

Building and Operating a Chook Tractor

Ian Simons

iansimons1@dodo.com.au

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Introduction

Keeping chooks in a tractor can be a rewarding activity. The advantages are:

- The chooks lay eggs. A good layer can lay over 240 eggs in a year.*
- The birds provide an ecological way of disposing of kitchen scraps.*
- Their droppings are a source of manure for a lawn or vegie bed.*
- They can work over a finished vegie bed ready for the next crop.*

But, before you start, you need to be aware that chooks need some care and attention every day. You need to give serious consideration:

- Where to locate the tractor?*
- How will you feed and water them, especially when you go away on holiday?*

Building the tractor

You can easily build your own tractor. This is an example:



It is light-weight and portable. It has a 2m x 1m base, and is about 2/3m high. Use the following materials.

- 50mm PVC pipe for the base*
- 25mm high-density irrigation polypipe for the curved ribs*
- sheet or corrugated metal for the covered area*

-- chook wire to enclose the frame.

Include a door and a perch (5cm x 5cm) in the design. For a nest box, simply use a redundant lawn-mower catcher, or cut-down 20l liquid container. Nest material can be strip-shredded paper.

The chook tractor design in the picture can house 3-4 chooks.

Getting started

You should purchase good quality birds, bred for their **egg-laying** qualities. White birds cope best with the heat. A good way to start is to buy vaccinated point-of-lay hens. Purchase birds that have been bred by a recognised breeder. For example, 'Bond white' point-of-lay hens produced by Bond Enterprises are available in some produce stores in S.E. Queensland. (Note that roosters are not needed for hens to produce eggs.)

Feeding chooks

The best feed for backyard chooks is commercial layer pellets. These provide a well-balanced diet. (Contrary to popular belief, they do not contain antibiotics or hormones.) **The chooks should have full-time access to them.** They are available from produce stores in S.E. Queensland. There is a variety of feed pellet dispensers available for sale. Plastic hoppers like the one shown here are fine.



It has little plastic bars around the feeding ring to stop the birds from scratching out feed onto the floor. There is very little waste from one of these hoppers. Unfortunately, models like this one only last a few years, but have the advantage that you can see the feed level easily.

Kitchen scraps

Help the environment. Reduce waste. Supplement your birds' diet by feeding them kitchen scraps/lawn clippings, etc.

As a guide as to what scraps you can put out for the chooks: a rule of thumb: if we can eat it, they can eat it. Fresh scraps are best. Avoid moldy or 'off' feed such as old damp stored grain or mouldy bread. These may contain poisons. Feed the scraps in a flat-bottomed dish. At the end of each day, collect any uneaten scraps and dispose of them as you would normally dispose of any unwanted scraps. (Mine go into the worm farm. Then the worms are fed to the chooks!)

If you feed scraps, it is important: at all times, the chooks must have access to the layer-pellets. Do this, and you will not have to worry about by giving them extra feed which might do them harm. The chooks will simply leave the harmful feed alone.

Feeding calcium for egg-shells

If you feed a lot of scraps, your chooks will need extra calcium (Ca) for their egg shells.

Note that layer pellets manufactured by two of the main supplying companies in S.E. Queensland have Ca at levels

-- Riverina red label layer pellets, minimum Ca=3.5%.

-- Barastoc golden yolk layer pellets, minimum Ca = 3.8%.

These levels are sufficient to provide for your chooks' needs if they are fed pellets alone. However, when other sources of feed form a significant portion of the birds' diet, additional Ca must be supplied to them in the form of shell-grit or hard marble chips.

Crusher dust/grit

Crusher dust/grit also needs to be supplied to the chooks. This helps them grind down their food. (Hens do not have teeth. Or at least, I believe they are rare!) Put a handful of dust/grit with their pellets once a week.

Water

It is emphasized that the chooks should always have cool clean water available. There are a number of water container types available. Galvanized containers are strong and long-lasting. Plastic can break easily but it is useful to be able to see how much water is left in a container.



Management aspects

Collect eggs daily, and store them in a refrigerator.

For maximum production, you should replace your flock when birds reach 75 weeks of age. Beyond this age, the rate of lay is much lower, and egg shell and albumen quality will be poorer.

Happy chook-keeping!