

When COVID-19 struck this spring, it caused many challenges, not only for N.C. Cooperative Extension, but also for our clientele. The gaps in the food supply chain and empty shelves caused panic in many consumers and led to an increase in the number of people wanting to raise their own backyard poultry flocks for meat, eggs, or both. Many of these individuals had never raised poultry before and needed guidance and instruction.

To help address the need of those individuals who wanted to raise their own backyard flock, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Davidson, Davie, Forsyth, and Yadkin County Centers, along with the Area Specialized Poultry Agents, held a five-week Home Flock Series online through Zoom. Topics included breeds, brooding, housing, nutrition, municipal codes, health and disease, processing including broilers and eggs, egg handling, and egg laws.

Response to this series was overwhelming causing the maximum number to be increased to 125 participants per session. Online participant surveys showed that 86% improved their knowledge related to selecting the right breed, while at least 77% increased their knowledge related to brooding chicks and housing/coops. Biosecurity, or reducing the potential for infectious disease, is paramount in livestock production. 97% increased knowledge relating to biosecurity, and 91% said they would apply the concepts and information they learned to their own flock. One individual stated that they “really enjoyed the poultry program and gleaned so much information about keeping chickens. It was a great overview of how to start your own flock and the interaction with others was so helpful.” Another said, “Applauding you, your hard work and your wonderful adaptation of using Zoom to continue reaching out to help and teach all of us!” Over 230 different people joined live for the classes. Other Extension Agents were able to take the resources (powerpoint and supplemental materials) that were developed to offer this in their own counties.

With such interest in poultry programming, we wanted to capitalize on the momentum we had gained and decided to continue offering online programming during the pandemic. Additional programming was offered through August of 2020, including Basics of Poultry Incubation; Selling, Handling, & Storage of Pasture Poultry Products; and Forages for Poultry Pastures. There were 103 people who participated live in these three workshops.

Many suppliers and local agricultural supply stores ran out of chicks. The Basics of Poultry Incubation workshop was held to allow producers information on incubating their own poultry. The primary focus was on chickens, but also covered other poultry species. We also discussed how to set up your incubator and troubleshoot common issues. All participants indicated that they learned how to develop a plan for hatching their own chicks and 95% plan to hatch their own eggs or use the information they learned to increase their hatch rate.

North Carolina does not have any processing facilities that will process chicken for local producers. We hosted the Selling, Handling, and Storage of Pasture Poultry Products to help producers who are wanting to sell local poultry products to increase revenue on their farm. During the session, we discussed who needed a meat handler's license, what is involved with the application process, and meat label information. The workshop also included information regarding poultry processing exemptions. Seventy percent of participants gained skills or knowledge to increase production for local markets.

Raising poultry on pastures is a popular topic, so a Forages for Poultry Pastures workshop was offered. Participants learned what forages to plant, when to plant them, and pasture management including rotation and stocking rates. While poultry can obtain some of their nutrition from forages, we stressed the importance of providing them a balanced, complete feed. All participants indicated an increased knowledge of pasture/forage management

practices and said they will adopt Extension-recommended best management practices related to pasture management.

A follow-up survey was sent to all participants of the workshops. Ninety-one percent of respondents indicated a gain in knowledge that they applied to their flock. While all the workshops were free of charge to attend, participants were asked if they had to pay for the workshop, what monetary value would they place on the information and training they received. Responses varied from nothing to \$100, with the average being \$41. One participant reported that her family has “pushed further ahead for egg business infrastructure and are well-positioned for expanding our selling at the beginning of spring. In addition, we have continued to improve our pastured poultry rotation and infrastructure. These classes have been critical as we continue to learn all we can as new farmers!”

With the shift to virtual programs during the pandemic, we asked participants to provide their comments regarding the virtual nature of the programs instead of being in person. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive for the virtual programming. One participant said, “Typically, I place a high value on in-person learning and connection. That said, we have only known this online format as newer farmers, and it has been invaluable to our farm. As a homeschooling mom of four, this format has allowed me to participate in SO many lectures that I would have likely missed otherwise, as well as allowing me to pull in the kids when appropriate and expand our entire family’s knowledge base. My husband and I have many times re-listened to saved lectures to clarify or remind ourselves of various instructions. We are big fans.” Another said that “This was a great program presented in a very informative and professional manner, it is usually difficult for me to travel for these programs and this allowed me to easily fit it into my schedule.”