

# The Home Broiler Flock

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**M**any families are interested in producing their own broilers for home use. It may cost more to raise broilers than to buy them at the supermarket, but the recreation and satisfaction the activity provides can 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 for home broiler production. However, a clean, dry structure that will protect the broilers from predators, cold, and rain, and that can be well ventilated, is required. Also, 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. Your county Extension agent can suggest hatcheries with broiler-type chicks. Some family growers prefer to raise pullet chicks. Others buy unsexed chicks. Pullets (females) carry more flesh over the back and breast than cockerels (males) 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.

## Preparation and Brooding

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

Be prepared for the chicks 2 days in advance. Broilers reared for home use



**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.**

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should have 1 square foot of floor space per bird. Put at least 4 inches of litter on the floor of the cleaned, disinfected pen or house. Never place the 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 keep it from packing. Hard, damp 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 you use infrared bulbs, two 125-watt bulbs per 50 chicks are recommended. Make certain the 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 keep 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 about 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. Making light (natural and artificial) available 24 hours a day allows broilers access to feed at all times and increases their body weight, especially during the summer months. Keep a 40-watt bulb at least 6 feet above broilers after turning off the heat lamps.

## Feeding

Optimum performance of the broilers depends 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



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

growth. Most switch to a broiler feed at 2 to 4 weeks of age. Let your feed dealer know which type of feed you need at least 2 weeks in advance so that fresh feed can be ordered. Milk, greens, eggs, etc., are not needed and may retard early growth. Supplemental grain will also slow broiler growth if it is added before the chicks are 5 weeks old.

Added vitamins during the first week may be required to prevent leg weakness. Add inexpensive water-soluble poultry vitamins to drinking water at the recommended level.

All broilers should be able to eat at the same time. One pie plate or cooking pan for feed and one chick waterer per 25 chicks are needed the first 7 days. From 7 days to slaughter, provide one tube-

type feeder per 20 to 25 broilers. 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. Rinse the water containers every day and scrub them twice a week.

Tube feeders are recommended. 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. Keep feeders and waterers adjusted so that the trough portion is level with the back height of the broilers.

Feed must be kept before the broilers at all times if they are to reach maximum growth. Broilers respond to attention. Walk the broilers and stir the feed three to five times each day. This will provide exercise and increase their feed consumption and growth.

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

Caution: Do not put out more moistened feed than the broilers can eat in 10 to 15 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 cir-

culate. 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. Low temperatures can result in chilled birds and poor performance. Inadequate ventilation can also cause health problems.

A house that is too warm reduces broiler growth and may cause feather-picking and cannibalism. In hot weather, use fans to circulate the air.

## **Broiler Health**

Keep all other poultry away from broilers. Do not give medication unless the broilers are sick or stressed. Broiler chicks placed on feed from late August to early November should be vaccinated for fowl pox at 14 days of age.

A good sanitation program prevents parasite problems. Remove the litter after each flock of broilers. Keep old

birds away from the broilers, and do not walk from the laying house or pen into the broiler house without thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting your shoes.

The external parasites most likely to attack broilers are lice and mites. These parasites lower broiler quality by reducing gain and causing skin discolorations. Treat all fire ant mounds within 100 feet of the broiler house to prevent fire ant problems.

## **Processing**

Some people may hesitate to grow broilers at home because they lack knowledge of processing procedures. Texas Agricultural Extension Service publication 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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