

Thoughts from the Roost -- #2 (2011)

Keeping Laying Hens on Pasture-- Why Moveable Pasture Shelters?

We've been on a quest the last few years to figure out a system that works well for pasturing laying hens. Here's a few of the methods we have used.

(Please note, all the methods below will, to various degrees, create a high quality, authentic egg.)

Method 1--Use the old chicken coop and let the birds roam around the farmstead.

This method works for 2-20 hens for eggs for household use and to sell to neighbors and friends. There are a few problems. The birds can go anywhere and leave droppings anywhere including the deck, front porch, tractor seat (a favorite), barn hay and an occasional, but brief, excursion into the house. They also find new places to lay and hide their eggs besides the nest boxes in the chicken coop. Finally (there's lots more but I'll let it rest after this), they not only peck at all the nice grass and insects in the yard, but everything else (even on the cleanest of farmsteads) --- pieces of trash blown astray, stuff in the mechanical shop when doors are open, etc. Maintaining organic integrity would be a challenge on a working farm.

Method 2--Build a portable chicken house and move it through the pastures.

Perhaps you've seen a picture or two of these contraptions. They're typically hammered together from scrap wood and junk metal evoking a strange beauty in their simplicity. Being a carpenter, ours was more like a regular little building, built on an old yacht trailer. We christened it "The Chicken Yacht" the day it was launched into the pasture. This method also had it's challenges. First, it's still a chicken house-- it gets dirty and needs regular cleaning. Second, the birds love to hide their eggs in the pasture grass. Third, if the weather isn't right (rainy, too hot, too sunny, too cold- in other words, about half the time), the birds just stay inside, making the first problem more of a problem. I could go on, hawks, ground predators, etc.....

Method 3--Build a stationary chicken house in the middle of a big field and let the birds roam.

We did this, out of necessity, while working on the new pasture pens. Every day about noon, after the primary egg laying time was over, we opened the doors of the three poultry buildings. The hens would pour out (2000 in all) like corn from a pail and fan out through the seven acre field around the buildings. Some had places they would race to immediately, like the gravity boxes where spilled feed could be cleaned up. Others just meandered about. Then, there was the group that figured out where Beth's organic vegetable garden was. Meager temporary fencing didn't help and after all the tomato buds were picked clean I made an oath- "never again". In addition, there were all the problems mentioned in *Method 2* above.

Method 4--Use the same moveable pens used for raising meat birds and modify them with nest boxes.

Although they both have beaks and feathers, chickens bred for egg production and a chickens bred for meat are radically different from one another. The former is active, likes vertical mobility, is somewhat obsessive, is kept at least 18 months and requires very careful management to keep things sane for the birds and the farmer. The latter is far less active, can't fly, satisfied if there's a feed trough and water within a short walk and is kept 7-12 weeks before butchering. Needless to say, the laying hens will do best in a pasture shelter designed for their needs.

Method 5---Use a floorless moveable shelter designed specifically for laying hens.

What I like about specially designed moveable pens, is they resolve many of the problems mentioned above. 1) There's no hen house to clean. 2) We know where the eggs are. 3) The birds eat only 100% organic pasture and grain. 4) They have shade and weather protection allowing them to always be on fresh grass. 5) They are protected from predators. And, 6) We don't have to race home at sunset to beat the coyotes and coons to open coop doors. We're still fine tuning things. But we, and the hens, are generally happy with this system of keeping birds on pasture.