

Getting started with rotational chicken pastures



If you're starting from scratch with pasturing chickens the way we were this year, you'll probably be asking a slew of questions. Your first decision will be between chicken tractors and day range --- we chose the latter so I'll focus on rotational pastures in this post. Here are some of the questions I wish I'd known the answers to twelve months ago.

What kind of fencing should I use?

Your second decision is between permanent and temporary pastures. The former are harder to build in the short run and are more expensive per square foot, but are easier to use in the long run. If you're raising 50 or fewer chickens in your backyard, I'd recommend permanent fences.

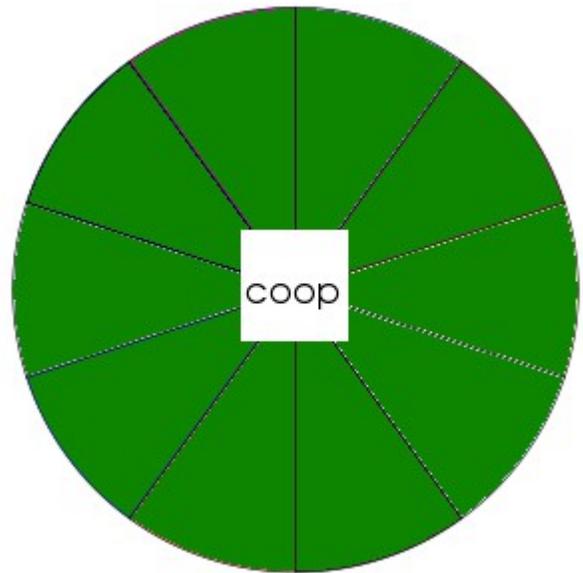
For happy chickens who don't live in a predator hotspot, a roll of five foot chicken wire strung between t-posts about 15 feet apart with a few old boards or logs tacking down the bottom will be sufficient. Here's my theory on what you should do if your chickens try to escape. A well-trained dog is our solution to predation.

If you'd prefer temporary fencing, the traditional choice is electrified netting. I wrote about why electrified netting is often a poor choice for the backyard and what I use instead here.

What does a permanent, rotational grazing system look like for chickens?

A chicken coop sits at the center, surrounded by several small pastures (often called paddocks.) The chickens spend the night in the coop (and go inside whenever they want to lay an egg), then exit through a small pophole into the pasture of your choice. When you want to move the chickens to a new pasture, it's as simple as closing the old pophole while the chickens are all sound asleep and then opening a pophole into the next pasture.

One of my favorite parts of this system is how easy it is to move chickens to a new patch of ground. I've seen several temporary fencing or chicken tractoring systems where people get lazy and let the chickens sit on the same patch of ground far too long because it's just a pain in the butt to move them. You won't have that problem here.



How much space do I need to devote to chicken pastures?

Mainstream pastured poultry producers will tell you that broilers need 10 square feet of pasture per bird per week (or a total of 40 square feet for the four weeks the birds typically live on pasture.) You should consider that the bare minimum required for breeds that don't forage much, with the chickens housed in tractors that are moved daily so that the flock can't scratch the ground bare.

In my permanent, rotational pastures with keen foragers, I see pasture degradation when I have fewer than 270 square feet per bird during the summer. I suspect I'd need at least twice that much space to keep the ground from turning into mud in the winter.

Keep in mind that the amount of space your chickens need will depend on a variety of factors, including climate, season, chicken breed and age, and pasture quality. If in doubt, give your chickens as much space as you can --- the more they can roam, the more they will supplement storebought feed with insects caught on the wing. You can tell that your flock doesn't have enough space when bare spots turn up amid the grass, you can

see poop on the ground, and the pasture starts to smell and fill with flies.

How many pastures do I need?

What you're really asking here is --- how long should I leave my chickens in one paddock and how long should I let that paddock sit fallow before I move chickens back into it? The answer will depend on whether you're just raising broilers when pasture plants are growing fast or are keeping laying hens year

round. Your type and quality of pasture plants will also affect the answer.

Once again, it's helpful to look at the bare minimum, which is four pastures for summer use or six pastures for year round use. If you size each pasture so that your flock eats the tender growth in about a week, you'll be able to rotate the chickens through three other pastures before turning them back into the first one in a four pasture system. Three weeks off is sufficient for plants to rebound as long as they weren't overgrazed, the pasture got enough rain, and it's not too cold or hot for growth.

