



THE HOME BROILER FLOCK

Fred D. Thornberry*

Many families are interested in producing their own broilers for home consumption. It may cost more to raise broilers than to buy them at the supermarket, but the recreation and satisfaction derived offset the slightly higher cost. In addition, manure and litter from the broiler enterprise can be used to fertilize the family garden and flower beds.

Expensive, elaborate housing and equipment are not necessary. However, a clean, dry structure that will protect broilers from predators, cold and rain, and that can be well ventilated, is required. A brooder or heat lamps to warm the chicks and feeding and watering equipment also are needed. Attention to detail and close adherence to the instructions in this publication are essential if healthy, good quality broilers are to be produced.

Purchasing Chicks

Good quality broiler strain chicks should be ordered from a reputable hatchery. The local county Extension agent can suggest hatcheries with broiler type chicks. Some family growers prefer to raise pullet chicks. Others buy unsexed chicks. Pullets carry more flesh over the back and breast than cockerels and will generally have a more rounded appearance to the breast, thighs and legs. Cockerels reach slaughter weight 1 to 2 weeks earlier than pullets.

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Preparation and Brooding

Clean and disinfect the brooder house, feeders and waterers at least 2 weeks before the chicks arrive. Sweep, then wash the house down with soap and water. Spray with a commercial disinfectant labeled for use in poultry houses.

Be prepared for the chicks 2 days in advance. Broilers reared for home use should have 1 square foot of floor space per bird. Put at least 4 inches of litter on



Sheds attached to existing buildings make fine facilities for growing broilers. The openings on three sides of the building provide plenty of fresh air for the birds.

the floor of the cleaned, disinfected pen or house. Never place chicks on a slick surface such as cardboard, plastic or newspaper. Wood shavings, cane fiber, ground corncobs, peanut hulls or rice hulls make good litter. Hay makes very poor litter and should not be used. Stir

the litter daily after the second week to prevent packing. Hard, damp places in litter will cause breast blisters on the birds.

Electric heat lamps or infrared bulbs are good heat sources for brooding chicks. If a gas or electric hover-type brooder is used, it should operate at a temperature of 88 to 92 degrees F at the thermostat or at the location of the manufacturer's thermometer. Gradually reduce the thermostat temperature 5 degrees each week until the broilers are 3 to 4 weeks old or until the outside temperature reaches 70 degrees F. Allow at least 10 square inches of brooding space per chick under the hover.

If infrared bulbs are used, two 125-watt bulbs per 50 chicks are recommended. Make certain lamps are secured so they cannot fall to the litter and create a fire hazard. The lamps should hang so that the bottoms are 18 inches from the litter. Raise them 2 inches per week to a maximum height of 24 inches. Place watering pans a good distance from the lamps to prevent splashing water from cracking the hot bulbs.

Various types of materials (cardboard, building paper, etc.) can be used to make a brooder guard to circle the brooding area. The brooder guard should be approximately 18 inches high and 5 to 7 feet in diameter. It is used to keep young chicks near the heat source. When chicks are 7 days old, remove the guard and allow them full freedom of the pen. Remove all sticks, boards and sharp objects from the broiler pen or coop.

After the broilers are 3 to 4 weeks old and fully feathered, heat seldom is required.

Lighting

Provide all-night light for broilers. Twenty-four hour lighting (natural and artificial) allows broilers access to feed at all times and increases body weight, especially during the summer months. Keep a 40-watt bulb at least 6 feet above broilers after removing heat lamps.

Feeding

Optimum performance of broilers is dependent on proper nutrition. It is absolutely essential that broilers be fed a high quality broiler feed containing at least 20 percent protein. Lower protein feeds, including chick starter, will not do the job. Many experienced feeders start chicks on a higher protein turkey or gamebird starter to stimulate additional growth. Some leave the broilers on the higher protein feed (24 to 30 percent protein) throughout the 7- to 8-week feeding period. Others switch to a broiler feed at 2 to 4 weeks of age. The feed dealer should be informed of the type of feed required at least 2 weeks before it is needed so that fresh feed can be ordered. Milk, greens, eggs, etc., are not needed and may retard early growth. Supplemental grain also will slow broiler growth if added before chicks are 5 weeks old.



