

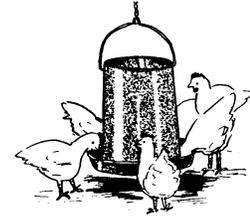


*The University of Georgia*

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## ***BACKYARD FLOCK TIP . . .***

### **HOUSING AND CONFINEMENT FOR THE BACKYARD FLOCK**

Raising chickens in the United States dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the English first brought them here. The chicken was originally domesticated by the English for cock fighting which was considered a spectator sport. Since then chickens have been grown for showing, meat and egg supply or just the pure pleasure of having the birds running around in the yard. Whatever your reasons for having a flock of birds in your yard, consideration should be given to where and how the birds will be housed. This backyard tip will look at housing and confinement for the backyard poultry farmer.

When designing and building housing for chickens, enough room should be provided to accommodate the growth of the birds and consideration should also be given for future expansion. The minimum amount of space that should be provided for each bird will depend on the type or breed of bird grown. Small breed birds such as Rosecomb or Seabright which are about 1.3 to 1.5 lbs would require spacing of 0.75 to 1 sq ft per bird. Larger breeds such as Orpington or Plymouth Rock which are about 7.5 to 8 lbs will require 3 to 3.5 sq ft per bird.

Temperature is an important consideration when designing and constructing housing if you are considering an enclosed confinement for your backyard flock. The temperature inside the house should stay at about 70°F. Of course the type of enclosure needed to maintain this temperature will depend on the local temperature. The building can be constructed with curtain sides which can be lowered when the ambient temperature falls and raised when the ambient temperature rises. Installing a circulating fan in the ceiling of the house will also enhance movement of air throughout the house. The floor of the houses should be covered with a good absorbent bedding material such as pine shavings, rice hulls or peanut shells. Not every chicken fancier wants to keep birds in houses. Some prefer to have them roaming free walking and foraging around their property all day. These birds are referred to as “free range” birds. While it is ok and quite normal to have the birds roam free, it is important to fence them in confining them to a specific area in the yard. This is necessary for several reasons;

1. Chickens make easy prey and allowing to roam free exposes them to predators.
2. Chickens are foragers naturally and will wander far distances as they forage for insects and seeds. You could lose some birds if they wander on someone else’s property.
3. Birds that are allowed to wander around are at risk of contracting diseases from wild birds, water fowl or other birds from neighboring flocks.

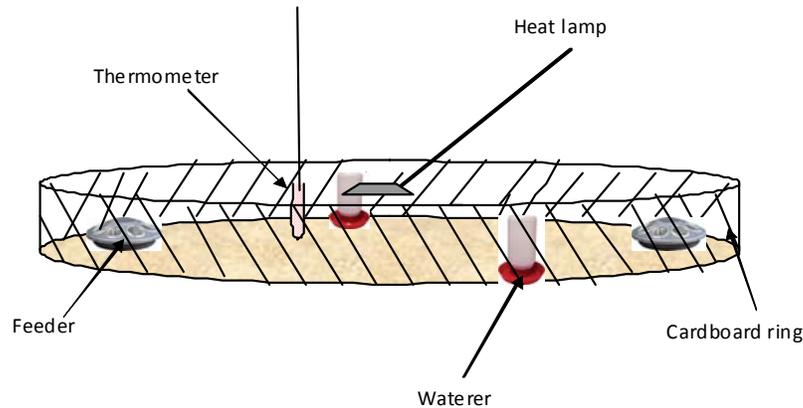
### **PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK**

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4. Chickens are really not good at crossing roads and you could lose a few as they attempt this.
5. Fencing in your birds is also important for good neighbor relationships. Chickens will get into flowers and vegetable gardens and scratch out seeds. This is annoying if this happens in your garden and more so in your neighbor's garden!

Fencing to enclose free range flocks should extend all the way to the ground and be at least six feet high because chickens will try to go under the fence or get over it. The mesh that is used for the fenced birds should be small enough to keep the chicks in; chicken wire works best. While not always possible, you should try to cover the top of the enclosure to prevent flying or climbing predators from gaining access to the birds. While your birds may be free ranged, shelter should be provided for these birds to protect them from the elements and give them a place to roost at nights.

When constructing housing for your backyard flock adequate heating should be provided for young chicks (brooding). Heat can be provided to the chicks using infrared heat lamps which should be placed 1 to 1.5 ft above the chicks. The temperature should not be allowed to fall below 70°F. For the first week of the chicks' life, a temperature of 90°F should be maintained at chick level. The temperature should be dropped 5° each week until the chicks are five weeks old. You can keep track of the temperature at chick level by hanging a thermometer at the same height as the chicks and adjust the temperature each week by raising the lamp a few inches. Chicks should be kept close to the heat source by placing a cardboard ring beneath the source to form a brooding pen. Enough room should be provided to allow the chicks to move away from the heat. A diameter of about 6 ft is enough room for about 50 chicks.



*Figure 1. Diagram showing brood ring.*

Finally, your construction plans should include provisions for laying if you intend to keep some of the birds for eggs. Laying boxes should be provided whether or not the birds are free ranged.

  
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Extension County Coordinator/Agent

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”