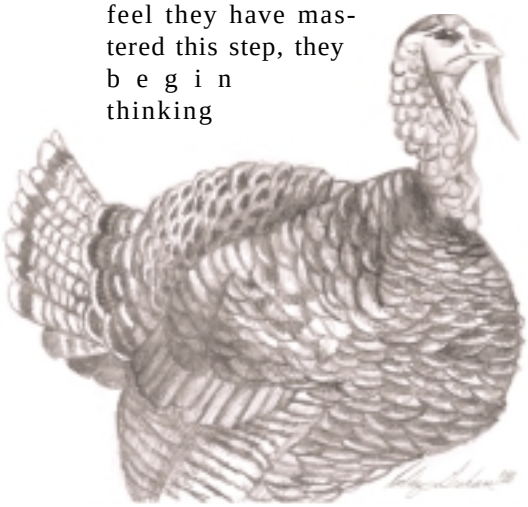
The self-sufficient barnyard

By Rich Kientopf

In their quest for self-sufficiency, a lot of families start out quite logically by moving to their own piece of land in the country and cultivating a large garden. Once they feel they have mastered this step, they begin thinking about livestock. This is where many people fail. They either underestimate the cost of owning various livestock, or they willy-nilly acquire a collection of poultry and animals that resembles a petting zoo more than a farmyard. In this article I'll try to run down the basics.



Land base

Make sure you have enough land to feed the livestock you plan to keep. Here in the Midwest, a family of three or four needs at least five acres of tillable land to be self-sufficient on food. I mean good land where an acre will produce 100 bushels of corn or pasture one cow for an entire summer. If your land won't produce this well, you need more. Talk to local farmers and ranchers to get a feel for this.

Of course you can buy all of your feed from the local feed store in colorful 50-pound bags. However, if you do this, you're merely transferring your dependency from the grocery store to the feed store and probably haven't saved any money on your food bill. Even the best run farm relies on some purchased feed in the form of mineral and protein supplements, but the idea is to keep this to a minimum. Also bear in mind that crop failures due to drought, insects, and the like can happen, so it's a good idea to have at least a six-month supply of reserve feed on hand. Never have an empty corn crib, granary, or hay mow.

What to raise?

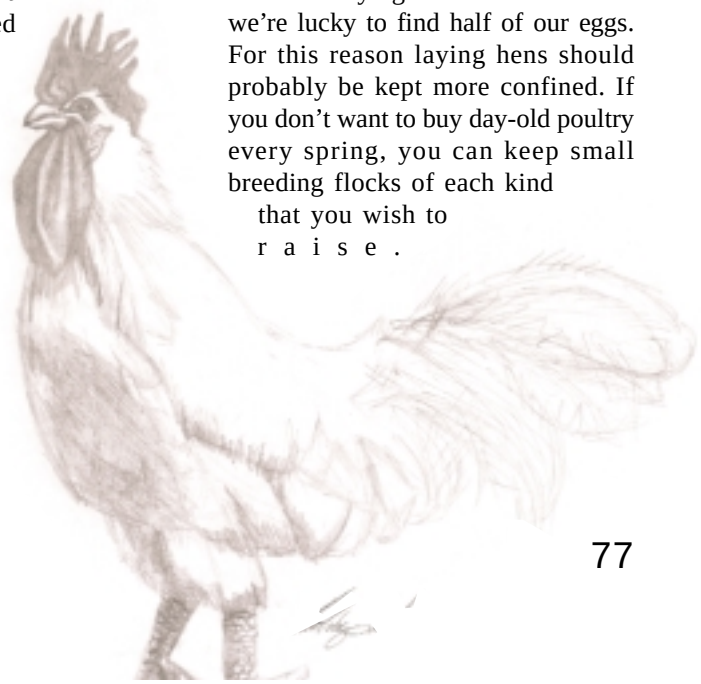
First and foremost, raise only what you want to eat. Twenty years ago, when we bought our first cow, a neighbor tried to convince us that it was more economical to keep a few goats. Maybe so, but my family preferred to drink cow's milk and eat beef rather than subsist on goat products. If you're going to invest the money and do the work, make sure you're going to enjoy the results.

