

The Chicken Chronicles

Ten Commandments for Chicken Growers

by *Patrick Slattery*

Homestead chicken farmers need to be stingy with time. The majority of us aren't full-time farmers, so any time we devote to chickens must be well spent. We can't allow our daily chores to become time-consuming drudgery. We want to enjoy our work and earn a reasonable return for our investment. In light of these goals, I offer the following Ten Commandments:

COMMANDMENT I

Thou Shalt Not Carry Water

This is a common downfall of small-scale chicken farmers. If you review your everyday routine with chickens, it's my guess you will find that carrying water tops your list of time invested. Water is heavy (8 pounds per gallon), and it's dangerous to carry it about, especially when there is ice around. If you carry water, reform your routine.

Chickens prefer water that isn't too warm and will drink more in hotter weather. Water is a primary feed source, so never skimp on it.

Pay attention to your watering systems. Commonly employed are double-jacketed waterers of 2- or 3-gallon capacity. These require pulling off the outer shell in order to refill, and I find them unhandy. About the only thing worse is those screw-on watering caps for quart or gallon glass jars, which are a total pain. If you are going to use this kind of waterer, I suggest plastic models that have a 7-gallon capacity.

I prefer more effective ways to water. Nasco, among others, handles a very handy, five-font waterer, with an in-line pressure reducer, so it can be hooked right up to a hose. In the past we've run water into barrels or tanks and then run a hose to a stock tank valve in a watering pan. This was effective until we had the unsavory experience of having the valve cease to work, sending water over the tanks for about eight hours. Well-bedded chicken

barns don't smell unless they get wet, and then hold your nose because the stench will knock you over. We gave up on that system.

We have developed a simple setup for larger birds using a hose to fill large watering pans that we make by cutting off the bottoms of 55-gallon plastic barrels. The chickens generally stay out, and before refilling we wash them, adding a little bleach, and they stay reasonably clean. For younger birds up to 6 weeks of age, we use the standard sort of double-jacketed waterers. For birds as young as a week old, the small, multi-font waterers work well.

Any effort you expend on upgrading your watering system is well spent. If you don't have a waterline to your barn, buy some good hose, however much footage it takes, and get water to your chickens. Also, buy a shut-off valve — it saves you a good many steps.

COMMANDMENT II

Thou Shalt Not Haul Feed & Bedding

For the part-time farmer, it doesn't pay to haul feed or bedding. Instead, it's well worth paying someone else to bring these essentials to you. Your time alone is worth the little amount of extra money expended. I once owned a half-ton pickup and spent hours on feed runs up and down the road. That came to a screeching halt when my old truck died. Now we have a smaller second car that gets good gas mileage. That's a necessity for those living "in the sticks." The question is: Do you really need a truck? They are nice to have, but I suspect you could get along nicely without one. Hiring out to do your hauling is cheaper.

For instance, a local sawmill will haul an enormous load of sawdust to my place for \$50. Not only is the sawdust good stuff, but I'm liberated from the task of

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hauling it home — which I used to do in much smaller quantities with my truck. Similarly, the local feed mills will gladly deliver a ton of feed for an additional \$10 hauling charge.

COMMANDMENT III

Thou Shalt Raise Only Cornish-Rock Crosses

Today's standard broiler hybrids are true marvels. Their genetics account for the heightened efficiency of the poultry industry — one reason why they rule the supermarket roost. The homestead chicken farmer is on a level playing field with the biggest producers in terms of availability of advanced genetics. All hatchery eggs come from the same basic sources, so Tyson's and ConAgra really don't have an advantage.

Given the superiority of Cornish-Rock crosses, it behooves everyone to consider this fast-growing breed. What's more, Cornish-Rocks are bred to be double-breasted, giving them an extraordinary amount of white meat, which the majority of consumers expect. In contrast, other breeds, regardless of size, lack this oversized breast and end up producing a carcass that can be disappointing.

