

The Chicken House of Mystery

Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze

©2004 Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze

Chickens walk backwards. Eggs roll uphill. No, nothing like that. Although I am not a carpenter-type, I love to build things. It took me two years to build a chicken coop. I planned, designed, and built it myself. I thought my design would be easy for a novice to build.

Best Laid Plan

The design uses 4 by 8 foot (1.2 x 2.4 m) sheets of 1/2 inch (13 mm) plywood, without cutting them. So the chicken house is 4 feet wide, 8 feet tall, and 8 feet long. It has a ceiling made from a single sheet of plywood. I figured that by using these dimensions, I would avoid having to make a lot of cuts with a saw. I am absolutely no good at cutting straight lines—not with a handsaw, a circular saw, nor with a jigsaw.

Attached to the chicken house is an 8 by 8 foot varmint-proof chicken run made out of chicken wire. A corrugated metal roof covers both the structure and the pen. For the roof supports, I sank 12 foot (3.7 m), pressure-treated 4 by 4s, 2 feet (0.6 m) down into concrete. I figured the roof pitch from the 10 foot (3 m) height at the end of the chicken run to the 8 foot (2.4 m) level of the chicken house would be enough to shed water and snow.

I planned to have an attached nest box at the back of the coop. That way I could collect eggs without having to enter the coop. I bought 16 foot (4.9 m) joists for supporting the roof, figuring there would be enough of an overhang at the coop to cover the protruding nest boxes and protect them from the rain and snow.

I placed the chicken coop right next to our garden. We have a 6 foot (1.8 m) tall fence around our garden to keep the deer out. I wanted a chicken “tunnel” from the coop into the garden. That way the chickens could enjoy the freedom of ranging in the garden during the seasons when we were not actively gardening.

For my chicken dream house, I wanted a door into the wire chicken run. I also wanted a separate door (for people) into the plywood chicken house. The door into the house had to be accessible without having to enter the run. This meant I needed another door for the chickens to get from the house to the run—a door that I could open and close from

the outside. That way I could clean the run or the house with the chickens in or out, as I preferred. I figured I had thought of everything.

House of Mystery

I call it the House of Mystery for several reasons. First, there is not a square corner in the whole building. I tried, and I really tried, but accurate measuring evaded me. I actually (and this is true, I swear) measured a board and cut it three different times, and it was *still too short*. I had to use it in another place. When I build, jokes come true.

I planned for the 16 foot roof joists to give me a 3 foot (0.9 m) overhang at the bottom of the pitch. This did not happen. The pitch ate up some length (who knew?), and the protruding nest box gets the full brunt of the rainwater falling from the roof. This winter, I stapled tarpaper over the nest box lid to fend off the water.

My friend, who has asked that his name not be associated with the Chicken House of Mystery, came to help me put on the metal roofing. I hate heights. I don't even like being up on a ladder. So Friend came to put the roof on.

He saw that I had built with every board straight up and down—no bracing whatsoever. He kind of freaked out and spent a good part of the morning cutting and attaching cross bracing throughout the structure. When he felt it was safe, he climbed up and attached the roof tin for me.

Friend placed the tin panels in straight lines along the roof rafters, overlapping them by one corrugation, starting at one side of the roof and finishing at the other. Because the building is not square, when he came to the last bit of roof, the straight-sided panel did not cover the whole roof of the cockeyed chicken house. There was a wedge-shaped gap that was 5 inches (13 cm) across at the widest part.

After Friend left, I cut a wedge of old greenhouse fiberglass to overlap the tin and cover the gap. I stood at the top of our fruit ladder to attach it, and I was terrified. Frankly, between my lack of carpentry skills and my fear of heights, it's a mystery how I finished this project to the extent that I have.

The Poultry Palace

My coop began to get a little personality. I cut a crooked opening in the back of the chicken house, and used the piece I cut out to make a crooked door. It fit perfectly. I bought some old glass doorknobs at a yard sale, and I used those on the door.

