



Poultry

AMY HOGUE



Merrifield Farm's mobile coop is far larger than traditional portable models.

A poultry success story

Raising pastured poultry at Merrifield Farm

Small farm success stories are always a delight to stumble upon, and Merrifield Farms is an excellent example of small farm innovation and excellence at its best. While the reasons behind owner Ryan Merrifield's success could be attributed to qualities like a good work ethic and perseverance, a bigger reason might be his passion for the industry and a straightforward business sense.

Located in Eastern Ontario, Merrifield Farms is a 100-acre property where Merrifield raises 23 acres of soybeans and 10 acres of hay pasture. He also raises chickens — lots and lots of meat birds.

Having grown up on a farm himself, Merrifield has been raising poultry for most of his life, so when he began looking for his own farming enterprise, the decision to get into pasture-raised poultry was easy. To Merrifield, the benefits were obvious— elimination of the long wait period to raise breeding stock, a lower initial investment and less overall risk.

"You can raise a heifer from birth and then wait until year three to decide whether you're going to keep her offspring. With chickens you can run a flock every eight weeks," Merrifield explained.

Not only is the investment lower, the risk is reduced when you break up your flock, as Merrifield has, into multiple batches.

"If you have a catastrophic failure, it's a failure of only 500 chicks," Merrifield said, "You're limiting your liability with smaller batches."

Merrifield seems to have it all figured out, cobbling together a strategic business plan and farm enterprise from other success stories and his own experience. Read on for the details on how he is making a success of small-scale poultry farming.



Ryan Merrifield and his family are making a success at small-scale poultry farming in Eastern Ontario.

The numbers

As part of the Chicken Farmers of Ontario (CFO) Artisanal Chicken Program Merrifield is able to raise up to 3,000 broilers per year. After registering for the program in 2017, he raised 1,500 birds in year one (500 birds per batch), 1,800 in year two (600 birds per batch), and is planning on 2,500 this year, with 500 birds in each batch.

This is no caged operation; his birds live in luxurious splendour in a pasture-raised environment, and in a carefully designed and manufactured structure that is moved regularly to ever-greener pastures.

Merrifield's coop was built to accommodate 800 ten-pound chickens, but he said he can't imagine raising that many birds in that space. After

experimenting with numbers of 500 or 600 birds in a single batch, he found 500 birds had fewer issues than 600, and is adjusting his expectations accordingly.

"That's why I like the philosophy of the Artisanal Chicken Program. We could load our barn with many more chickens, but we can see with a difference of only 100 what kind of conditions commercial chickens are living in."

Merrifield's material costs are estimated at \$15,000 to \$20,000 to construct his coop, and he said he was able to pay off the bulk of his start-up costs (tractor and barn) in the first two years of operations. In 2019, he will be adding another coop to his farm.

Since entering production, Merrifield has been able to successfully bring costs down year over year. This year he will be further reducing costs by completely replacing commercial feed with cracked

grains raised on farm, and purchasing a customized mineral pack from Grand Valley Fortifiers out of Toronto to add any vitamins and minerals needed to maintain optimal health for his birds. As Merrifield notes, when it comes to raising broilers, every cost savings counts.

Reduced losses

Unlike the standard expected loss rates of roughly 10 per cent, Merrifield averages an impressive loss rate of two-to-three per cent, well below the industry average. The reason behind this rate is a simple, yet brilliant (albeit accidentally discovered) efficiency.

The ground-breaking discovery? Merrifield makes his birds walk outside every day. Sounds deceptively simple, but when it comes to white rocks who

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With an estimated weight of between 5,000 and 6,000 lbs, Merrifield's poultry barn is no lightweight, although Merrifield said elements were incorporated into the design to help it slide easier when moved to fresh pasture (the 'ski' design).



Here, Ryan Merrifield stands next to the horizontal and diagonal beams which will be altered this year. The horizontal beam along the bottom of the structure will be moved up to replace the wooden supports currently found roughly two feet above the ground. The diagonal beam will be removed altogether. These changes will enable Merrifield to drag the coop to fresh pasture while the structure will simply pass over any birds that may have remained inside.



