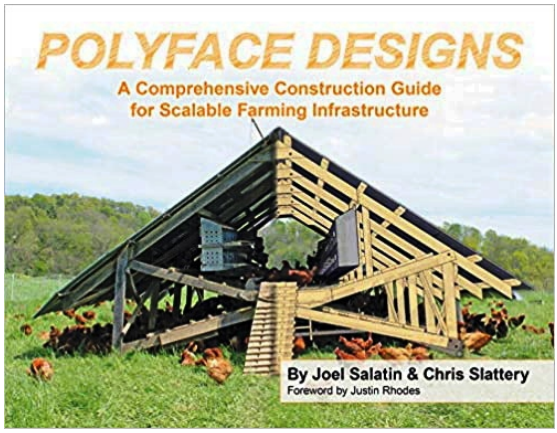
Chapter XIII

Of Rabbitats, Chickshaws and Ducktrucks

We have talked about the animals we're raising, the garden products we need and the system we are using. Now, we need to talk about the structures necessary to achieve the ends we desire. Many of these we have mentioned but there are others as well, I think.



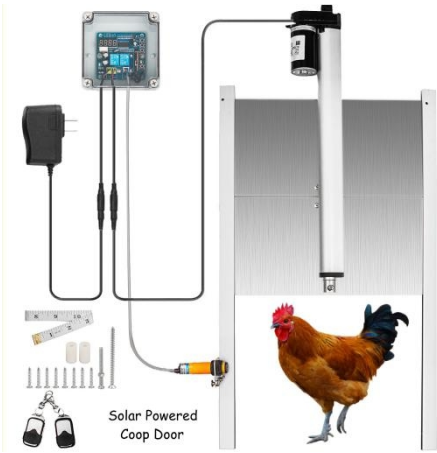
To begin with, while I will describe each we need, some in greater detail than others, there is a book available to us with the best of designs available to us for these structures. The book is entitled "Polyface Design" by Joel Salatin and Chris Slattery.

Yes, this volume is not inexpensive, but it has complete plans for every major structure we will need on our farm with excellent drawings and complete instructions right down to a materials cut list. As an example, the Eggmobile pictured on the cover will house and provide for over 1000 laying hens… a bit beyond what we would need, but there are other structures that are more suited to our size of operation.

Chickshaw

Here is a link to Justin Rhodes' "Chickshaw 2.0" which is virtually perfect for us except ours needs to be just twice the size of 2.0 or 8' X 12' and with nesting boxes on three sides to be able to accommodate as many as 100 laying hens within. The link to the structure is: DIY Mobile Chicken Coop PLANS ~ ChickShaw 2.0 by Justin Rhodes - YouTube . Please look at it to see precisely what we are talking about, however.

Remember, with 100 laying hens housed herein, our goal would be 72 eggs per day, If we built 6 nests across the back where he shows 4 and 6 to 8 along each side, that would be beneficial in giving them room to nest. If we start to find broken eggs in the nest, or eggs being laid outside the nests, add more nest boxes or pick up the eggs at noon and in the evening.



If we keep all 100 of our laying hens on pasture, we would need but one of these to house them adequately. In this type of arrangement, they need to be released in the morning, preferably at first light and locked up each evening at deep dusk. In order to save ourselves a great deal of trouble at the extreme ends of our day, I would recommend a solar powered automatic door. This appliance can be had for around $100 and the savings in labor would well be worth it with our layers.

Normally speaking, 100 chickens and one goose would be overpopulating this device, but since they are only in it at night, and are living outside, it will work nicely!

Broiler Chickens - Chicken Tractor

For our broiler chickens, the Cornish Cross birds, we will use the standard 10′ X 12′ Chicken Tractor which will house 75 birds each. Two of these, then will house the 150 broilers we have at any one time on the farm.

