

Gathering Summary: Raising Chickens, a Panel Discussion, February 24, 2010

Summary by Catherine Haug; Photos as noted.

Divided this into two documents, this on chickens and the other on rabbits.



(Chickens on roost, by Keith B.)

Our Panel

Keith B., Shelli R., Nick & BrendaLee S., and Julie V.

[NOTE: Annie G. was unable to attend, but she provided information that has been included on the handout for this event: [The EssentialList: Raising Chickens](#)].

Many people in the audience shared their relevant experience as well.

Subsequent to the event, Jeffrey Funk provided additional information on slaughtering poultry.



Local Regulations

(Photo of "Rooster" by Keith B.)

It's best to check with your local municipality, as rules change. Permits may be required as well. The following have been verified as of March 5, 2010:

- **Kalispell:** hens and roosters for personal use only. Zoning regulations apply to coops. Noise regulations may apply to roosters.
- **Whitefish:** up to 3 hens, no roosters allowed; only for single- and two-family residences, per city Council minutes, Dec 1, 2008.
- **Columbia Falls:** not allowed in town, per the city.
- **Flathead County** (governs unincorporated areas): no regulations on chickens.
- **Homeowners Associations** may override local government regulations. Check with your landlord if you are a renter.

Baby Chicks

(Photo of chicks by Keith B.)

When to start:

This depends on how good the coop is (heat, etc.).

Cheryl C. suggests rotating meat and layers annually. Start chicks in spring, for summer growth. Butcher meat birds in fall, saving a few laying hens for laying and spring hatch; butcher layers for stewing hens the following fall.





Purchased chicks:

(Photo of chicks by Keith B.)

You can purchase hatched chicks from Murdochs, Cenex, or online. Nick & BrendaLee recommended www.mthealthy.com. You can mix varieties in a minimum order of 25 chicks.

Chicks mature in about 4 - 9 months. Best to butcher meat birds in 3 - 4 months, for the most tender meat.

Keith kept his chicks 3 weeks in a brood house (see below for more). Chicks raised for meat are more trouble than those raised for eggs, because meat breeds grow too fast.

One suggestion is to remove food at night if raising chicks for meat, to limit their rate of growth.

Incubate your eggs:

(Photo of hen with chick by Shelli R.)

This can be done with an incubator, or the mother hen.

Takes about 21 days to hatch. Then keep in a brood box until about 6 weeks old, before moving with others.



Housing for young chicks:

- ▶ Shelli used an old horse trough, with sawdust bedding and a heat lamp. Added water and feeder. Covered trough with chicken wire, weighted with 2x4s over top.
- ▶ Keith built a 4'x8' box, 2' high, with a screen at one end. It gets too crowded for them after 6 weeks, and they start to stress.

Adding chicks to main flock:

Chickens have a 'pecking order,' making this tricky indeed. One idea is to separate the pen into 2 yards with visibility between them, so they get used to each other before putting them together in same pen.

Shelli believes the key is to minimize stress, by keeping them happy with adequate food and space.



Lighting & Heat Lamps

(Photo of brood box by Keith B.)

As long as you have electricity, a heat lamp is the best way to heat the brood box, as well as to keep water from freezing in the main coop during winter.

(If no electricity, keep the brood box near a woodstove, or use heated blocks covered with blankets.)

All agreed that red infrared is better than clear, and it keeps pecking to a minimum.

For the first 2 days in the brood box, keep the heat lamp on non-stop. Then turn off during mid day. As the chicks grow, raise the lamp so they don't get burnt.

You can tell by the chick behavior if they are too hot or too cold. or you can monitor with a thermometer: keep at 90° F the first few days.



Breeds

(Photo by Shelli R.)

Suggestions from panel:

- Leghorns are by far the best layers. They need a calcium supplement, which can cause other breeds to get egg-bound.
- Barred Rocks are good winter layers, and also are good for meat.
- Black Giant is also good for eggs and meat.

Other considerations:

- Adaptability to stress - some breeds are better than others. Orpingtons bear confinement well, such as cold weather, when crowded into coops.
- Egg color: mixing breeds by egg color helps you determine who is laying the best.
- Bantams are easier to free range-they don't tear up the area as much.

There are many websites to help you choose the right breed for your requirements. One such is mypetchicken.com.

Housing

(Photos of coop, right; and nesting boxes, below by Shelli R.)

Your coop and pen should be animal proof. Bury fencing 18" below ground; may even put chicken wire on ground. Best also to cover pen with chicken wire, to keep out predatory birds.

Provide a closeable vent, with a screen.



Coop size

This somewhat depends upon the breeds, and whether they will be confined to coop or allowed to free-range. The larger the space the better.

Nick & BrendaLee have a 10'x20' pen, with a 5'x9' coop inside the pen. It includes 6 nesting boxes. Provide about 9 - 10" for each chicken to perch.

Annie G has a 8'x10' coop with 7 nesting boxes and three 5' long roost bars, surrounded by a 12'x24' pen for her 25 chickens. She allows them to roam throughout their property during the day; then rings a bell to call them to the coop for the night.