Above the nest boxes, I incorporated a small, old, stained glass window. Above that, I framed in the bathroom window that we had replaced with a double-paned one in our house years ago. In the summer, I can open it to ventilate the chicken house. I covered the window opening with quarter-inch hardware cloth. The cut piece fits just where a screen would. I bought a gallon of paint for US\$5 because it was tinted wrong. So the Palace is dark green now.

A good deal of my enjoyment of building comes from trying to use as few new parts as possible. Used hinges, doors, windows, latches, scraps of plywood, and 2 by 4s all found their way into my architectural creation. Here is something I learned a long time ago though—new chicken wire is worth the cost. You can never get old, used, bent chicken wire back into usable condition.

We had an old glass door from a broken-down greenhouse, and I used that for the door to the run. That was an easy door to attach. I made a small chicken door, attached eyebolts at the top, and strung them through with antenna rope. I used deck screws to attach some scraps of plywood next to the opening. The door uses these plywood rails as guides. By pulling the rope, I can raise and lower the door hatch from outside the coop.

My sister gave me an old wooden ironing board in a cabinet. I attached it to the wall inside the chicken run. I leave a knife out there on top of the cabinet. So now I can take garden debris into the coop, lower the wooden ironing board to a comfortable height, and chop it into chicken food. Boy, is that handy.

For the chicken tunnel, I took a square tomato cage and wrapped it twice over with 1 inch (2.5 cm) chicken wire. I secured a piece of plywood on the bottom of the chicken wire wall facing the garden. I cut a not-too-crooked door the size of the tunnel opening in the plywood. With hinges attached at the bottom of the cut-out piece, it became a little ramp into the tunnel. When I close the ramp, it has a spring-loaded hook and eye at the top to secure it. I am very proud of the tunnel. It works quite well.

The roosting poles are attached diagonally in one corner of the chicken house. There are four roosts, each progressively shorter and higher. I spread cedar shavings in the nest boxes and the floor of the chicken house. Then when I clean out the coop poop, it all goes right into my homemade, rotating barrel composter.

The Chickens

I got my first three chickens from a friend. They were a big rooster, Elvis, and his two young protégés, Priscilla and Penny. I had them for a while when Priscilla succumbed to MCD—better known in novice circles as Mystery Chicken Death.

So I got chicks at the local feed store and raised them. Even when the chicks got to be adolescents, Elvis and Evil Penny would not tolerate them. There was much pecking and attacking whenever I tried to mix them. The attacks happened even if I introduced just Elvis or just Evil Penny.

I sent Elvis and Evil Penny into exile at my father's house. I heard that Evil Penny had died and now, two years



Kathleen's Chicken House of Mystery.

later, Elvis lies around the yard in the sun with his two dog buddies, Old Peter and Daisy. My father swears Elvis is a dog with feathers.

Two of my remaining hens died—one from MCD, and one from DOG. The less said here, the better. I saw an ad for laying hens, so I bought some. They were adolescents when I got them. Several turned out to be roosters, so now I have the Three Amigos. For a while, I had only two hens and the three roosters.

This spring, I saw another ad for laying hens. I called and explained that I only wanted laying hens. I had more than enough roosters. I did not want to raise chicks and have more roosters. The woman explained that the hens she was selling were pullets. A pullet is a chicken that has just started laying and has not reached its first molt (feather shedding). Perfect. I got eight Red Leghorn pullets.

Simple Pleasures

I still have some fine-tuning to do on the Chicken House of Mystery. My chickens do not seem to mind though. I have fashioned a chicken courtyard outside the tunnel so we can garden unmolested. I get plenty of eggs now, with enough surplus to sell a dozen a week to my neighbors.

My biggest rooster, Simon, is getting a bit pushy, so there may be a coq au vin in his future. Even though they have tiny putty brains, I really like chickens. You know, I once did see one of my chickens walking backwards.

Access

Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze is composting chicken manure and eating homegrown eggs at her home in Northernmost California. c/o *Home Power* magazine, PO Box 520, Ashland, OR 97520 •
kathleen.jarschke-schultze@homepower.com