I'm repeating this video here because it shows the structures more…

(2) Joel Salatin - Polyface farm - YouTube

In the instructional video cited here, he builds a 10′ X 10′ tractor. To create the tractor we need, simply elongate the two sides to 12′. Since we are no longer a square box, the diagonal braces he uses will not work as he describes. I would still cut them to the same 7′ 23/8″ used in his smaller tractor and let it join the outside frame where it makes a square corner and crosses at a 45 degree angle.

Turkey Trotters

For our turkeys, we will simply build two chicken tractors with an automatic door like that on the Chickshaw and rename it our Turkey Trotter! Each of these will hold 55 turkeys until they are 8-10 weeks old and which time they

will be retired and the turkeys will free range within their Premier 1 Fencing. They will need a simple rain shelter such as the pigs use that can be moved with them from paddock to paddock.

This Turkey Trotter is made simply from 2" conduit with a water proof canvas for a roof. One of these per 55 turkeys will shelter them nicely.

For our rabbit tree, I love the Salatin style Rabbitat for pasturing. Pasturing our rabbits will save us over 50% on food, thereby increasing out profitability.

Rabbitat

For our Farmer Farm Rabbit Tree, we want the best for our breeding does and our bucks. For us, this means pasturing them from mid spring thru mid fall. During the winter months, we move all our Rabbit Tree operations indoors, preferably to a Raken type house where the rabbit cages are suspended at a convenient and comfortable height above the floor and our laying hens are allowed to free range at ground level in the house.

The perfect Raken is inside one of our greenhouses. The combination of these two animals with their deep bedding on the floor builds a wonderful compost for spring planting.

Building a Rabbitat is a simple matter as described in the video linked below. The large mesh wire bottom is preferred over chasing loose rabbits all over kingdom come! It is cheap insurance against a breakout!

Building a Rabbit Tractor for about $75 - YouTube

This video shows an enclosed area at one end which I prefer since I kindle my does there as well. With this private space included, it is just a matter of placing a nest box inside that area on day 29 of pregnancy for the doe to use. She will do all else for the kits. I also put a floor in the private area. Yes, it will get soiled with time, but it's an easy matter to clean it out once in awhile. With the bottom in place, the Rabbitat can be moved in its regular rotation plan, even with kits in the nest!

The link below shows the construction of the rabbit's nest box. It is a simple affair made of 1X10 lumber and is 16" in length and about half that in width. The 5" lip at the low end helps to prevent the kits from being dragged out of the nest by mother and going astray.

DIY Rabbit Nesting Box ~ Cheap And Easy! - YouTube

Personally, I would make this next box 2" longer than what he shows here. Some N.Z. White does can be very large and will need the extra room.

Duck Truck

For our ducks, we will need a couple of different applications. The standard Chicken Tractor with the addition of a door for access will work nicely. The door need not be an automatic door, but that certainly helps us if we are pressed for time in the early morning and late evening. All of our ducks we will want on open pasture during the daylight hours as a duck can gain up 80% of his dietary needs from grazing… this makes then very easy to feed!

For safety from predators, they still need to be enclosed at night. We only feed them only at night and preferably inside their Ducktrucks to give them a reason to return nightly.

Free Ranging Ducks - Training your DUCKS to come when you QUACK! - YouTube

This video is very instructive… and I do not understand, after watching

the ducks in it, how anyone could not want these birds on their farm!

For our laying ducks, our Khaki Campells, we will need nest boxes in the duck truck, plus, we will need portable nests in their pasture, preferably in a shaded, hidden area. These ducks are better if left on a larger pasture for a longer period than one day. Moving them is not as simple as with chickens as they need a different watering system due to the fact that they have need of immersing their entire head into the water to cleanse their eyes. A basin the size of a kiddie wading pool is best to use in this situation.

Ducks, being ducks will be messier than will be our chickens. That's okay, we just have to remember to renew their water more often and to allow for their duckness. It seems like more with our ducks… more training, more watering concerns and more concerns in finding the eggs since they love to nest remotely from their nest boxes in the duck truck, but they are more than worth the effort!

Duck Tubes and how to build them - YouTube

The first three minutes of this video show the construction of a very clever, highly reusable and totally portable duck nest.

