

Grazing frames (edited)

<http://www.thegardencoop.com/blog/2012/02/07/grazing-frames-backyard-chickens/>

In our yard, we have one small dedicated day run for our hens located right next to their Garden Coop. In all, it provides only about 100 square feet of grazing area. Fully greened, it would only take a few days for our flock of nine to tear it all down to bare earth. My first attempt at keeping it green was to divide the yard into a couple of paddocks. This required a lot of tending, and there were long stretches of time where both paddocks were closed to recover and regrow.



Then I discovered grazing frames in an article by gardening writer Vern Nelson. Grazing frames are simple two-by-four frames with hardware cloth (welded wire mesh) attached across the top. It's kind of like a raised bed for chickens. Set one above a patch of grass, and the grass will grow up through the openings. Your chickens can snack on the green tips, and the frame protects the roots so that the grass survives to grow another day.

The design I present here is a modified version of Mr. Nelson's, but it's basically the same idea: protect the roots, grow the shoots.

Grazing frame plans:

Materials List (to build one 5' x 3' frame – 1525 x 865 mm)

- 2 8-foot (2400 mm) two-by-fours. *Note: The wood will be in direct contact with the ground, so either choose a naturally rot-resistant species like cedar or redwood or use a cheaper softwood (spruce, pine, fir) and seal it well or preserve it with a garden-safe product like Timber Pro UV Internal Wood Stabilizer.*
- 1 6-foot (1800 mm) one-by-two. *See note above.*
- 3" (75 mm) exterior screws
- About 50 galvanized poultry fencing staples (do NOT use ordinary staples from a staple gun!)
- 59" (1500 mm) length of 3' wide (914 mm), 1/2 in. (13 x 13 mm) galvanized hardware cloth, also known as "welded wire mesh"

Tools List

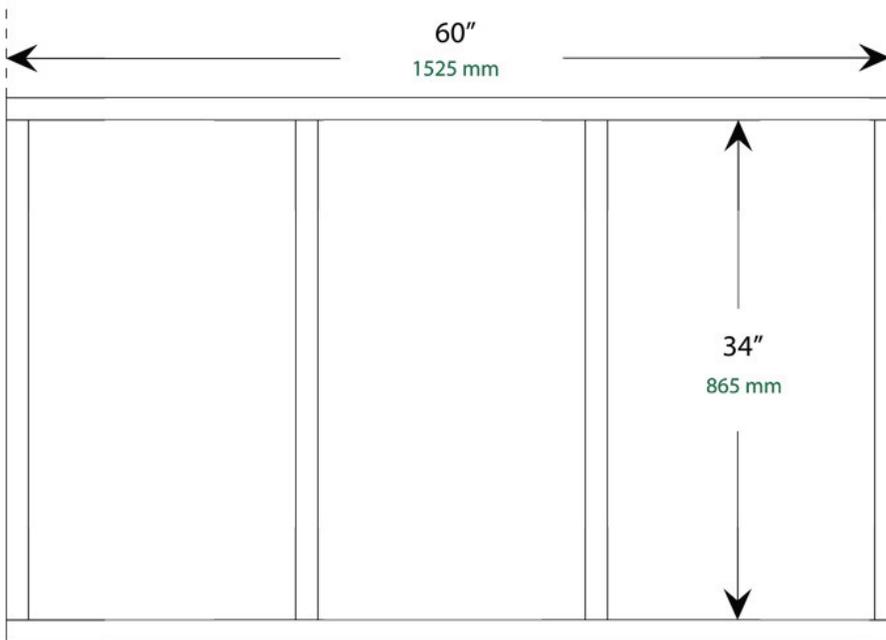
- Circular saw or handsaw
- Couple of sawhorses
- Power driver with assorted drill and driver bits
- Tape measurer
- Hammer
- Wire snips (for cutting hardware cloth)

Instructions:

Cut each of your 2 two-by-fours into a 60" (1525 mm) piece and a 34" (865 mm) piece. These will make up the outer edges of the frame (see diagram below).

Cut the one-by-two into two 34" (865 mm) pieces. These will be the two center spans.

Lightly sand the cut pieces and paint, seal, or treat them as needed with a non-toxic wood preservative like Internal Wood Stabilizer.

