

Raising chickens on pasture

The raising of chickens on pasture is characterised by the fact that **the animals have fresh grass every day**. This is achieved with the **daily movement of the animals** through a system of fences and mobile shelters. With this type of management, chickens become an important element of the plant-animal system, and a main tool to regenerate the soil and the landscape thanks to their excrement.

■ Feeding the chickens

Chickens are not exclusively herbivores, but **they do eat a lot of grass**. The key to managing these small animals in the meadow is to keep the grass fresh and vegetative. Chickens do not usually feed on very mature plants, as they are less digestible than young plants, nor do they eat the taller plants, in fact, what they do is trample them.

In the meadow, chickens also obtain high amounts of live protein in the form of worms and insects, as well as seeds that they also find there. Together, all these resources can represent 30-40% of their diet.

The rest of the resources to complete a balanced diet are provided by the farmers in the **feeders: an important part is in the form of feed, but cereal grains can also be added**. If the cereal is also fermented it is more digestible for the animals. It is also convenient to provide small stones to facilitate the functioning of the gizzard and digestion.

■ Characteristics of the shelters

The priority for pasture raising chickens is to provide fresh grass every day. For this reason, it is important to **design shelters that move easily**. This system allows chickens to eat fresh grass on a new patch of pasture each day.

The shelters that we use in the **Polyfarming system** are suitable because of their low cost and flexibility. They are **iron structures of adequate size (3 x 4 m)** without soil and with wheels to transport them by hand every day (**Figure 1**). These shelters have a raised



Figure 1. Mobile shelters for pasture-raised chickens. Photo: Marc Gràcia.



Figure 2. Division of the meadow into sectors in which the mobile shelters move. Photo: AVVideos.



Figure 3. Movement of chickens through a system of fences and mobile shelters in the pasture. Photo: AVVideos.

- **Protecting chickens against predators and diseases**

structure on which a canvas or mesh roof is placed to protect the chickens from the sun, and partly from the rain, and to reduce the risk of predators. Chickens are generally placed under the roof of the shelter to sleep at night.

Predators can cause large losses on farms, so it is very important that shelters offer the animals the maximum protection against them. In general, chickens are susceptible to predation by birds and by some mammals such as foxes. This can be solved in part by placing an electric shepherd around the enclosure to keep predators away, or by having trained dogs in the field.

As regards diseases, well-managed **pasture systems rarely require the use of drugs**, as the system itself, together with proper cleaning, prevents diseases before they occur.
- **Division of the meadow into sectors and movement of animals**

Chickens are put in the meadow 3-4 weeks after hatching. **The chickens are managed in a pasture divided into corridors (Figure 2).** These corridors allow the animals to be moved daily through a system of fences and mobile shelters. **You don't need heavy machinery to move these fences, they can be moved by one or two people (Figure 3).**

The daily movement of the animals allows them to always have access to a clean pasture that offers the animal the maximum resources that possible at different times of the year.
- **Benefits of raising chickens on pasture for farms and the environment**

 - Production of **chickens with high nutritional value.**
 - It helps to **control crop pests** because chickens consume lots of insects that can be harmful.
 - It helps prevent disease and **almost eliminates the use of medications.**
 - **It helps to create and maintain high-quality pasture** by means of their droppings.
 - **Increase in the farm's profitability** because the equipment and maintenance of the system requires a small investment.