

COPY OF ARTICLE WRITTEN BY THE CHRIS GRAHAM, EDITOR OF PRACTICAL POULTRY MAGAZINE, AND PUBLISHED IN THEIR FEB 08 ISSUE. (Published here with the kind permission of the author).

Chris Graham considers the most important practical features to look for when buying a poultry house

With so much choice available these days, both on the internet and through adverts in specialist magazines like this one, the apparently simple business of buying a poultry house has become surprisingly involved. The more you look the more potential suppliers you find but the real secret, as with buying birds themselves, is learning to tell good from bad.

As the poultry keeping hobby has blossomed in recent times, so has the number people setting themselves up as hen house builders and suppliers. We're at the stage now where, at one extreme, you have large concerns importing mass-produced, flat-packed houses from China while, at the other, there's the one-man-in-his-shed operation building one-off units to his own design. Most of us occupy the territory in between these two ends of the economic scale, which is probably as it should be.

However, as with all other practical aspects of this fascinating hobby, there's a good deal to be considered when buying a hen house. Thankfully, though, despite the enormous variation in product quality we're presented with these days, it's perfectly possible to make the right decision if you follow a few commonsense purchase rules.

What shape?

Chicken fanciers truly are spoilt for choice when it comes to poultry house designs; there really is something to suit all tastes these days. Of course, with chickens being such attractive creatures, and backyard keepers wanting to maximise the visual impact of their poultry set-ups, it's easy to be drawn down a route that favours form over function. Never forget that a poultry house is there to provide a vital function, and there's a danger that those creations that place too much emphasis on cosmetic attractiveness can fall short in this respect.

While I'm not saying that it's impossible to have an attractive poultry house – because it certainly is – I do think that buyers should always bear in mind that, first and foremost, a poultry house must provide its occupants with suitably-sized, draft-free, well-ventilated, dry and secure accommodation.

If you want to buy a purpose-made hen house then you basically have the choice between a simple, ark-style unit, a square-sided design with a flat, pent roof, or a square-sided style with a pitched, apex roof. There are variations on all three themes, and you can specify each with or without an integral run. Whether or not you opt for this depends on your situation, how much space you have available, how you'll be keeping the birds and, to a lesser extent, your budget.

The ark-style houses – based on a simple, triangular structure – seem less popular these days, with many keepers now appreciating the inevitable headroom limitations inside. This can be especially true for those designs featuring a raised roosting compartment at one end. This is done to maximise run space but, with the living quarters squashed into the apex of the structure, roosting space can be dangerously restricted. Birds have been known to suffocate during hot weather under these conditions. But the ark-style houses remain attractive to the first-time buyer on a tight budget, as they tend to be the cheapest option.

The more conventional, straight-sided designs are costlier to buy, but are more popular among new and existing keepers nonetheless. In real terms they offer the best use of space, and their basic structure is such that designers find it easier to make them effectively weatherproof and readily accessible for simplifying cleaning and bird management. The pent-roofed versions are cheaper than the pitched-roof alternatives but, for many people, they just don't look as attractive.

Happy roosting

If chickens aren't happy and content when shut inside the roosting compartment of their house then you're going to have serious problems. Apart from the key design requirements, which we'll cover later, keeping this area clean, dry and fresh is one of the essential requirements of a good husbandry program. While this will always be a chore to some degree, you can certainly make life a lot easier by buying a well-designed hen house in the first place.

The physical size of the house has a big influence on this. Given reasonable overall dimensions, designers are able to include large doors and other access points, which greatly simplify the cleaning-out process. Raising the house on legs – an important basic requirement, anyway – will also help enormously in this respect, as it limits the amount of bending required. Some of today's smartest designs set the house floor at waist level, to make cleaning operations as easy as possible. This can be a real boon for elderly keepers, or those with mobility problems.

The amount of space available inside a roosting compartment is a crucial issue; over-crowding the birds must be avoided at all costs. This is an aspect that you'll have to check carefully, and be responsible for when buying. Remember that it's often in the seller's interest to maximise the bird capacity of a house. This approach, however, isn't always in the best

interest of the birds. You, as the customer, need to be aware of the reality. Don't take for granted what the seller tells you; check for yourself.