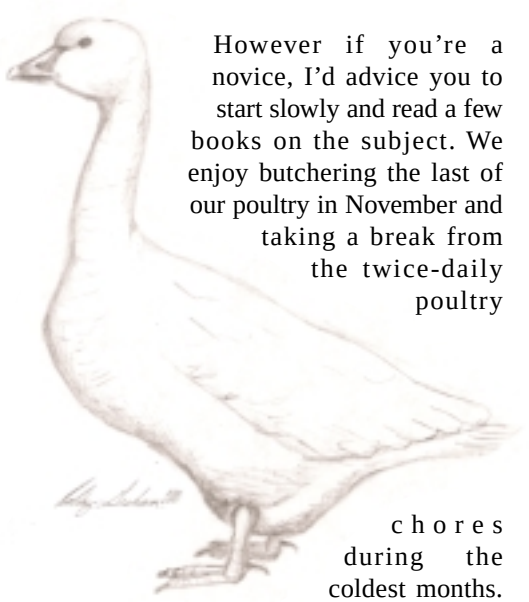
Poultry

The cheapest and easiest way to get started is with a flock of chickens. Free range chickens require little extra feed during the summer months as they will eat a multitude of insects, weed seeds, spilled and wasted grain, etc. On our farm, broilers are purchased every spring and started in the brooder house. When they are about two weeks old, we give them access to a small outside enclosure, and by the time they are a month old they have the run of the farm. Currently we don't offer them any protein supplements or any purchased food once we turn them loose, giving them only cracked corn outside the brooder house each morning. We've found that providing the corn and water near the brooder house keeps them from wandering too far. We also found that if we keep a 60-watt bulb lit in the brooder house near dusk, the chickens will automatically go inside by the time it gets dark, and all we have to do is shut the door to keep them safe from varmints.

We always buy Cornish rock broilers; these are the same kind that the poultry industry raises to market in six weeks or less. However the way we raise them they grow slower, cost less to raise, and taste better. We can usually begin butchering fryers weighing four to five pounds dressed at about three months of age, and we let some of them go until they are five to six months old for an excellent eight to ten-pound roasting chicken.

One word of caution: While this method of raising poultry has worked well for us with our meat chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys, we have found that free-range laying hens soon start laying all over the farm and we're lucky to find half of our eggs. For this reason laying hens should probably be kept more confined. If you don't want to buy day-old poultry every spring, you can keep small breeding flocks of each kind that you wish to raise.





However if you're a novice, I'd advice you to start slowly and read a few books on the subject. We enjoy butchering the last of our poultry in November and taking a break from the twice-daily poultry chores during the coldest months. That way we also avoid the hassle of keeping watering troughs thawed out during subzero weather.

Milk cow

The most valuable addition to homestead self-sufficiency, especially if you have children, is a milk cow. When choosing a cow, I would select one of the smaller dairy breeds, Guernsey or Jersey, over the larger Holstein, which consumes too much feed and gives too much milk for homestead use.

