

# The No-Tech Chicken House

by Mark Slater and Dyan del Gaudio

Last fall when the frosts returned, I realized that the summer accommodations of Myrtle and Gyrtle, our two chickens, would not suffice for winter protection. We decided to make a simple structure with straw bales. Straw bales are cheap and readily available, provide good insulation, and can be reused as mulch. They are easy to stack together like building blocks.

The number of bales that are used and the way they are arranged will depend upon the number of chickens to be housed. The standard amount of space recommended is three square feet per bird for heavy breeds and two square feet for lighter birds. We chose to make our house two bales high with six bales per tier. This arrangement provides about ten square feet of usable space. A roost is easily installed by placing a pole between the bales, and there is plenty of room for a deep layer of litter to catch the droppings.

Most straw bales have similar dimensions and can be used like children's building blocks or bricks. Given the amount of space you want, it's a matter of trial and error to figure out how to best arrange the bales. For greater stability we recommend placing the middle of a bale on the top layer over a seam between the bales on the bottom layer—the same as you see in brick laying.

As you are arranging the bales, choose one corner bale in the top layer. This bale will be removable, and will serve as the door to the coop.

We used an old corrugated fiberglass panel for the roof. A clear top allows plenty of light inside the coop on days when the hens do not venture out. We attached the fiberglass to a wood frame which had been attached to the straw bales with rebar. The rebar should go through a hole drilled in the wood, then through both layers of straw bales, and be driven 6 to 12 inches into the ground. Be sure to make one end of the roof higher than the other for drainage.

A more elaborate roof which opened from the top would facilitate egg collecting and litter changing. To collect our eggs we now crawl through the entrance and become covered with straw.

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*Mark Slater and Dyan del Gaudio are creating a permaculture design at Jemez House Youth Ranch in northern New Mexico. Mark is the manager of the project, now in its second year.*

Our coldest winter temperature was -14 degrees F, but our chickens survived the winter in good health. For two to three weeks the hens did not venture outside. On these days we scattered grain and placed water in a small container inside the coop.

When the weather was warm the chickens spent the day outside except when they laid eggs. They have been laying inside the house in the straw litter. We have not provided them a nesting box.

The straw bales have stayed dry; I have not seen mildew or any parasitic arthropods. We mix the litter periodically and change it every two months. This works well, but the climate is dry here. I am unsure how the structure would work in a wetter environment.

We have not had any rodent problems. (Our chickens relish eating dead mice but I have yet to see them hunting for them.)

The coop was originally designed as a temporary shelter and functioned very well throughout the winter. In fact, we have only used it from mid-October through mid-March and we do not know how it will work in hot summer months. Ventilation and overheating may be problems. Yet we believe it has potential to be used as a more permanent structure for someone who wants to keep a small number of chickens.

The beauty of this design is that if the straw becomes too wet, or if you have an outbreak of parasitic arthropods, or if you simply want to move the coop, you can easily bring in new bales of straw and start over, using the old roof. The old straw makes a great mulch.

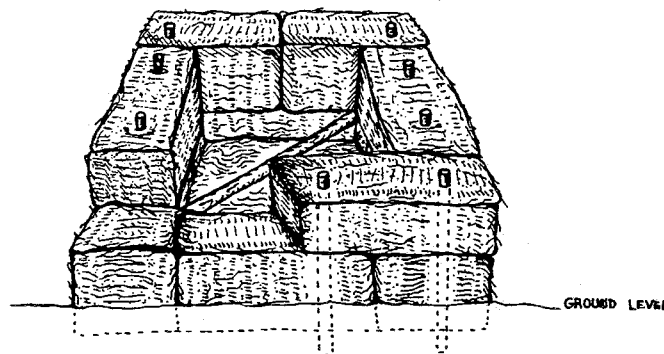
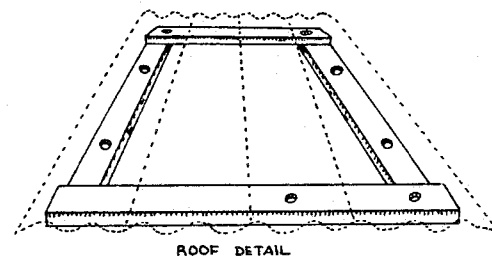


Illustration: Dyan del Gaudio