

Raising Meat Turkeys in Small or Backyard Flocks

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Written by: *Dr. Jacquie Jacob, University of Kentucky*

Compared to other meats, turkey is relatively lean and nutritious. While often the meat of choice on Thanksgiving and Christmas, turkey is a versatile meat that can be eaten any time of the year. Many people are starting to raise their own turkeys. While raising turkeys does not require a lot of time each day, turkeys do require daily care.

Before starting a flock of turkeys, it is important to identify your goal. This will dictate the best breed and management system for your flock. Are you raising turkeys for your own consumption or for sale? Once you have determined your goals, you need to pick the type of turkey and housing. The types of turkeys often referred to as "breeds" are actually varieties of a single breed of turkey. The most common variety grown commercially is the Large White, but there are many other breeds of turkeys to choose from. Hens commonly reach a live weight of 15 lb. at 14 weeks of age, and toms (males) weigh about 28 to 30 lb. at 17 to 18 weeks. Smaller weights can be achieved by raising the turkeys for a shorter period of time.

Brooding

Temperature

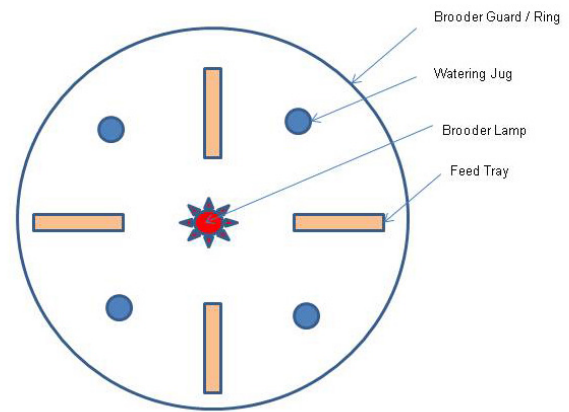
Turkey poults (young turkeys one day old and older) are more difficult to get started than chicks. Poults need to be raised in a warm, draft-free environment because they are unable to regulate their body temperature for the first 10 days of life. In the brooding area the temperature should be started at 100°F, measured two inches above the floor (that is, at the level of the poult). Reduce the temperature 5°F each week. A red infrared heat lamp is best to supply the heat needed. The bulb should be suspended at least 18 in. above the floor. The height of the bulb can be adjusted as the temperature needs to change.

Litter

Wood shavings are the best litter for turkeys. Do not use sawdust because poults may eat it and have digestive problems. The purpose of the litter is to absorb moisture and insulate poults from the cold floor. Any wet litter should be removed and replaced with fresh litter. Do not use newspapers or other slick materials on top of the litter. The paper will become slippery and can cause leg problems.

Brooder Guards

A **brooder guard** should be used during the first week or two. The brooder guards keep the poults near heat, feed, and water. A typical brooder guard is 18" tall. Poults startle easily, causing them to crowd on top of each other. Rounding all the corners of the brooding area with a brooder guard reduces the likelihood of a corner pileup.



Feed and Water

Feed and water should be available to the growing turkeys at all times. Some young turkeys have trouble finding the feed and water, resulting in death from "starve out." To ensure that your poults find the feed and water, it is best to spend some time with them for the first day or so. Dipping their beaks in the water helps to teach them where the water is located. Use a small one-gallon chick waterer. Open dishes or pans are not recommended because poults may fall in, get chilled, and die. Bright-colored marbles may help to attract the poults to the water. The bottom half of an egg carton makes a good starting feeder for the first few days. Adequate feeder and waterer space ensures that all the poults in the flock have an opportunity to eat and drink.

Commercial varieties of turkeys are fast-growing. They require a high-protein diet. Turkey starter diets typically contain 28% protein in crumble form. It is generally recommended that you use turkey starter diets for the first four weeks. A turkey grower diet typically has 26% protein. Note that chicken starter and grower diets are too low in protein, and turkeys fed these diets will have reduced growth performance.

As the turkeys grow, they get taller and their necks get longer. The height of the feeders should be adjusted to match the birds' growth. The edge of the feeder trough should be at the level of a turkey's back. This will keep the feed and water clean after the first week. It is important to not fill the feeders too full, or feed will be wasted.

Processing

A small number of turkeys can be raised in a relatively small area, but you need to adhere to the local zoning laws and ordinances in order to raise, process, and sell turkeys. Whether the turkeys are for home consumption or for sale, you must make plans for processing, whether that is through home processing or custom processing.

Terminology

- **Beard:** Coarse, black hair-like feathers projecting from the breast of a turkey
- **Caruncles:** The bumps on the head of a turkey
- **Hen:** Female turkey
- **Jake:** Immature male turkey
- **Jenny:** Immature female turkey
- **Poults:** Baby turkeys
- **Snood:** Long red piece of flesh that grows from the forehead over the bill

- **Tom:** Male turkey
- **Wattle:** Flesh growing from the throat.

For More Information

[Small-flock turkey production.](#) Pennsylvania State University.

[Raising turkeys.](#) Tom Danko, University of New Hampshire.

[Production of eggs and home-raised, home-butchered broilers and turkeys.](#) Scott Beyer and Rhonda Janke, Kansas State University.

[Producing turkeys for show.](#) Fred Thornberry, Texas A&M University.

[Raising broilers and turkeys for competition.](#) Susan Watkins, Frank Jones, F. Dustan Clark, and Jerry Wooley, University of Arkansas.