

The Chicken Chronicles

Ten Reasons to Raise Homegrown Chickens

by Patrick Slattery

Provided you go about doing it right, you can make good money, have fun, and feel satisfaction for the time and money invested in raising homegrown chickens. If you think only in terms of conventional agriculture, the above statement may sound ludicrous. Modern poultry farming is a high-tech, high-volume, and tight profit margin business.

Prior to the 1950s, chicken was an expensive meat, reserved for special Sunday dinners. Today, it's inexpensive and convenient, and that's why more chicken is now consumed in the United States than any other meat. Poultry is one of American agriculture's greatest success stories.

Conventional chicken is plentiful and affordable, but how does it taste? With enough herbs, seasonings, and deep fat frying, modern chicken is quite tasty. But let the bird's taste stand by itself, and the truth is that modern chicken isn't so "finger lickin' good."

What factory farm grow-out buildings can produce in abundance are grossly under exercised and over-medicated birds, compared to how poultry used to be raised under more natural conditions. And therein lies the alternative opportunity. You can raise poultry that move about to get exercise, and preferably get outdoors and eat some bugs and green grass. The result is that you'll have a healthier bird with firmer flesh — which means it tastes much better.

There is a market out there for people who prefer their chickens raised under more natural conditions. Average people know the difference when they taste it — and so will you. What's more, this market is expanding rapidly. Your challenge is not to sell something exotic like emu-burgers, but rather a food product most people appreciate and know how to cook. Get them to sample the difference and sure



Roosters aren't always necessary to raising chickens, but they do add character and a different way to usher in the new day.

enough, you'll end up with a list of dedicated customers willing to pay a fair price that will reward you with a reasonable profit for your efforts.

Here are 10 good reasons to consider raising homegrown chickens:

Raising chickens can be profitable. Conventional agriculture offers very few entry-level opportunities. Hog producers are happy to earn clear \$10 per head on a 5- to 6-month-old butcher hog, while cattlemen are satisfied after 14 to 24 months of work and investment to earn a \$100 profit on a 1,200-pound animal. In order to earn family-sustaining incomes, they must deal in large numbers.

The conventional poultry industry attains its profits on sheer volume, and increasingly on the clever marketing of value-added products. Poultry was the first segment of animal agriculture to go to contract farming, and today's standard situation is that the poultry grower only supplies a

grow-out building and his labor, not owning the flock or feed.

In contrast, the homegrown chicken farmer must be vertically integrated, owning the birds, supplying the feed, processing the poultry, and selling the dressed finished product. Ownership must be retained all the way to the consumer. If you can do this, you stand to make anywhere from \$2 to \$5 per bird. Granted, that's not a lot of money. But it is an honest profit, and profits are hard to come by in today's agricultural world. A recent statistical roundup in Wisconsin reported that 33,000 of the state's 79,000 farms grossed less than \$10,000. Small farms in particular are considered to have the least profit potential. So indeed, if you can turn a profit on your farming operation, however small, consider yourself a successful rural entrepreneur, and count your blessings for being able to live in the country.

Raising chickens is enjoyable. When you care for chickens, you continue the domestication of a breed of livestock that goes back thousands of years. You are fortunate if you live somewhere where zoning laws do not prohibit the raising of livestock as, alas, the majority of urbanized populations have no such opportunity to provide meat or eggs for their own tables.

Chickens are rather pleasurable companions, and if you enjoy watching them, you are not alone. Henry

Ford used to credit his chicken coop as the place where he did his best thinking. Chickens are fun to watch as they go about their dust bathing and scratching

for food. Watching the antics of roosters or the hens as they establish their pecking order never ceases to entertain. And for early risers, a rooster's crow is a sure and steady alarm clock telling us to prepare to greet another day.

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“Tending the chickens needn’t be relegated to adults. If well equipped with handy waterers and feeders, any reliable 10-year-old ought to be able to do the chicken chores without difficulty. And, of course, doing the chores builds character — a well-known and often employed strategy used by families of generations past.”

Having chickens around a farmstead provides a feeling of aliveness. A farm really isn’t a farm unless some chickens are out and about.

Raising chickens is good for family life. When you send your children or grandchildren out to the chicken coop, you needn’t worry about them getting trampled, gored, bit or kicked. Even for toddlers chickens are safe to be around. What’s more, they can be picked up, held and petted.

Tending the chickens needn’t be relegated to adults. If well equipped with handy waterers and feeders, any reliable 10-year-old ought to be able to do the chicken chores without difficulty. And, of course, doing the chores builds character — a well-known and often employed strategy used by families of generations past. Sadly, many modern households have very little productive activity for youngsters. When it comes time to butcher chickens, if your family can do it well and in peace, congratulate yourselves for having achieved a level of cooperation that few modern families have experienced.

Homegrown chickens are environmentally friendly. The more you know about the conventional chicken business, the less you will want to do with it. The poultry industry is most at home in locales typified by low wages, loose environmental standards, and rural areas. Following the lead of other transnationals, the poultry industry is increasingly relocating to Third World countries, where labor is cheap and regulations nonexistent.

In contrast, consider the inherent benefits of the homegrown chicken —

raised, processed, and consumed locally. There is more justice and human dignity in the raising and consumption of this bird. Additionally, small chicken operations place less stress on the environment. The scratching of chickens is good for pastures or crop land. What’s more, manure from a smaller-scale operation can be easily composted and put to good use as fertilizer. It’s a perfect fit to combine with any sort of market gardening or truck farming operation.

Chickens don’t require a lot of maintenance. Time is precious, and few of us have enough of it. Despite the advances of telecommunications, most of us have jobs that require us to work away from home, and for many of us in rural locales, we must make long commutes.

