Spring Chickens

—*Karma Glos*

Encouraging words for those interested in incubating and raising purebred poultry

"Although every woman knows how to raise chickens there are nevertheless some precepts laid down by the most careful ancient writers on agriculture which are unknown not only to women but perhaps also the learned in these matters. He who wishes to gain profit from these birds should first choose someone he can trust. For unless the person who takes care of the hens keeps faith with his master no profit of the poultry house overcomes the expenses. A foster father of this sort who climbs into the hen house, collects the eggs, incubates and turns them, will be called the caretaker or rightly the guardian of the hens" (*Ulisse Aldrovandi, 1600*).

Chickens and poultry of all types have been artificially incubated and reared by humans since ancient times. Creative methods for incubating eggs included placing them near composting dung piles, wood-fired ovens, and even the warmth of a woman's bosom. These days, sophisticated thermostatically controlled electric incubators do most of this work. Chicks sold by mail order have been incubated, hatched, and handled in large commercial hatcheries that bring thousands of baby poultry into the world.

It's from these types of facilities that we have purchased our chicks for over ten years. Cardboard boxes ventilated like Swiss cheese arrived safely at our post office bearing peeping masses of chicks, ducklings, and turkey poults. In a typical year our farm would purchase 400 layer chicks, 300 meat chicks, 150 ducklings, and 50 turkey poults. These youngsters generally shipped successfully, their yolks pulled abdominally to nourish them during the journey. Once on our farm, they cuddled under the brooders and grew into healthy, seemingly contented layers, broilers, ducks, or turkeys. But, there was a missing link. Who were these orphans' parents? How was the parent stock raised, and what were they fed? How far did the fertile eggs travel to the hatchery... and then to our farm? What happened at the hatchery? What was the fate of male or excess chicks?

These were questions to which I could not easily find answers. These gaps in control troubled me. I wanted to close the loop and bring the breeding back to the farm. We keep our own breeding stock for hogs and cows and can therefore make sure our parent stock is well cared for, well fed, and organically managed. I wanted the same for our poultry.

Choosing the Right Breed

In order to breed our own layers, we knew we would have to work with a purebred standard breed (not a hybrid). This could also work for ducks and standard turkeys. Modern meat chickens, however, present problems for small-scale breeders. Virtually all meat birds from the Cornish Rocks to the Colored Broilers are hybrids, derived from two different parent stocks. This is also true with many production layer hybrids (Red Star, Red Sexlink, Cheery Egger, etc.); they are crossbred to increase production. There are, however, many old standard breeds (Rhode Island Red, Delaware, Barred Rock) that make decent free-range layers and can be purebred on-farm. Raising hybrids is an on-farm option, too, but it requires keeping separate parent lines, which could be onerous on a small farm. To

Two tom turkeys at Kingbird Farm await the breeding season. *Photo by Karma Glos*

A batch of young pullets in a greenhouse brooder. *Photo by Karma Glos*

this end, we began looking for productive purebred poultry that would be reasonable to keep, breed, incubate, and hatch with our limited space and resources.

Our first breeding effort involved our laying flock. We chose the standard Black Australorp. They came recommended for their free-range smarts, laying capacity, docility, and beauty. We initially kept one rooster for every ten hens. With this ratio, the percentage of fertilized eggs was very good, but there was a great deal of hen damage. Because the rooster bred each hen so frequently, the hens suffered too much feather loss. On the positive side, our incubation efforts using a Hova-Bator 1602 with a 30-egg capacity, in combination with eggs set by broody hens, resulted in enough pullets to replace the older hens we chose to cull. It also provided a good batch of young cockerels, which we butchered for excellent fryers. Under this system we plan to replace up to 20 percent of our flock each year and have nice fryers to sell our customers.

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This year, we plan to keep a separate breeding flock so the laying flock can recover. We hope this will result in enough fertile eggs to fill the incubator each week.

Breeding Turkeys Too

We also accomplished the breeding and rearing of our turkeys last year. We chose the naturally breeding Narragansett standard turkey for its foraging ability, size, and, of course, visual appeal. The Broad-Breasted White, which is used commercially, makes a very nice, plump bird, but becomes too large to breed naturally and requires artificial insemination. We did not wish to perpetuate a creature that cannot reproduce itself.

We started our flock in 2008 by purchasing a group of poults from a small breeder/hatchery and raising them up for breeding stock. At the end of the season we selected the best two toms and the best five hens to keep as our breeders and processed the rest for Thanksgiving sales. Our customers were very pleased with the turkeys and encouraged us to continue with our project.

The following spring our young hens began to lay and we incubated everything they provided us. The first 30 eggs yielded only 15 poults, but the second setting hatched 20, and we ended up raising nearly all those poults to maturity. This was not a bad percentage considering we incubated every egg and did not select for quality due to the limited numbers. We expect better hatchability this year because our hens are now more mature and because we plan to invest in a better-quality incubator (a Sportsman 1502 with a 180- to 216-egg capacity). Even with low numbers, however, keeping the breeding stock was worth it since commercial poults cost nearly $10 apiece and organic poults aren't available at all.

Hatching Plans for the Future

Despite the learning curve and the extra responsibility, we will happily persist with our own breeding efforts. It is currently the only way we can start with organic chicks, and it has the potential to develop a bird that best fits our farm. Next year, with the updated incubator and the use of additional broody hens, we intend to hatch several hundred Australorp chicks, 60 turkey poults, and 90 Pekin ducklings. As we get our legs under us, we may also look into breeding a meat bird like the Poulet Rouge. All this effort keeps the production close to home and under our care.

Poultry is just one of the many diverse ag products that Karma Glos and her husband, Michael, raise on their family farm, Kingbird Farm in Berkshire, New York. Karma has recently joined the Board of Directors of NOFA-NY.