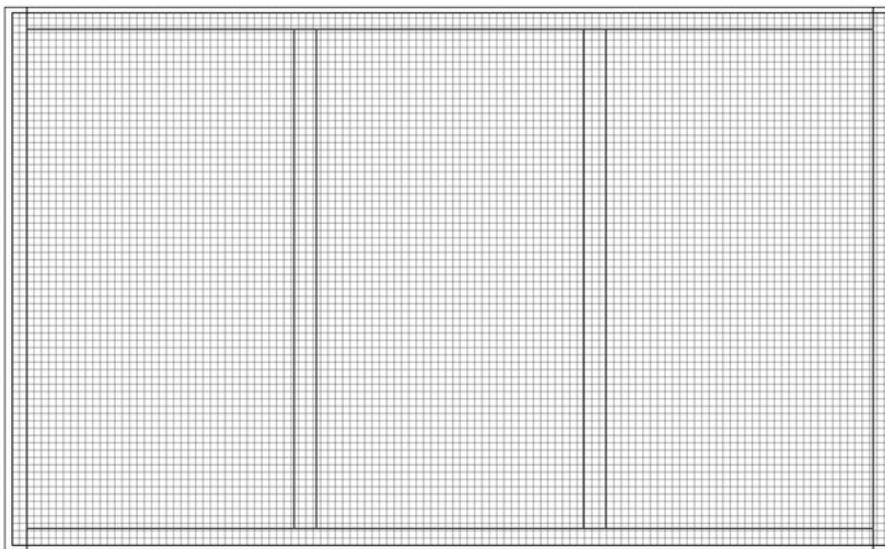


Attach the two-by-four pieces together to form the outer edges of the frame, using 3" (75 mm) exterior screws, two per joint. Refer to the diagram for placement. You will probably want to pre-drill the holes to prevent splitting.

Attach the one-by-two pieces evenly spaced between the outer edges and flush with what will be the top edge of the frame, using one 3" (75 mm) screw per joint. By using one-by-twos here instead of two-by-fours, and by attaching them near the top of the frame, they will support the wire mesh without resting on the ground,

allowing more grass to grow.

Note: You can build the frame to whatever dimensions you choose, but be sure to space your supports every 2' or less apart (600 mm). It might seem like overkill, but a flock of hens can be pretty hefty, especially when they all converge in one spot atop the frame.



Attach the hardware cloth to the top of the frame at the perimeter, stapling it down well, every 3-4 inches or so (75-100 mm). There's no need to attach it to the center supports. If you've built a coop using either of our chicken coop plans, you're already a pro at this!



Prepare an even bed of well-fertilized soil, then plant grass seed or grain. I just fluff up the soil a bit, then scatter the seeds generously and rake them in a bit until they're mostly buried to about the depth of their diameter. As for what to plant, I've used both a mix of grains (wheat, kamut, etc.) and a rye-grass mix with success. The grains gave a faster, more prolific growth, as you can see in the photos below. The rye grass (not pictured) was slower growing and finer, but lasted longer. As of this writing, I think I prefer the grains.



Set the frames over the seeded ground, adjust for positioning, and give the whole thing a generous, but gentle watering. Let the sunshine do the rest, and water as needed.



Voila! When the grass tops stick up above the wire, it's time to let the chickens out into their new pasture paradise. (Actually, you can let them out as soon as you have the frames over the seed. Our hens just happened to be young at the time, so it was *them* we were waiting on to mature, not the grass.)



Maintaining your grazing frame pasture

So how do you suppose your hens will repay you for all this work? Like they always do: with poop (then later with eggs). Poop on the grazing frames is a good thing. Simply hose it down through the cracks as you give the bed an occasional watering, and in moderate doses, it will help fertilize the soil.

Too much nitro-poop could burn the plants, though, so keep an eye on it. I usually let the poop dry a bit first, then aim a higher pressure stream of water low and across the surface of the frames, rolling the poop, leaves, and other debris off to the side.

Over time, blades of dead grass may form a thatch atop the mesh. You can lightly rake across the top from time to time to remove this thatch, or simply continue to water.



Eventually, the bed will tire out. The photo below was taken about three months after planting. There is still plenty of life in this patch. I think we got another month or so out of it before we opened it up and let the chickens go to town on the bugs and roots beneath.

When it's time to replant, the frames have a big advantage over the paddock system in that you can let your chickens back into their day yard right away. The frames protect the seeds from the start.