

## ***Raising Turkeys in Portable Pens***

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Turkeys have an undeserved reputation for being stupid. They are said to drown in the rain and pile up and suffocate in a panic. I've raised turkeys for years and have found them to be hardy, resourceful, entertaining and at least on an intellectual par with chickens (compared to Cornish Cross, turkeys are Einsteins).

Last year, right before Thanksgiving, there was a story on the radio by a young woman who grew up on a turkey farm. Her family raised 16,000 turkeys a year. She spent a lot of her childhood herding, catching and otherwise spending time with turkeys. But the turkeys weren't theirs. They belonged to the processor. That is, unless they died. Then they belonged to the farmer and he owed the processor. This arrangement seems about as fair as medieval fiefdoms or southern sharecropping. One year thousands of turkeys died in a bad storm. They piled the dead turkeys on the back of a flatbed truck and waited for the insurance adjuster who took several days to get there. Needless to say, this woman has little love for turkeys, alive or on the table.

Well, we don't raise 16,000 turkeys a year so we maintain an affection for the species. This past year we increased production from 4-5 for our table to 25 to sell. This was also the first year I used the Salatin portable pen system for poultry.

Turkeys are said to be highly vulnerable to chicken diseases. Nevertheless, I've always raised turkeys with chickens and had no problem. This year, because it was a commercial venture, I thoroughly disinfected the poultry house then built a plywood brooder box to segregate the poults from any lingering chicken germs. There was also a box of 50 Cornish Cross in the brooder house, but poult mortality was very low. Two died in the first 48 hours and only two more died during the season. One of these had genetically deformed legs and the other escaped and was killed by a predator. Due to the generosity or poor counting of the hatchery, I ended up with 24 even though I only ordered 25.

I used a mix of peat moss and sand for litter, mostly because woodchips and sawdust are not readily available in this area. A lot of turkey books tell you to put marbles or some other bright objects in the food so the poults can find it, but I haven't found this necessary.

The poults moved from the brooder to the portable pen at four weeks of age. They should have gone earlier since they were leaping out of the four foot high box and even getting in with the Cornish Cross, but they had to wait for a batch of fryers to vacate the pens. The epitome of caution, I disinfected the pens before putting the poults in. For their first four weeks on range all the poults were in one 8x8 foot pen. When the last batch of Cornish Cross went off to the processor, I moved half the turkeys to another pen.

I built 8x8 foot pens so I could move them through my orchard and agro-forestry plantings where the trees are planted 10 x 10 or 10x12 feet apart. The smaller pens are easily moved without rear wheels or other aids. The pens were 26 inches tall, which turned out to be too short; the turkeys seemed rather cramped for the last four weeks or so. This winter I'm rebuilding the pens to be 32 inches tall. This will give me three equal pieces from an eight foot (96 inch) board or sheet of galvanized metal. Since turkeys end up four times larger than fryers, pens, feeders and waterers must be much stronger. Turkeys drink—and spill—an inordinate amount of water. I finally gave

up on automatic waterers and put in buckets for water.

Even though the birds had 25 percent more space than the Extension Service recommends, one pen still had a problem with cannibalism. Of course, I didn't mutilate their beaks or cut off the ends of their toes. Once I removed the picked-on turkey, the problem stopped. Next year, I'll only put 10 turkeys in a 64 square foot pen.

**Pat Labine's Three Rules for Chick Success**

**1. Compulsive cleanliness.**

Poor air quality and wet litter are the death of chicks. If your brooder house has an ammonia odor, it's past time to address the litter.

**2. Give them probiotics,** i.e. *Lactobacillus*, and liquid vitamins.

**3. You gotta love chicks.**

Give them a lot of attentions and observe them closely.

*Pat Labine raises organic poultry on Oyster Bay Farm near Olympia.*

In contrast to Cornish Cross, turkeys are eager to move with the pen. They all crowd to the front to begin grazing the fresh forage. In fact, my appearance caused a Pavlovian reaction among the turks; they'd gobble, squeak, whistle and click whenever they saw me coming. This year the pasture was lush all season long. Normally, we'd expect it to dry out and be diurnally dormant from late July to at least mid-September, but a wet spring and a good rain in early July got us through. Early fall rains brought a flush of downy brome (AKA 'cheat') grass, normally an obnoxious annual weed, but a great forage plant in this situation. The turkeys also relished Canada thistle. It was great to see no trace of the weed after the pens passed over it, although I have no illusion the turkeys killed the pernicious roots. About midway through the season I began moving the pens twice a day.

I started the poults on a commercial poultry feed, then gradually moved them to a diet of hard red winter wheat and cull peas. Turkeys need a higher protein starter ration than chickens (28 v. 22 percent) but can be finished on a 16 percent protein feed. Of course, on pasture you aren't sure what their diet really is. How many high protein bugs are they eating as opposed to low protein grass or weeds? Yet I didn't want phenomenal growth. In fact, I was trying to retard growth a bit.

I obtained the poults the first of July, the last available shipping date from the hatchery. I ordered broad breasted bronze but through a miscommunication was sent broad breasted whites. Bronze look like the traditional holiday turkey. They are said to be hardier and better foragers than the white variety and are becoming a rare breed. There are only a few hundred laying hens left in the country.

The turkeys were butchered November 24, one day short of 24 weeks of age. Most my customers wanted small turkeys, in the 15 pound range. Despite my efforts, the dressed turkeys averaged 20 pounds. The hatchery also does the processing so pretty much dictates the perimeters of the season.

Another farmer confined by the same margins was complaining to the hatchery because his turkeys reached 30-35 pounds in the same time period. These turkeys were penned like hogs with nothing to do but eat a high carbohydrate diet.

November 24 was about the busiest, most logistically complicated day of the year. I loaded the big birds in the dark. This is much less stressful than catching them during the day. In late November, dark is in surplus while light is in short supply. I backed the pickup truck up to the pen, removed the top from half the pen, laid down some feed sacks (to avoid soiling my Big Macs), crawled in and pulled the turkeys out. Poultry are very passive in the dark. The last one to go was as unconcerned as the first. They soon settled into their temporary home, which was warmer and drier than the one they had left.

I drove the live birds 70-some miles to Ritzville on a glorious Autumn day. A few hours later I drove them, much reduced in size and considerably less active, back home. Louise took six to our Pullman customers, meeting them after work in the same parking lot where we distributed CSA orders. I took the balance to Moscow and met the Idaho customers in the parking lot of my favorite feed store.

I advertised the turkeys through a flyer distributed to my CSA and farmers market customers. In mid-September I was a bit concerned. I only had a few names on my turkey list. But by the third week in November I was ready to disconnect the phone. This despite an article in Sunset magazine that said there was little difference between a \$1.79/pound organic turkey and a 49 cent Safeway special.

I sold my turkeys for \$1.50/pound and made a profit because I had access to a lot of free feed—one of my brothers is a wheat farmer and another is in the pea business. But one of my customers said I could charge \$2 a pound and people would still pay it.

I don't know yet if I am going to increase production next year or just raise my price. The tentative plan is to charge \$1.75/pound plus \$5/bird for processing. Some of my customers called after Thanksgiving to tell me how good the turkey was (and how well it was processed). Others have stopped me in town to rave. I doubt this sort of thing happens to Safeway.