



THE BEGINNING OF A JOURNEY

Raising broiler chickens can be fun, rewarding and profitable. There is a night-and-day difference in the quality of life and richness of taste between a chicken raised on pasture, eating grass and bugs, versus a chicken you would buy in the store. Without a doubt, the difference comes from the grass, and that's something you cannot recreate in a barn.

Depending on who you are, chickens may be your friends, your food, your passion or your business. You have to keep them safe from predators and happy with their living arrangements, while giving them access to forage.

Yet the whole situation has to be enjoyable for you as well. To keep your chickens safe and happy, you are going to need a chicken tractor design that works for you. The tractors described in these plans were designed and built by me and for me, but after seeing hundreds of pictures of other people using this design, I know it works for others as well.

These tractors were designed for broiler chickens. As you will read in this book, though, they have several other uses as well. My daughter loves using them as forts. A friend of mine is using them as a hutch to raise rabbits. Another homesteader

keeps a few egg-laying chickens in them seasonally. They're pretty useful for whatever you can imagine.

In this book, you will find more than the professionally drafted chicken tractor plans. You will find information on how to build them, what materials I used and why, as well as how to build your own feeders and waterers.

Since I was starting my farm on a tight budget, all the materials and design elements were chosen to cut costs without sacrificing structural integrity or animal welfare. As the saying goes, "poor guys can only afford the best." I knew I would only have enough money to build these once and couldn't afford to spend time fixing them. That is why I had to get it right from the start.

I can now say, years later, that they are holding up strong with almost no defects aside from what can be attributed to normal wear and tear.

This is a guide for anyone from a small-scale backyard homesteader to a full-production poultry grower. These tractors will hold up to 30 chickens each. Not only will they provide a good life to the chicken, but a good life to the farmer as well. I have used these same chicken tractors to raise up to 2,400 broilers in one season.

I wrote this book so that you could have answers to all of the questions I asked when I was starting out.

My Own Journey – Then and Now

When I first wrote this book, life was insane. My wife, Kate, and I had bicycled 5,500 miles across the country, finished a season apprenticing on a farm, and decided to take the plunge and start our own farm. On top of all that, Kate was pregnant with Mabel, we had to buy a car, move to a new town, and Kate got a teaching job.

It was simply too much to take on in one year and, without the support of friends and family, combined with many sleepless nights, we would have never been able to pull it off.

At the end of that season in 2013, I got a job as the farm manager at Camps Road Farm where I am today. Along the way, I have made a lot of mistakes, learned even more, and have come to enjoy the process in ways that I never have before.

I started farming 100% on my own at my FoodCyclist Farm. I started out with just 1,300 broilers and a small herb garden on someone else's land with a handshake lease. I now live on and manage a 52-acre farm with livestock, annual and perennial plants, and two other directly connected businesses—a brewery and distillery.

Life is just as insane as it was when Kate and I started out on our own, but in so many better and more interesting ways.

In this book, you'll read about both when I started out and how I do things now. While the broiler operation is fundamentally the same as it was in the beginning in terms of type of management and scale, I have become more solid in my practices, more nuanced in my decisions, and more confident as a pastured poultry producer.

When you're starting out, you're going to be super-nervous. Even if you do a small batch of broilers, that's 25-30 chickens you have to care for, keep alive and then—well—kill.

The first time you raise broilers, it's going to change how you view chicken. It's going to be amazing, a little stressful and a boatload of enjoyable. After a few seasons, you're going to be an expert and you'll wonder what life was ever like without the best chicken you've ever eaten.

As You Explore, Question Everything

Or at least take it with a grain of salt.

One of the early traps I fell into with farming caused many hard times for me. The problem was, I assumed everything I read was fact and that I should follow it. There is as much bad information out there as there is good ol' scientific fact, which is an exhausting aspect of small-scale farming today.

Some homesteader or small-scale farmer will make claims on their blog or YouTube channel about how to raise chickens, livestock or crops a certain way because “you have to.” I have been guilty myself of making a claim based on half-science and then I had to go back and create another video recounting my advice because I had done more research.

In the world of the internet, bulls*** can be spread with the best of intentions.

Another pitfall is, while there may be scientifically accurate advice for a certain person in a certain region, that doesn't mean it is going to work for you in your situation. It may or may not be a fact that is adaptable to you.

That is the true art of farming—patience, intelligence and an acceptance of living the process. As farmers, we take the advice and information that we gather from our various sources and we iterate, experiment and take notes. Simply by the nature of its existence, a small diversified farm will run thousands of experiments a year.

The longer I farm, the more I am challenged. I keep gathering new information, experimenting on my farm and developing my process to suit my skill level, goals and motivations. While I'll let you be the judge as to whether or not I am actually a smart feller, I do feel that as time goes on my questions are becoming more specific, more intelligent and constantly lead to more questions on how I can improve my process.

If you truly like raising chickens or you just want agriculture in your life somehow, I encourage you to always question the advice of internet farmer geeks like me. We love what we do and our content may be born from real fact, but always do your own research, read academic studies and talk to your extension officers. The world is a fascinating place and there is always something more to learn. Farming will teach you a lot if you are patient, listen, do your own tests and are willing to adapt.