ark until then. If leaving it off for one or two days causes a reduction in eggs for the sake of healthy, live hens... THAT is a worthwhile trade!

Day temps are going to be low enough that we will be providing fresh, WARM water several times a day as well.

Happy Yule!

WINTER HENS (JANUARY 2013)

If you have been following the journey from last year, you know that we have 13 hens and they are in their winter quarters. It would be cruel to leave chickens without protection from the elements during the winter and since we have just a few girls this year, we moved them into the fenced yard to the north and east of the house. This area will be vegetable, herbs and flower gardens so having the girls clean up the bugs, scatch up the grass and fertilize it is also a great help.

This is what we find when we step out of the house... hens looking at us, waiting for the next tidbit.

They come running! Unless they are busy in the nesting boxes.



The ShelterLogic "shed" has been super! We put four straw bales on the north end to minimize blowing snow inside. It also helps keep the north panel from making too much noise as the wind flaps it around.

The Chicken Tractor barely fits left to right and extends past the opening a few feet. So the back to roof panels are left open all the time so we can get to the food and water.



We have found this arrangement to be very nice! No problems with snow blowing into the food because it usually comes from the north or west.

And the south most roof panels are in place to keep out the rain when the wind comes from the south.

This Light Brahma was busy around the corner and is racing to catch up to see what the hubby is doing in the shed.



Here I am a few days later. Each day during the winter, the girls get roasted navy beans and reconstituted alfalfa pellets in addition to their sunflower seeds and whole oats.

They love those beans almost as much as dried meal worms.

I have to spread the allotment in three (3) or four (4) piles to reduce competition (fighting) for them.



So happy the hubby got this shot!

That is one of the Dark Cornish girls. She is SO fanatical about those roasted navy beans, she is willing to perch on my arm, on the cup, wherever necessary to get some before everyone else.

I'm actually getting used to it. Never thought I would say that.

Doesn't she look like a raptor?

Those photos are from early January. Since then the snow has all melted and today the temps hit 70 degrees Fahrenheit. This is weird weather.

On Saturday, we discovered a couple of the girls outside the yard, 3 perched on the wood gate and one trying to perch on the top woven wire of the fence. This was new! They had figured out where I come from with the food, so I was used to seeing them cluster in the corner waiting for me, but this! Oh OH.

I had the cup with the beans in my hand and went back in for a pair of scissors and the hubby. Using the beans as a lure, he caught the Cornish girl outside the yard and I trimmed the flight feathers on one wing. We then proceeded to catch each hen and did the same to them. At first we kept catching the trimmed ones over and over, until we got smart and put them on the outside of the fence where they could (happily) search new ground for bugs.

Once everyone was clipped, we herded them all back into the yard and I finished my daily chores.

WHAT ARE MY DAILY CHORES?

First I spread the roasted beans and alfalfa (about a quart total) so the hens will be distracted while I empty what is left in their food bin out on the ground. (I spread it around so the wild bird can eat what the girls leave behind.) Then I fill the bin with their sunflower seed/whole oats mixture (about 2 quarts of feed).

Then I check to be sure their water is not frozen, if it is I remove what ice is in the lip and when I'm ready to go back in the house I dump out the water (over a plant that can use it in this drought) and take it inside to fill it with warm water. Then I bring it back out to the girls who are usually very excited to get that warm water.

I head to the nesting boxes while the girls are busy eating and using a rubber coated gloved hand, I scoop out the poop from each box (the problem with using the same location for sleeping and laying eggs), make sure there is a wooden egg in each box still, and add enough wood shavings to absorb the next round of poop. Finally, (if there is no snow) I move the Chicken Ark forward the length of the nesting boxes so they have fresh ground to poop on. If there is snow, I cover the old droppings with wood shavings without moving the Ark. Once the snow melts, I move it and the girls do a great job of spreading out that pile of shavings and poop.

In the early afternoon, I take about a quart of defrosted Japanese Beetles out and spread them like the beans. They love that! Unfortunately, there is only one more allotment of the things. Luckily, the weather turned warm and the girls are finding bugs on their own.

On Mondays, I add grit to a small pile near their feed bin. I also check their calcium and if it's getting low, I pour what is left on the concrete piece and put the dispenser in the bucket to refill for the next morning.

On Sundays and Thursdays, the girls get a mineral supplement in their water. It turns it very brown and is not unpleasant smelling. They seem to like it.

Several times during the day, one of us checks the nesting boxes for eggs.

SPRING EQUINOX (MARCH 2013)

Here it is the end of March... Spring has Sprung... or has it? We sure were spoiled last winter! This Winter has more than made up for it. Of course, the snow has provided much needed moisture... but 30 inches in a week is a bit much. We've had more than enough. Today (3-30-13) we actually had RAIN from the SOUTH... oh boy!



We moved the ladies to a new location just before the BIG snow in February. It is a bit further from the house, but even though that made it a pain during the snow, the ladies sure liked having fresh ground to peck at before it was covered.

Eggs, eggs and more eggs! This shows the variety of coloring among our ladies' eggs.

The one really big egg is abnormally large and we are happy to report that it did not cause any problems to whichever chicken laid it.

We used that large egg the next day and it turned out to be a double yolk.

Here is the new location... directly east of the “front yard” where they were initially. We put the electric fence from the end of the woven wire (at right) that is the “Big Dog Yard” and the end of the Front yard on the north. This makes a nice big area for them.



Here is the hubby hooking up the electric.

This day was happy and sad. One of the Dark Cornish girls became very lethargic and even let me pick her up. OH OH. We left her in the chicken tractor close to the food and water after we got everything set up.

She went into the chicken ark for the night with the rest of the ladies. The next morning she was dead; we think she had laid a “shell-less egg” about a week before which caused an infection. All the other hens are very healthy.

And then there were 12.

I thought I took photos of the area during the snow... can't find them. But it was humorous... we shoveled the snow around the shed and chicken ark so the ladies could get to the ground (and not walk on the cold snow so much). Then the hubby expanded the ‘ground’ area a bit every day... it looked funny. Wish I had that photo... darn!

Today we moved the chicken tractor out from under the shed oriented with the opening to the east. This will give them protection from that south blowing rain now that Spring seems to have arrived. (knocking on wood.)



The pullet chicks (50) are due this week. Back to pictures of chicks! Has it really been a year??? Amazing.

THE EXPANSION TO SELLING EGGS IS FOUND IN CHICKEN ADVENTURES, VOL. 2.