Over the years I've tried alternatives, and experienced a few disasters. One year I received some advice at an organic farmers' conference and bought 600 chicks from a hatchery in Pennsylvania, instead

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of my usual source. The speaker spoke glowingly of this giant silver-barred breed and claimed their growth rate rivaled Cornish-Rocks. This particular hatchery specializes in serving the New York City kosher market, and rabbinical law mandates eating only female birds, hence this hatchery has large number of cockerel chicks to move and sells them at attractive prices (about half the cost of Cornish-Rocks). Indeed, they grew reasonably well but were a pale imitation of Cornish-Rocks, especially their lack of breast development. I ended up butchering most of them smaller than I wanted (around 4 pounds). Overall, I was disappointed by their performance. In retrospect, I never should have bet so boldly on the unknown — 100 silver-barred chicks would have been more than enough.

There are niche opportunities to sell birds other than Cornish Rocks, but usually not for eating. There’s a strong market for pullets for egg production. The problem is that you must feed them for 20 weeks, and that’s a lot of feed. One retired dairy farm couple who are doing well raising and hatching rare and unusual species. They get \$2 or more for some of their chicks. Many people keep small flocks of these exotics and sell or trade them with other poultry fanciers. In the Midwest, poultry or pigeon swaps are popular. Held on weekends, these swaps attract thousands who come to buy, sell, or trade chickens. Finally, there are those connoisseurs who prefer the taste of the “senior citizens” of the chicken world — spent hens. I know an older woman of Polish descent who is famous for her cooking and who insists on adding spent hens to her chicken soup. Old chickens can be delicious if they are cooked properly — slow and moist is the rule.

COMMANDMENT IV ***Thou Shalt Not Raise Chickens in Extreme Weather***

I seriously doubt if most homestead chicken farmers need to raise chickens year-round, especially in the North. If you face fierce winter weather, the best route is to have your chicken building empty by the time snow and ice dominate the landscape. Similarly in the deep South, it may well be best not to raise chickens during the blistering hot summer months, but renew your operation during cooler weather.

There’s a natural rhythm to getting out before winter’s onset, because demand for poultry, particularly big birds, peaks during the Thanksgiving/Christmas holiday season. Time your production so that your birds will be processed and ready to meet the peak demand. This may mean starting a mid- to late-summer batch of chicks. Most smaller producers don’t do this, and instead order all their chicks in May, and thus have chickens to kill and process in hot, late-summer weather. It’s far easier to deal with butchering chickens after cooler weather sets in. I especially like to process chickens in late fall/early winter, because I have more time after the season’s garden work is done. With deep-freeze freezers, you can have chicken available for sale year round.

A word of caution: Be sure to clean out your barn before the freeze-up. Cold weather can help sanitize your barn by upending some disease-harboring organisms, and allowing a barn to sit empty will give you a clean start next season.

COMMANDMENT V ***Thou Shalt Not Sell to Middlemen***

The downfall of most farmers is that everyone else along the food chain — processors, distributors and retailers — earn reasonable (and in many cases, exorbitant) returns on their efforts. It’s often the case that producers of raw materials — the true source of real wealth — do not receive fair recompense. However, homestead chicken farmers have the opportunity to sell directly to consumers and receive 100 percent of the price. Because there are no middlemen between the producer and the consumer, we can keep our prices reasonable.

If you decide to sell to someone other than the end consumer, be prepared to see the price of your product rise beyond what ordinary people are willing to pay. I’ve seen certified organic chicken sell for anywhere from \$2.19 to \$5 per pound. Few can pay that kind of money, and they are usually people with either very serious health problems or lots of money to spend.

COMMANDMENT VI ***Thou Shalt Avoid Bureaucracy***

Laws regulating direct sales of food products have been used to strangle small farmers. To be able to sell dressed poultry directly off the farm to customers is an opportunity to conduct an enterprise without having to have an inspector overseeing your affairs. In contrast, you could be hit with a big fine or even end up in jail if you direct market uninspected pork or beef.