From the point where the board is mounted on the bottom of the nest, I would add a simple 2X4 cross piece at front and back so it will sit stablely on the ground. Ducks are prone to hiding their eggs in a

pastured situation and the addition of two or three of these in their pasture will give them a place to hide them where we can find them easily!

Pig Pit

Pigs are relatively easy critters to care for if we are not farrowing sows. Ordinarily, we will only have them for 5 or 6 months and then they are harvested. Technically, we could raise a second crop and over winter them on the same ground, but that would depend heavily of the type of winters we are used to having. Actually, pigs will handle wet and cold better than heat because they do not perspire, so have no method of transferring excess heat from their bodies. Shade is an essential for our pigs and a simple lean-to type shelter is highly recommended for them. It should be something simple and light enough to move from paddock to paddock with the pigs.

Day 2 - Pig Pastures (Part 2) - YouTube

Although we have only discussed bringing weaner pigs onto the farm, it is highly advantageous to us to provide our own stock by maintaining 4 sows and a boar. A Yorkshire-Hampshire cross is an absolutely excellent pig, so if we maintained a Hampshire boar and 4 Yorkshire sows, we could depend on farrowing out an average of 40 piglets per year. The extra ten, if we don't have our market built to the point of 40 finished hogs, we could save the extras as

replacements for any losses up to weaning age, then selling those over our goal as weaners to other growers.

A sow carries for 3 months, 3 weeks and 3 days (and usually delivers at 3 am)… so, if we breed our sows about 1 October and put them into their farrowing stalls in mid-January, we will have our piglets born the third week in January and ready to wean off and go to pasture about 1 March… Perfect timing for our spring grass! These would then be ready to market in September or early October.

Calves

As far as our beef cattle are concerned, we have some decisions to make early on. First, are we going to purchase weaned feeder stock to begin their life on pasture with us, or, are we going to keep cows and birth our own calves?


Cow/Calf Pair

There are advantages to either option. If we choose to buy our calves, we must be careful to ascertain that they have not been inoculated with chemicals or drugs that would bar them from being classified as "Organic". This is an important consideration that must be strictly adhered to if we are to sell our beef under this heading.

If we are to rear our own calves, we are assured of their breeding and their feeding and care, but it means maintaining cows and a bull and that means more feed. It's not the cost involved, for that can be achieved for less cost

than the cost of buying weaned feeder calves from the auction, but it means more tasks to be performed and dealing with a possibly cantankerous bull. Also these have to be maintained overwinter, which means facilities for doing so.


Hereford Bull

Even with these extra considerations, I deem this a better option once we have our pastures established than purchasing the calves. However, it does require some extra planning. There are things we must consider and make contingencies for such as extra hay to feed over the winter months and a place to keep them as we don't want them destroying wet, soggy pastures in winter.

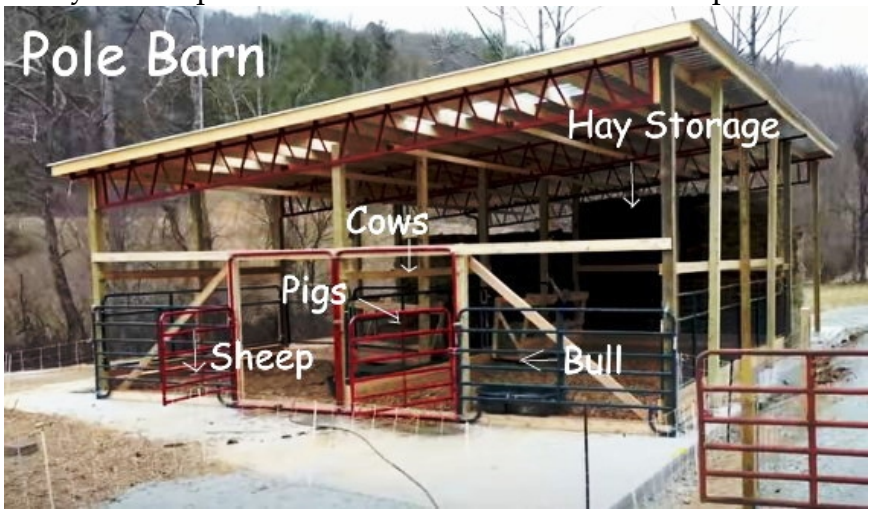
Under either situation, we need a shelter for the calves and cows in the pasture during the heat of summer or to avoid too much rain at any time.