The best rule of thumb is to work by perch length. Measure what's available inside the house and, allowing eight inches of perch length for each bird, calculate how many the house could comfortably accommodate. For example, a house with a pair of three-foot perches should be suitable for eight large fowl chickens. Bantams, of course, don't require so much space, so work on five inches of perch per bird if you're planning to keep these.

Another good rule is always to err on the side of under-capacity; buy a house that's slightly bigger than you need. Birds flourish with more rather than less space and, the chances are that you'll buy more birds than you originally intended anyway! However, guard against going to the other extreme as well. Putting just three hens into a house designed for 24 won't work either. Although you may imagine the birds will revel in all that space, what'll actually happen is that they'll struggle to keep warm during cold weather, increasing their stress levels and making them more susceptible to disease.

Of course, an obvious way for the less scrupulous house builder to increase the bird capacity of a house, and thus its price, is to pack it full of perches! Watch for this, and make sure that any racking used has at least eight inches between perches.

Ideally, perches should also be removable; a vital requirement in the fight against red mite, which you can virtually guarantee will colonise your hen house sooner or later. It's an almost impossible pest to banish for good, and most keepers resign themselves with minimising its effects by keeping the numbers in check. These tiny creatures don't live on the birds, but shelter inside the house during daylight hours, waiting to strike when the birds come in to roost at night. They hide away in nooks and crannies inside the house, and on the underside of perches; anywhere that affords them a bit of protection. Being able to remove perches will make it much easier to check and treat for red mite infestation on a regular basis.

Finally, on the subject of perches, their size and profile need to be considered too. Thin and spindly can be just as bad as thick and chunky. Most birds will be happiest and most comfortable roosting on a perch measuring about 2in square (slightly smaller for bantams), and that has its top two edges rounded-off.

The hole truth!

Every hen house needs a pop hole, that's used by the birds to get in and out. The overall size of this can vary a lot from design to design, with bigger houses tending to have larger ones simply because there's more space to play with. So it's on smaller structures that you have to be more wary. In general terms, 13x13in is probably as big as you need to go, but watch for anything significantly smaller than this.

Ventilation is another absolutely key factor when considering a house purchase. It's very important that the roosting area remains well-ventilated at all times, but without being drafty. Ideally what you're after is a gentle but constant throughput of air, to avoid the build-up of moisture and/or fumes inside the house.

A well-designed house will achieve this with its main ventilation points positioned high on the walls, close to the roofline, and combined with smaller apertures and/or slots incorporated lower down, around doors and pop holes etc. Unfortunately, there's no accepted formula for easily calculating the ventilation requirements of any given house, or the size of the apertures needed to provide it. Consequently, you'll have to be guided by the supplier on this one. But it really is a vital issue, so ask lots of questions and be suspicious of anything that looks inadequate.

Two other important ventilation-related points include the fact that good airflow must be maintained throughout the year. Don't be tempted to block-up vents in the winter when the weather is colder. If your birds are healthy, well cared for and in the right-sized house, then normally low temperatures shouldn't pose a problem. Also, give some thought to house orientation, with regard to prevailing winds etc. Don't position it so that rain and wind can easily drive straight in through either the pop hole or main vents.

Nest boxes can be mounted either internally or externally, with much depending on the size of the house. While an externally-mounted unit is generally regarded as preferable – offering less disruptive access – they do add considerably to the cost of a house, and need to be well designed if they're to remain dry inside. For these reasons, most smaller designs tend to have an internal unit

The two basic requirements for a good nest box are that it's sited at an appreciably lower level than the perches, and that it's as far away from the pop hole and perches as possible; ensuring that it's as quiet and dark as it can be. The relative height compared to the perches is important because it determines where the birds will roost. Chickens will naturally choose to roost at the highest available point so, if the nest boxes happen to be positioned higher than the perches, then that's where the birds will settle for the night.

Timber choice

Wood thickness and treatment are both fundamental aspects in determining the working life of a hen house. Given the option, it's always better to opt for a house built from properly pressure-treated wood than one that's simply been painted with some sort of preservative. Pressure treatment offers a much more lasting effect than a traditionally-applied coating, and requires no maintenance during the first 10-20 years.

It's also very important that the wood is thoroughly dry before it's used to build a house. Damp wood will simply go mouldy and will also move as it dries out, opening up gaps and potentially letting in rain. Cut ends should be treated as well, to help prevent rotting and splitting as the wood ages. Check all these details with the supplier and, if anything sounds at all vague, then go elsewhere.

