

The Movable Coop

For small flocks, a portable chicken ark may be the answer. by John Grogan

When I brought four chickens home to take up residence in our backyard, I wanted them to be free to range around my property. The problem was that they kept free-ranging their way straight into the neighbors' yards. One day I found all four of them happily devouring black-oil sunflower seeds while perching on my next-door neighbor's bird feeder, which was listing like a sinking freighter under their weight.

So I began planning a coop. But a permanent structure for four measly birds seemed like overkill. And I hated the idea of a permanent pen, which I knew would be quickly scratched clean of all vegetation. The solution that I stumbled on was a chicken ark, a portable structure that ingeniously combines mobility with security.

A chicken ark is basically a coop and grazing pen in one movable package. It is shaped like a tent with the sleeping quarters above and a fenced pen below. A gangplank connects the two parts and can be raised at night to keep the birds in and predators out. Handles on each end allow two people to easily move the ark around the yard, giving the chickens fresh grass every few days. It also can be placed directly over open garden beds in the fall to let the birds fertilize, cultivate, and eat bugs.

On the Internet, I found a British company (www.forshamcottagearks.co.uk) that makes handsome arks out of rot-resistant cedar. But at several hundred dollars each, not including overseas shipping, they were too rich for my taste. I decided to build my own from recycled materials. From the Dumpster at a con-

struction site near my house came several large scraps of half-inch plywood and odd lengths of lumber. From a friend's barn I salvaged leftover scraps of red metal roofing. From my own garage I cannibalized an old set of shutters for their hinges. The wire-mesh fencing for the pen was left over from the previous season's tomato cages. My wife snagged a coffee can full of nails and screws at a garage sale for 50 cents.

I made my ark 6 feet long, 4½ feet tall and 5 feet wide at the base with two nesting boxes in one end and a small hinged door that allows easy access to the eggs. One roof panel also opens for replacing bedding. I

Painted mine to protect the exposed wood from the elements, a step that is not necessary if you choose cedar or other rot-resistant wood. Do not use pressure-treated wood, which could poison your poultry. An ark this size easily holds six or seven chickens. My happy birds can't stop clucking about theirs.

Materials

- Six 5' 2" × 4"s for framing
- Three 3' 1" × 3"s for crossbars
- Four 6' 1" × 3"s for roof slats
- Two 10' 2" × 2"s for handles
- One 3' × 6' sheet of ½"-thick plywood for floor
- One 18" × 6' sheet of ½"-thick plywood for roof hatch
- Two 31" × 36" sheets of ½"-thick plywood for sides
- Scrap lumber to build gangplank and nesting boxes
- Metal roofing and roof cap
- Wire-mesh fencing