Stir the litter daily to prevent packing. Hard, damp places in the litter will cause breast blisters on the birds.



Water, feed and a heat source are all essential in getting broiler chicks off to a good start. When chicks are comfortable they will bed down in a semi-circle around the perimeter of the heat zone. If cold, chicks will crowd under the lamp; if too warm, they will move to the outer limits of the brooding zone or brooder guard.

A high level of vitamins in the diet during the first 2 weeks is required to prevent leg weakness. Adequate vitamins can be ensured and leg problems prevented by adding inexpensive water soluble poultry vitamins and electrolytes to drinking water at the recommended level.

All broilers should be able to eat at the same time. One pie or cooking pan for feed and one chick waterer per 25 chicks are needed the first 7 days. From 7 days to slaughter, one tube-type feeder per 20 to 25 broilers should be provided. Broilers must have access to clean, fresh water at all times. One 2-gallon waterer per 50 chicks is required from the first through the fourth week. One 2-gallon waterer per 25 broilers is required after the fourth week. Water containers should be rinsed daily and scrubbed twice weekly.

Tube feeders are recommended because they hold an ample supply of feed, can be adjusted easily as broilers grow, and are less likely to cause bruises than horizontal trough feeders. Feeders and waterers should be kept adjusted so that the trough portion is level with the back height of the broilers.

Feed must be kept before broilers at all times if maximum growth is to be attained. Broilers respond to attention. Walk broilers and stir feed three to five times per day. This will provide exercise and increase feed consumption and growth.

Small amounts of broiler feed slightly moistened with milk and cooking oil and fed several times during the day will increase growth by stimulating birds to eat more. This practice can be particularly helpful in hot weather with broilers more than 4 weeks of age.

Caution: Do not put out more moistened feed than the broilers can eat in 5 to 10 minutes.

Ventilation

If the broilers become too hot or chilled, growth will be retarded. When the broilers are well feathered, open the house and allow plenty of fresh air to circulate. The ideal growing temperature is 65 to 75 degrees F after the broilers are 3 weeks old.

During the winter months, keep the south side of the house open after the broilers reach 4 weeks of age, except during near freezing temperatures. If the water freezes during the night, refill the fountains with warm water early in the morning. Freezing water in fountains indicates that the temperature in the house is too low. Temperatures in this range can result in chilled birds and poor performance or mortality.

A house that is too warm reduces broiler quality and may cause some of the broilers to start feather picking and cannibalism. In hot weather, use fans to circulate the air.

Broiler Health

Keep all other poultry away from broilers. Medication should not be given unless broilers are sick or stressed. Broiler chicks placed on feed from late August to early November should be vaccinated for fowl pox with a single needle before 14 days of age.

Internal parasites can cause poor gain; roundworms cause the most trouble. A good sanitation program prevents this parasite problem. Remove the litter after each flock of broilers. Keep old birds separated from the broilers, and do not walk into the broiler house without thoroughly cleaning shoes.

The external parasites most likely to attack broilers are lice, mites and fire ants. These parasites lower broiler quality by reducing gain and causing skin discolorations. Check broilers each week for these parasites.

Processing

Some people may hesitate to grow broilers at home because they lack knowledge of processing procedures. Extension bulletin B-1383, "Processing Poultry at Home," makes home processing easy. This publication gives a step-by-step description with photos, of the simple facilities, equipment and procedures necessary for slaughter, picking, evisceration, chilling and packaging poultry for the home freezer. It is available from your county Extension office.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Zerle L. Carpenter, Director, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, The Texas A&M University System.