Loafing Shed

A portable loafing shed such as this one pictured is essential. It should be framed with 2X4 lumber with 4X4 posts in the front and the entire structure mounted on 4X4 or 4X6 runners. Since we do not want wood treating chemicals

around our stock or leaching into our pastures, burn the surface of the runners and other portions expected to contact ground surfaces. This will retard deterioration of those parts. With aluminum siding, it should be light enough to be moved about with a 4 wheeler or even a light tractor. A pair of them should be sufficient for our small herd of beef critters. Thusly constructed, they can be moved from paddock to paddock, as needed.

For wintering over, we need a major structure. If we do not have a barn suitable for this task, a pole shed will suffice nicely. The pictured 30X40 feet structure will provide us



very advantageously in this department. With the hay storage on the end toward the prevailing winds, the rest of the barn can be divided off by the use of portable gates into stalls for each type of animal, male and female and the bedding allowed to accumulate to whatever depth it takes to finish the year with 8" being the minimum depth.

In each area, corn is spread before the next layer of bedding is applied, then left until spring. As soon as the large animals go to pasture in the spring, the pigs are allowed on these areas, and their rooting for the corn will very

effectively turn and aerate our compost the critters have created for us!!

The area is sufficiently large, with access such that a tractor can come into the stalls and clean out the accumulated compost in an action Joel Salatin, the Guru of this operation, calls his pigerator.

How Joel Salatin brings out the "Pigness" of the Pig - YouTube

The last thing we need to think about here is facilities for getting our cows bred on time.

As we discussed prior, We can either own a bull or buy calves from the auction, but there are other options as well. Often, in most areas, it is possible to rent a bull to get our breeding done… Of course, not all of our cows will come into heat simultaneously, so we must have his services available to us for from a month to six weeks. There are many small farms who own bulls who would love for someone to board their bull for a month or two and a few bucks on the side is virtually free money. The problem here is, would this bull be free when WE need him?? This is something that would have to be determined well ahead of time for we need our cows bred back about 60 days after they give birth and certainly not more than 80 days after. This is the only way to get the calf a year we

need to sustain our operations. If it can be arranged, then this may be a wonderful option!

On my homestead, I'd need the bull at least the month of June and possibly into July. With the cow's 274-280 day gestation period, this would give us our cows the first week in April… past our last frost date and a time they can be safely kept out. If we have a secure facility in which to calve indoors, we could go as much as a month earlier, so even we have some flexibility in dates! But, whatever the birth date, she needs to be bred back in 60 days!

The final option to consider is Artificial Insemination… AI allows us to choose the genotype to sire our calves so as to adjust for circumstances. For instance, if we are breeding heifers, we might want to make sure we choose a bull known for siring smaller sized new-borns to reduce the chances of birth complications.


Squeeze Chute

Also, AI gives us the option of day and time of breeding. When the AI tech shows up, it's done!

Unfortunately, there is a major negative to be considered here to… AI is not free! The cost runs from $50 to $75 per cow bred! We must consider that in our planning. For our

11 cows, $600 or so is probably less than it would cost us to feed a bull for the year, but if we add more cows, what is the point where the bull becomes cheaper and we are back to the other considerations?

Also, for AI, it would be best to have a squeeze chute to hold the cow during the procedure, but, perhaps, something like a milking stall might be enough if only a few are being done at a time.

Decisions must be made and plans implemented to house our stock in relative comfort. Out goal is for our animals to never know a bad day in their life and to be honored for whom they are! This plan will go far to make that a reality!

Be sure you are right, then go ahead…
David Crockett, circa 1830