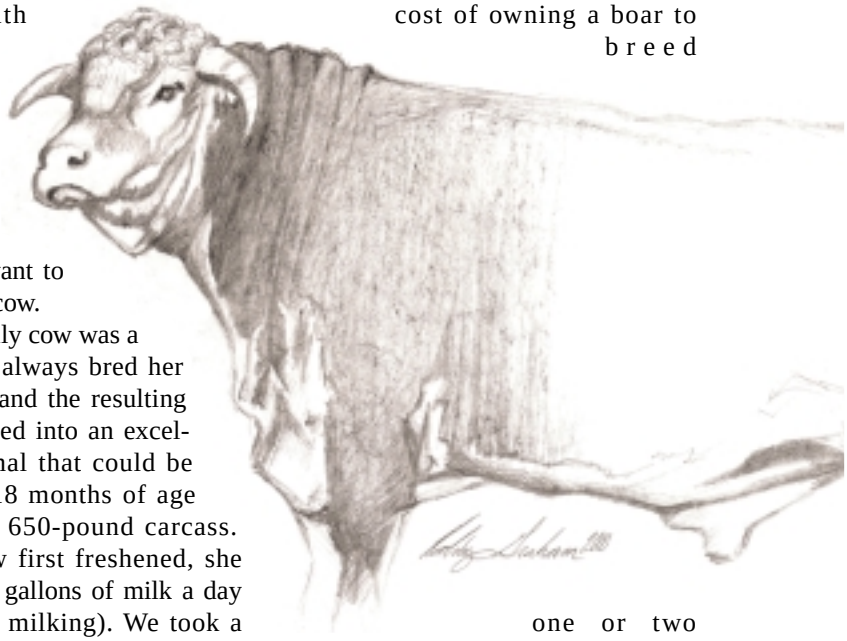
For those of you who are unfamiliar with the annual cycle of a milk cow, it goes as follows: 1st month, the cow "freshens" which means she has given birth to her calf and started giving milk. You will begin milking the cow twice a day. (The first six milkings are colostrum. This milk is essential for the health of the newborn calf, but should not be used for human consumption. On the seventh milking you may start using the milk. Sixty to ninety days after freshening, the cow should be re-bred for the following year's calf. I accomplish this by renting a neighbor's bull for a while. After the cow is re-bred, her milk production will slowly decline until the tenth month after freshening. That's when you quit milking her and allow her to "go dry," giving her a month or two to rest before she freshens again.

If you want an uninterrupted supply of milk, you'll need two cows with staggered freshening dates. The size of your farm and feed supply will determine whether you want to keep a second cow.

Our first family cow was a Guernsey. We always bred her to a beef bull and the resulting calf was fattened into an excellent beef animal that could be butchered at 18 months of age and yielded a 650-pound carcass. When our cow first freshened, she gave about six gallons of milk a day (3 gallons per milking). We took a gallon for household use and a gallon to feed the calf. The excess milk was used in various ways. We often kept the milk overnight, skimmed the cream, and made butter. The extra butter could then be frozen and kept to use during our cow's dry period. The resulting skim milk is an excellent feed supplement for either pigs or chickens. Sometimes we would buy an extra baby calf to feed the excess milk to. By the time a calf is several weeks old it can safely consume several gallons of milk a day, although one gallon is sufficient if you offer grain and hay too. Another way to use excess milk would be to try home cheese making. Good cheese can be stored indefinitely and the resulting whey is also good pig or chicken feed.

Pigs

At our house we eat a lot of pork, so it was only natural to raise a few pigs. For the homestead it's best to purchase feeder pigs weighing 30 to 50 pounds and to fatten them to 250 to 300 pounds for slaughter. I'd say buy feeder pigs because keeping one sow takes about 50 bushels of corn a year and should produce two litters of at least eight pigs per year. Also, the cost of owning a boar to breed one or two sows is prohibitive, and few people will be willing to rent or lend you one. If you live in an area with large hog farms, you can often pick up a few pigs cheap, if they happen to have a late litter that doesn't fit with the rest of a large group. In addition to corn, oats, and barley, which we raise, our hogs receive a purchased protein supplement. We also feed kitchen waste (potato peels, spoiled fruit, etc.) garden refuse, and surplus dairy products.



Horses

We've always had quarter horses for pleasure riding, but I have to admit that they contribute nothing to our bottom line. They would, however, be an effective replacement for both car and tractor in the event of a disaster. That is, assuming you own the harness and horse-drawn implements you would need.

If you think farming a small acreage with a team of horses would save money, forget it. I bought an old two-cycle John Deere for about half

the price of an average team. It pulls a two-bottom plow, never gets tired, and doesn't eat if I don't use it. I can do my fieldwork for about $20 worth of fuel per acre per year. And the feed a team would have eaten can fatten two more steers.