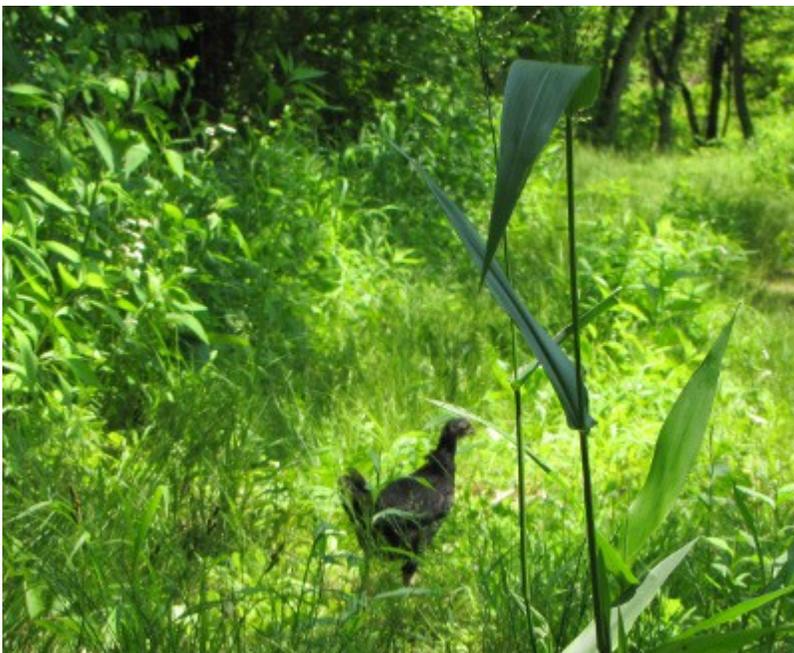


What's the best shape for a pasture?

The perfect chicken pasture is square, but you'll often have to work around obstructions and use a wiggly or rectangular shape. If you can help it, don't make your pasture more than twice as long as it is wide or chickens will tend to hang out near the coop and not explore the far reaches. A sharp bend in the pasture will have the same effect. You can counteract this behavior to some extent by locating a compost pile or chicken waterer at the far end of the pasture.

Does the pasture location matter?

Yes. In the winter, chickens will do best if their pasture is in the sunniest possible location, beyond the shade of hills, buildings, or evergreen trees. In the summer, the reverse is true --- chickens like some sunny spots but will enjoy hanging out in shaded corners and under bushes. You can either build separate pastures for winter and summer or can create the best of both worlds by using deciduous trees to shade certain parts of your summer pasture while letting in the winter sun.



What's the best type of pasture?

Chickens enjoy succulent, young growth, which means that tall plants like ragweed are the worst choice for your pasture. The best types of groundcover for year-round growth tend to be perennial grasses and legumes like bluegrass, clover, etc. You may want to plant paddocks of annual grains and legumes to extend the pasture season into the cold weather. Trees and shrubs can be useful additions if they produce fruits that chickens enjoy, but there's a tradeoff since the perennials will also shade out the undergrowth even when the trees aren't bearing.

Is one time of the year best for raising

broilers?

Once you get a feel for the peak production times for your individual pasture, you'll know when it can handle an influx of extra birds. In regions like ours where pastures are dominated by cool season grasses, those peak periods occur in mid spring to mid summer and again in early fall. Putting one set of broilers on pasture in May and pasturing another in September would use our pastures to best effect.

Should I include other animals in my pastures?

Joel Salatin's model uses grazing animals like cows, sheep, or goats to keep the tall weeds down and the chicken-friendly plants growing as fast as possible. Miniature livestock are an option for the backyard, but an alternative is to simply mow your pasture a few times a year.

Can I use chicken pastures to keep deer out of the garden?

Chicken moats are a permaculture concept that utilize linear chicken pastures on the perimeter of a garden to deter deer. Even though the deer can jump over a five foot fence, they don't like to be confined and will hesitate to jump two in succession. Our deer moats have worked very well...too bad they don't completely encircle our tender garden plants.

I'm sure I'll have another long list of mistakes to shun next year, but that's the fun of pasturing!