Water

Chickens regulate their metabolism by water intake, so it's very important to keep water available at all times, and to keep it from freezing.

Nick and BrendaLee suggest adding cod liver oil to the water for vitamin D, which is especially important if the chickens don't spend much time in the sun.

Feed

(Photo of feed by Shelli R.)

Nick and BrendaLee grind their own feed (grain and seeds), as well as used egg shells for calcium. Sardines are a good treat. Also old flour and old milk.



Shelli adds that for chicks, you can purchase a chick starter that is medicated (with antibiotics that helps the chick overcome pasty butt, a condition when the chick's vent is covered with poop and causes a blockage), or non-medicated.

Free range chickens love to dig in compost, etc., for maggots and insects, and seeds. Building two pens, one on each side of the coop utilizes their love for digging. One pen is for adding compost; the chickens are let into this pen. The other pen is your garden. Reversing this plan the following year, provides chicken-tilled compost for the garden.

Predators

Skunks, raccoons, and family pets are the most common predators. Foxes and birds will also raid your pen.

Winter Care

Chickens won't lay if too cold. Put a light or heat lamp in the coop, and keep water from freezing, as water helps them regulate their body temperature.



Eggs

(Photo of fried eggs with orange yolks by Keith B.)

Eggs have a protective coating to keep out infection; washing the eggs removes this coating. Instead, brush off dirt without using water.

If you do wash the eggs, use water that is warmer than the eggs, so bacteria won't penetrate the shell.

Good clean straw or grass clippings (from non-fertilized grass) in the nesting box helps to keep eggs clean.

Using a pencil to write the date on the egg shell helps you to know which to use first. or you can number and rotate your cartons. Julie notes that she often wrote journal entries on the shells.

Butchering

(Photo of chickens hiding under coop, by Shelli R.)

Several methods were suggested:

- Nick and BrendaLee butcher their own; they grab chicken by the neck, then hit with an axe.
- Keith put them in a box and used a tree-limb cutter to cut off their heads.
- Susan and Lu use a roadside cone. The head comes through the top, confining the body in the cone, to keep it from running around. Blood is also confined.
- Someone mentioned that the Mennonites in Creston will butcher for a fee.



To pluck: dip dead bird in boiling water first; this makes it easier to remove the feathers. Or simply skin the chicken. (Cat notes that the fat in the skin is good for you, and also protects the meat when cooking). Or you can buy an apparatus for plucking.

Mobile Poultry Slaughtering Unit

According to Jeffrey Funk, AERO and Grow Montana support a mobile poultry slaughtering unit. He notes, however, that the producer provides the manpower.

“This is a state sanctioned, clean and completely equipped mobile facility intended for use by small poultry producers who wish to process their own chickens and turkeys. If a producer wants to process poultry for sale in Montana, there are fairly stringent rules that must be abided to be legal. This facility, along with the comprehensive manual that was produced in association with it brings legal, local and cost effective poultry processing to small producers. I have toured it, and was quite impressed.”

Slaughtering Guide

For slaughtering guidelines when using Montana’s Mobile Poultry Slaughtering Unit, see e-book on the Grow Montana website: [Mobile Processing: Appropriate Technology for Pastured Poultry Producers](#), by S. D. Stokes

Video Clips from the Event

by Sally Janover

- [Edd B. opens with philosophy of ESP](#) (3:04)

Sources & References

Books

- *Chicken Coops*, by Judy Pangman
- *Chicken Tractor: The Permaculture Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil*, by Andy Lee and Pat Foreman (see sneak peek on Amazon: www.amazon.com/Chicken-Tractor-Permaculture-Guide-Healthy/dp/0962464864)
- *Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens*, by Gail Damerow

Web

- ESP handout: [The EssentialList: Raising Chickens](http://essentialstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Raising-Chickens_EsL2.pdf) (essentialstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Raising-Chickens_EsL2.pdf)
- Grow Montana's e-book: [Mobile Processing: Appropriate Technology for Pastured Poultry Producers](http://www.growmontana.ncat.org/docs/sstokesfinal.pdf); by S. D. Stokes (www.growmontana.ncat.org/docs/sstokesfinal.pdf)
- Flathead Beacon: Whitefish is Clucking over Chickens, 10/27/08: www.flatheadbeacon.com/articles/article/whitefish_is_clucking_over_chickens/6266/ and Whitefish City Council Minutes, Dec 1, 2008: www.whitefish.govoffice.com/vertical/Sites/{8773F417-AD9F-4BFA-B5F7-4D1C73387937}/uploads/{66682729-47FA-48D6-B966-FEDCEEA4F7C8}.PDF
- The City Chicken, on laws and regulations by state&city: home.centurytel.net/thecitychicken/chickenlaws.html
- My Pet Chicken, on breed selection: www.mypetchicken.com/chicken-breeds/which-breed-is-right-for-me.aspx