

# Raising Cockerels for the Table



*Our farmers believe all chicks should live to fulfill a purpose in life, and encourage consumers to explore raising their own male chicks for several months to provide food for the family table. By doing so, the reach of sustainable, humane agriculture is extended.*

## **Straight Run vs. Sexed Poultry**

Most breeds of chickens are unable to be easily sexed while young. Large commercial hatcheries employ specially trained “vent sexers” who are able to examine day old chicks and determine their gender with about 80-90% accuracy. However, vent sexing can be injurious for chicks and there are casualties even with the most experienced vent sexers. In most commercial hatcheries producing chicks for the home market, once the male chicks have been identified they are killed as demand for them is low amongst backyard flock owners.

## **True Dual Purpose**

The straight run chicks you purchase from us can feed your family in two very important ways. Female chicks (pullets) will begin to lay eggs at around six months of age. Being heritage breeds, they will continue to provide eggs for years, with breaks for molting and decreasing the number of eggs they produce as they begin to age. Male chicks (cockerels) will grow to a good size and be ready for the table between 14-24 weeks of age, depending on breed. This is the original process employed by our grandparents' generation for raising chickens for the family table. Additionally, as hens begin to age and lay less frequently the choice may be made to use them as “stew hens”. Long slow cooking produces excellent broth and tender stew meat.

## **Raising Cockerels**

All chicks may be raised together, whether male or female. From hatch until around 10 weeks of age, chicks should eat Starter. This is a finely ground, high protein food mix that meets their rapid growth needs. Excellent brands of organic chick starter are available from local/regional companies such as Scratch and Peck out of Bellingham and In Seasons Farms from British Columbia. They can be purchased at local outlets such as the Food Co-op, Cenex and the Co-Op Farm and Garden in Sequim. Talk with us if you need advice on where to purchase a quality food for your birds. Once they have all their feathers, chicks can move to a

Grower ration. This mix of nutrients helps them develop the bone, organ and muscle needed for a healthy frame. This frame will then begin to fill out, and the breast and thighs/legs will develop. We will have given you an estimate of the age when your young cockerels should be ready for processing. They may or may not begin to practice crowing by the time they reach processing age, though many of the true dual purpose breeds do not begin crowing until a more mature age.

## **Local Processing**

Some of our customers have the experience to do their own processing. But most prefer to have it done by a professional processor. Our area is lucky to have a local, USDA approved, humane processor that has agreed to offer their services to Peninsula Poultry Breeders' customers. SpringRain Farm in Chimacum (springrainfarm.org, 425-218 7756) provides weekly processing of chickens for a small fee. Contact them the week before you wish to bring your birds to them to make sure they have availability. The night before, remove all food as soon as it is dark. This is also a good time to move the birds into a comfortable container for transport. Plastic dog crates are perfect, as they provide a secure and quiet atmosphere to help keep the birds calm but allow them to stay together. Covering the crate with a light towel helps keep them settled. You will have received instructions on your early morning dropoff at SpringRain and your preparations the night before will make it all the easier for your birds. Late that day you will receive a phone call that your birds are ready for pickup. They will be clean, wrapped and cooled when you receive them and can go directly into the freezer. The only difference from a grocery-purchased whole chicken is that freshly processed birds should be allowed to rest in the refrigerator for a few days before cooking.

Knowing that your family's meat was raised in a manner that you can be proud of and that supports a humane, sustainable way of living is worth trying. We appreciate your willingness to do so!

***Thank you for purchasing your chicks from local farmers who breed to a humane, sustainable standard of poultry production. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions.***