The thicker the timber used, the better. A heavy house is likely to be a strong house but, as you would expect, those built from the best wood cost the most to buy. Doors and removable roof panel that feel flimsy and twist in use aren't a good sign if you're after longevity. So take a tape measure with you and check the width of the timber that's been used. If you're after the best quality then don't buy a house made from wood that's less than 19mm thick. A well-designed poultry house made from top quality, dry, treated timber will serve a caring keeper for 50 years. In contrast, something from the other end of the scale might only offer a couple of year's useful service before it becomes leaky and too distorted to function.

The final design aspect to consider is the roof. Essentially, there are three basic choices these days. Traditionally, many poultry houses had felt-covered roofs; a cheap and cheerful option. However, on the downside, this covering material it has a relatively short life – it can be prone to bird and frost damage – and also provides a favourite refuge for red mite infestations. It's inexpensive to replace, of course, but many keepers are starting to regard having to do this an unnecessary nuisance. Onduline is a modern alternative to roofing felt. It's a light-duty, tar-paper corrugated material supplied in rigid panels that are simple to work with and easy to fix into place. It's been praised for its anti-red-mite-attracting performance although, for some, its somewhat industrial appearance and the potential for condensation build-up count against it. The third option, and the most expensive one by far, is a timber roof – typically tongue and groove shiplap.

Finally, consider the angle of the roof. In general, larger house roofs should never be set at anything shallower than 40°, while the slope on smaller ones shouldn't be less than 32°. These two figures are the suggested minimums needed to guarantee effective water run-off, which is essential if the interior is to remain dry. Similar rules also apply to external nest box roofs, which should always be set at a minimum of 30°.

In the end, of course, hen house purchase is a very personal business. Your own preferences, plus the size of your budget, are likely to be among the most influential factors governing your choice. But, for the sake of your birds and their day-to-day maintenance needs, don't forget the practical aspects outlined above. Buying a hen house can cost a lot of money, so take the time to ensure that you spend your cash wisely on something that will do the job that's needed for a usefully long time.



1 Making the right choice when it comes to buying a poultry house will ensure your birds lead the most productive, contented and safe life possible.



2 A solid, well-made hen house build from substantial and effectively-treated timber will last many decades.



3 Modern houses like this Haven, from Flyte so Fancy, feature a raised roosting compartment with a floor that's conveniently set at waist height to simplify cleaning operations



4 A large access door is essential for day-to-day maintenance. Note the droppings board inside this house, and the sturdy legs raising about five inches above the ground as an anti-rodent measure.



5 A detachable, external nest box can provide useful, additional access to the henhouse interior.



6 If the nest boxes are internal, then having them removable like this offers a practical advantage for cleaning purposes. Note the 'privacy boards' fitted to help keep the nesting areas dark and secluded.



7 The simplicity of a well-designed interior – with perches and nest boxes removed – makes cleaning and pest control as easy as possible.



8 Where perching racks are used, ensure there's an eight-inch span between individual perches.



9 Removable perching is essential for the effective control of red mite. Note rounded-off top edges.



10 Well thought-out ventilation apertures will be sheltered by roof and wall overhangs, to minimise the risk of rain blowing in.



11 Ventilation points lower in the house walls should be shielded too, as this louvered slot is, for maximum weather protection.



12 Check the thickness of the wood used for construction. If it's thin and flimsy then service life will be limited. This is top-quality, 19mm thick timber.



13 Details such as this vertical weather protection strip on the end of a nest box roof, and the stainless steel hinges and screws used on exposed fixings, set a quality house apart from the rest.



14 Houses featuring meshed ventilation 'windows' like this will benefit from shuttering so that the apertures can be easily closed-off if the weather is extreme.



15 Roofing felt is becoming a less popular option, due to its limited life and reputation for sheltering red mite.



16 A shiplap timber roof like this is probably the ultimate option for strength, durability and performance, although it'll certainly add significantly to the cost of the house.



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House and external nest box roof angles are important to ensure good water run-off. A good overhang between the main roof and the nest box is another great feature to look for; it'll help ensure the nest boxes stay dry inside.

Flyte so Fancy

The houses featured in this article were all designed and built by Dorchester-based Flyte so Fancy, using top-quality, eco-friendly pressure-treated timber throughout. You can find out more about the company's impressive range of houses and runs by visiting www.flytesofancy.co.uk or calling 01300 345229.