

Most summers, we raise some chickens for the table. We order baby chicks from a hatchery in May, and by September, they are just the right size to butcher and store in the freezer for winter meals. Most people these days seem to choose the extra-heavy birds that are ready in six to eight weeks, but we think the more traditional breeds—we prefer the White Plymouth Rocks—have more flavor, and are generally healthier and more active. They are lively foragers, and we want them to develop the bright yellow fat that comes from a diet that is filled with green grass, weeds, insects, and the minerals that are present in the soil. So, our chickens have always been “free range” after they have grown to a size and age to thrive outside. They need to be closed in securely every evening, though, as the night raiders—raccoons, opossums, coyotes, and other wild animals of the woods and meadows would make short work of sleeping chickens that were unprotected.

This has never been a great problem. The chickens soon learn where “home” is, and it isn’t an onerous task to chase them into their coop each evening. It does mean, though, that we need to be careful to shorten any potential social evening if it interferes with “putting in the chickens.” And, in hot weather—something we have not found a problem this June—we don’t want to close them in too early, because it is cooler in the shade outside than in their chicken house. Only once, many years ago, did we lose half-grown chickens to a neighbor’s dog. This was during the day when they were scattered through the grass in the field near the coop.

So, we were very interested when we discovered that one of our Amish neighbors is a dealer for a company that makes “chicken tractors.” We decided that the medium size model would be just right for our 25 cockerels and ten pullets.

When the chicken tractor arrived, Runo and Steve assembled it—a job that took no more than half an hour. And, a couple of days later, when the weather moderated a bit after the hard frost we had a week ago, we transferred our young chickens from the coop to the movable chicken tractor.

Someone asked if the head chicken would be wearing a little John Deere, Kubota, or New Holland cap when he drove the chicken tractor. But, it is Runo or I who is firmly in the driver’s seat when the chicken tractor is on the move.

It is really quite a neat system. Two handles by the door allow one person to lift the enclosure enough for two wheels on the other end to engage. Then, the whole pen can be moved very easily. We move it just a length of the coop at a time. So, the young chickens have fresh grass with all the additional organisms and tasty treats that are in a new patch every time the chicken tractor is moved. We move it every day now, but soon, as the chickens grow, we will move it twice, or even three times, daily.

A heavy, sturdy tarp makes a roof for the pen, and other tarps

cover the back wall and half of the sides. These can be rolled up to provide more air and sunshine. But, in the weather we have had this June, we have not needed to give the chickens more fresh air. In fact, we have, so far, parked the chicken tractor close enough to the hen house—with an electrical outlet—so that we can hang a heat lamp in the new pen. That will not be necessary as the chickens grow and/or the weather warms up a bit.

So far, we are pleased with our chicken tractor. We don't have to worry about shutting the chickens in the coop at night; they are always in their safe place. And, they are enjoying the fresh and changing pasture without competition from the two old roosters and the hens. But, don't come by and expect to hear the putt-putt of a tiny engine or see a Plymouth Rock cockerel in the driver's seat, moving the chicken tractor to a new location. If that happens, we will need therapy.