Exotic livestock

Don't be led down that path. I have a neighbor who three years ago spent the price of a new pickup getting into the emu business. Last month he happily sold out for the price of a used moped. There are very few things that make a lot of money on a small scale, especially without major investment in breeding stock or facilities.

Whether it's llamas, bison, elk, miniature horses, ostriches, or whatever, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. An old horse trader friend once told me, "Spend little money to make big money. Never spend big money to make little money." This advice has served me well for a lot of years.

These are the basics. You'll have to tailor your livestock mix to suit your farm and your menu. Remember, raise only what you want to eat. Also try not to have too large of a surplus. Livestock consumed at home has a retail or "meat-counter" value. Livestock sold at the local auction barn has less than wholesale value.

Other considerations

One of the things I notice on well-thought-out farms is how each enterprise compliments another. For instance, on our farm free-range chickens visit the cow yard daily. In the process of scratching the "cowpies" apart in search of undigested grain, they also disrupt the maggot life cycle and help prevent flies. I've often watched our turkeys follow the cows around the field, eagerly eating insects that the cattle kick up and picking flies off the cattle when they lie down.

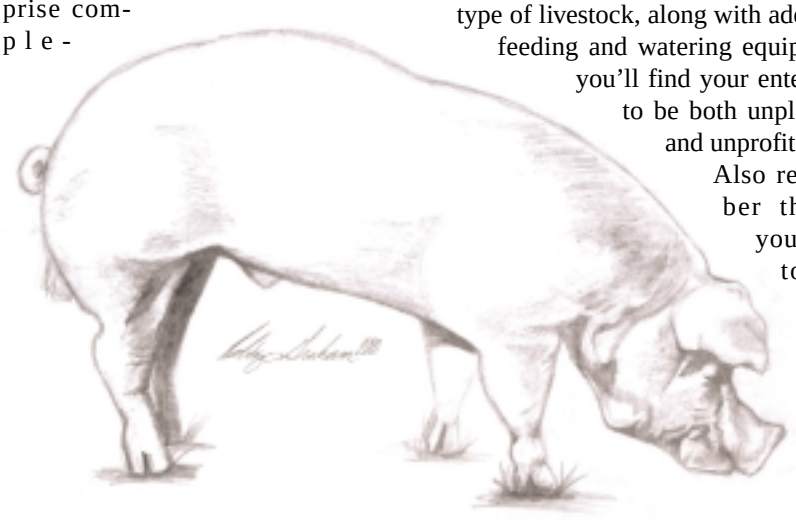
Geese eat a lot of grass but don't like broad leaves. We put this trait to use by letting them eat the grass out of the potato patch. They also reach into the woven wire fence and eat grass that the cattle can't reach.

Excess milk helps feed our pigs and chickens, and the pigs recycle a lot of otherwise wasted foodstuffs.

Keep in mind that if you don't have proper fencing and housing for each type of livestock, along with adequate feeding and watering equipment, you'll find your enterprise to be both unpleasant and unprofitable.

Also remember that if you want to be self-sufficient on your homestead, that is, raise all your own vegetables, fruit, meat, milk, eggs, and grain for both human and animal consumption, and if you also want to process, preserve, and store these foods, it's either a full-time job for one person or a part-time job for everyone in the family. Plan to spend fewer weekends fishing and more time cleaning the barn and hauling manure.

As a youngster, I sometimes resented the fact that I couldn't go fishing because I had to stay home and help butcher chickens or clean the hog house. After all, none of my friends had to do such things. However, looking back the greatest gift my parents ever gave me was the knowledge to live self-sufficiently and the self-confidence it inspired. Δ



What we raise and butcher annually

Our family consists of three active adults with good appetites. This list also allows for frequent company meals and a few well appreciated gifts at Christmastime:

50-60	Chickens
10	Ducks
6	Geese
6	Turkeys
4	250 lb. Hogs
1	1150 lb. Steer

You'll need to fine tune this list for your family, but it will give you a place to start.