This door opens outward to allow birds to enter and exit the coop, and also serves as a ramp on the exterior. Merrifield discovered that the birds also needed a ramp inside the coop to assist them in navigating the small step to the outdoors. This addition reduced instances of Green Muscle Disease from flapping of wings.



Merrifield points to the 'ski' end that helps his coop to slide over rough ground when dragged by his tractor. The metal ring to the right of the ski is used to attach the chains to drag the structure.



Merrifield has taken advantage of the market for value-added products, and his pepperettes and chicken jerky are favourites among his customers. Merrifield currently sells at farmers' markets and on-farm.

Grain is stored in this animal-proof container outside the coop, and set out each evening to encourage the flock to leave the coop so it will be empty when it's moved.





Feeding birds outside forces them to exercise.

are known for their laziness and fragility, nothing is ever simple.

“We feed our birds outside every day, when we move the coop. This forces the birds to walk outside to get the feed, and we discovered it makes a difference,” Merrifield explained.

Merrifield caught on to this discovery when bad weather had him feeding one batch of birds inside. The birds did much less walking, remaining indoors for the majority of their waking hours. The result from that one change in feeding regimen was more leg problems and higher mortality rates.

“Now we feed them outside, no matter the weather,” Merrifield said. As part of the Artisanal Chicken Program, Merrifield is required to pay the CFO \$0.24 per bird, whether they reach maturity or not, so it is in his best

interest to ensure his flock is as healthy as possible, with as few losses as can be managed.

The birds

As with most poultry farmers, Merrifield raises white rock broilers, a breed he likens to a Lamborghini, known for its need for specialized care to reduce engine issues.

“If you want proper feed conversion you need to use the white rock breed, and it’s a large, lazy breed,” Merrifield said, “White rock chickens are like a Lamborghini, and in our case, we take a Lamborghini and instead of high-octane fuel, we put Ethanol in it.”

In Merrifield’s case, the high-octane fuel could be likened to commercial poultry feed, and Ethanol to the cracked

grains he feeds his birds, which he considers a more natural food for poultry.

For the first two years, Merrifield purchased his birds from a larger hatchery and picked them up from a local feed store, but that will change this year when he receives his birds from a much smaller hatchery, Millpond Hatchery, located in Belleville, Ontario.

Using a smaller hatchery has multiple benefits. Millpond is a local business; the birds are in transit for a much shorter time. Instead of spending a day on the road, this year Merrifield’s birds will travel a mere two hours.

The shortened transit not only places less stress on the bird before arrival, but there is also less handling. Merrifield’s birds will be delivered straight to his farm from the hatchery, with no other changing of hands.

The coop

While his management techniques have brought impressive results, it's Merrifield's coop that is surely the 'pièce de résistance' of his farm operation. Merrifield's poultry structure is a 24' by 36' coverall barn with a 2' horizontal opening running along its long side. Designed by Merrifield himself with input from an engineer, the coop is made with a steel structural frame, and sits on tracks like skis that allow for easy moving.

Merrifield uses electric poultry netting for fencing, and locks his birds in at night as an added precaution against predators. A 2' screen made of 1" by 2" 14-gauge steel wire is attached to the coop perimeter and folded down flat on the ground at night to discourage burrowing predators, and then folded up during the day when the birds are released, and to allow for moving the structure. The sides of the coop also roll up for ventilation.

The coop is moved to new pasture roughly once every three-to-four days when the birds are young, and increasing in frequency as they grow. By slaughter time, the coop is being moved daily. Thanks to Merrifield's coop design, moving the structure isn't overly time consuming, although he has plans for further modifications to enhance the efficiency for the coop this year.

The theory is that by feeding birds outside, the coop will be empty during moving time, but Merrifield explained there are always stragglers left behind and this takes up time to remove them before moving the coop to fresh pasture, lest they be crushed.

The solution: Merrifield will create a 2' horizontal door at the bottom of the short end of the structure and remove the horizontal beam that runs across that space. This way, the pen can be dragged with a tractor and the coop will pass safely over any birds left inside, without harming them. "Every year we make changes to increase efficiency," Merrifield said, "We're getting this down to a science."



Merrifield's 24' by 36' portable coop.

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