In *Pastured Poultry Profits*, Joel Salatin rightly notes that “some people won’t do anything before first going to local governmental authorities and spilling their guts.” May I advise you not to be one of those people. Check your state laws to see how many chickens you can process and sell without governmental regulation. Note that if you sell dressed chickens to restaurants or retail stores, regulations stipulate that they must be processed at a facility with a state inspector. This precludes the opportunity of dressing chickens at home and cuts into your profit margin.

COMMANDMENT VII ***Thou Shalt Not Deliver to Customers***

Farmers have a tendency to work themselves ragged; what we don’t need is to expend our time driving all over creation to deliver chicken. Customers, no matter how busy they are, have to drive to buy their other food. Homegrown chickens ought to be perceived as worth a drive to the country.

The ideal is for your customers to pick up their chickens late on the same day that you process. This eliminates a tremendous amount of work. You might think that bagging, weighing and freezing chicken is no big deal, but you won’t feel like doing these last steps

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at the end of a butchering day. When picked up fresh, it becomes the customer's responsibility to see that their chickens are properly frozen. Many prefer the taste of a chicken that's never been frozen.

No doubt some of your customers will claim it's impossible to pick up their chickens on butchering day. If you must sell some frozen chickens, be sure to charge an additional amount, anywhere from 10-25 cents per pound, for your extra efforts.

COMMANDMENT VIII

Thou Shalt Store Feed Wisely

Most farmers still get their feed delivered in plastic sacks. Be sure you have a place to store your feed where it won't get wet and moldy. It's smart to get the feed out of sacks and into something safe.

er. I heartily recommend plastic barrels, as opposed to a feed bin in your barn.

Sloppy storage of grain invites vermin problems. Mice and rats love these easy pickings, and given their prodigious reproduction rates can easily become an out-of-control problem that consumes time and an enormous amount of feed. Proper feed storage can eliminate the need for poison control or traps. It also pays to have some hungry cats.

COMMANDMENT IX

Thou Shalt Make the Farmstead Inviting

Because we sell our products directly to customers, we must strive to make our farmsteads look nice. We don't need showplaces, but simply interesting places that people enjoy visiting.

We live in a large old house. It's nothing fancy, but overall it's a wonderful place to raise a family. In the summertime it's enchantingly green and beautiful. With each passing year it becomes more inviting. To be sure, our farmstead has its shortcomings. Our barn is never going to be pretty, the driveway needs new gravel, etc. But our place in the country is alive. It has chickens and children and gardens and strawberries and vegetables. It's a homestead abuzz with people working together. There is enterprise and great soil that grows great food — just the kind of place city-dwellers love to visit.

COMMANDMENT X

Thou Shalt Know & Love the Homegrown Chicken

In order to sell anything, you must be enthusiastic and believe what you are doing is vitally important and best for the customer. Happily, we homestead chicken producers believe wholeheartedly in our product. We know that we produce outstanding chicken and feel at ease charging a premium price — our chicken is definitely worth it. We must be convinced of all this before we go about persuading others. It is necessary to be enthusiastic about our product and never cease to sing its praises. We must educate consumers to break out of their convenience-minded practices and select a more healthful and delicious homegrown product.

Enthusiasm is infectious. If you don't believe in your chicken, no one else will. A big part of your job as a farmer is to sell your product. Get excited about it, and

go out and share your story. You don't have to persuade the world, but cultivate a loyal clientele who knows, appreciates, and will purchase your homegrown chickens.

Prospective poultry producers should consult any of numerous titles available from Acres U.S.A., including Small-Scale Poultry Keeping, A Guide to Raising Chickens, Chicken Tractor, Free-Range Poultry, and Pastured Poultry Profits. Call us toll-free at 1-800-355-5313 for a book catalog.

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