Given these circumstances, there is little time for daily chores. Facing this reality, many have given up on raising animals, but this needn’t be. Instead, we ought to strive to have livestock operations that require as little daily input from us as possible. In regard to raising meat birds, I’ll contend that no more than 15 minutes a day is necessary. If it takes more time than that — outside of the onerous task of butchering — then you better make the necessary changes, or you’ll soon grow tired of it all.

Chickens don’t require excessive space. You don’t need to own a farm to raise chickens. By farm I mean a couple hundred acres with a red barn, a silo, a machine shed, a big white square house with a wrap-around porch, and a long lane that leads out to a paved road on which any passer-by cranes their neck to admire your spread and believes you to be quite well off. That’s all very nice, but very unaffordable except for a fortunate few, and few of them can pay for such a spread with farm-derived profits.

More likely than not, your farm is a house or mobile home out in the country with a house and maybe a pole barn or old barn or a few small outbuildings. If you have crop land, it’s not really worth the hassle to raise smaller acres of wheat, corn, or soybeans, and if you have pasture, about all you expect from your

cattle is to keep down the grass and weeds. For crops and livestock raised in a conventional matter, it’s the same old story: There’s little or no money to be made.

But wherever you are in the country, at least you have the freedom to raise some animals. You will need access to just a building or two or a couple moveable cages to raise chickens. What could be simpler?

Raising chickens doesn’t require a great investment. There’s not a lot of essential equipment you need to get into the chicken business — a brooder, feeders, waterers, moving cages — that’s about it, unless you decide to do your own butchering.

The turnaround on getting your money back on your investment is quick in comparison to other livestock. Consider that you will probably harvest your chickens in a timeframe of eight to 12 weeks, depending on how big you want them to get. That compares with five to six months for a butcher hog, and 18 to 24 months for beef. Also consider the feed efficiency ratios — 2 pounds of feed to 1 pound of live weight gain for chickens, 3 to 4 pounds to 1 for hogs, and 7 to 8 pounds to 1 for cattle.

If you grow tired of raising homegrown chickens, you can give up on it and walk away — no problem. With an investment in cattle or hogs, that’s not so easy to do.

Homegrown chickens are a superior product. This is a food which sells itself simply on the merits of its taste. Even the most non-discriminating consumer can tell the difference. The same can’t be said as easily about homegrown pork or beef compared to conventionally produced meats. And it is easy to demonstrate the superior taste of your chicken by providing samples

at your local farmers market or during an on-farm buying day.

Another important point: Homegrown chickens are a novelty item. It’s something

special when served, table fare worth bragging about.

Homegrown chickens are not difficult to sell. There is a good market for homegrown chickens, but it will take some solid work on your part in order

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to tap into it. Don't expect to run a couple classified ads in your paper and have a mob of customers beat down your door. But with inventiveness and persistence, you can sell your chickens for considerably more than the going supermarket price. It almost goes without saying that direct marketing homegrown chickens is far easier than selling pork, beef or fish.

Raising chickens allows you to join the ranks of food producers. A lot of us have jobs where we wonder at day's end what in the world we've accomplished. Many of us spend a lot of time in cubicles looking at computer screens, or on the phone trying to convince others to buy this or that product. It's all part of the service economy, and if you do some soul searching, you have to wonder at times what you are doing to benefit the rest of humanity.

There's nothing more basic and elementary than producing food. It's an occupation that few have the privilege of doing in a modern economy. After all, farmers now number less than 2 percent of the total population, and there are only about 600,000 who farm full-time. In the United States, there are presently more people incarcerated (1.4 million) than there are farmers. So you ought to feel good when you sell a chicken to someone else. After all, you are supplying them with

food, and it is a superior food to anything they can get through conventional channels. No wonder your customers will make a fuss over what you do, and thank you profusely. You are a hero, well deserving of all that praise.

But before you call in your order to the hatchery for chicks, there are a few things to consider:

First, there's no way you are going to compete price-wise with the conventional chicken industry. This is a very competitive sector of the food economy, that has refined to a high science the inexpensive production of chickens. What the poultry industry has managed to do over the past 30 years is not simply sell chicken meat, but to economize for speed and convenience as well. For most people, the latter two elements are what they really want, and so they buy it all — buckets of fried chicken from the colonel, roasted chickens ready-to-go from the supermarket, boneless, skinless chicken breasts, chicken patties from the fast food stores — with little thought given to health or ethical concerns. The homegrown chicken farmer must recognize the vast advantages of economies of scale our giant competitors possess.

Second, remember that you have a superior-tasting product that deserves more compensation than at the marketplace. Your marketing challenge is to convince others to spend more money and go out of their way a bit in order to buy directly from you.

Third, you must pursue every opportunity to reduce input costs in order to make this enterprise as profitable as possible. In practical terms, this means you won't be able to feed an entirely pre-mixed, bagged product. An important element is to have your chickens eat grass, other young greens, or vegetable wastes, which will serve to not only reduce your feed bill considerably, but will make your animals healthier. Also, from our experience, chickens fed greens seem to be leaner and tastier. Perhaps the exercise factor enters into this.

Fourth, you are selling to a niche market, and it will take a considerable marketing effort to succeed. The homegrown chicken farmer doesn't have the luxury of going to a sales barn 250 days out of the year to ask, "What will

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you give me?" and walking away with a check. If you find it annoying or painful to deal with the public, then selling homegrown chickens probably isn't for you. But if you have people talents as opposed to managing machinery and conditions for huge numbers of birds, perhaps this production agriculture opportunity is for you.

Those with the best chance to succeed must have some passion for the enterprise. Beyond the desire to earn money, you must believe in the inherent superiority of your product and that you are providing a valuable service when you raise and sell homegrown chicken to others. If that's you, welcome aboard.

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