

“Big Box” Poultry Processing For Small Producers

Featherman Equipment’s new “Plant in a Box” is a complete chicken processing plant in an 8 by 40-ft. shipping container.

“The biggest bottleneck to the growth of the small farm pastured poultry business is processing,” says David Schafer, Featherman Equipment. “Every little town used to have a poultry house for processing birds locally. Our Plant in a Box could make that a reality again.”

Schafer notes that larger retailers are anxious to add locally grown, pastured poultry to their stores. Small operations can grow their own chickens and, in most states, process them on the farm up to a limit of 1,000 head. The problem is stores need poultry processed in a USDA compliant facility.

“We can’t guarantee an ‘approved’ facility because each local inspector has approval rights, but we’re comfortable ours is USDA-ready,” says Schafer.

Schafer worked closely with Dr. Greg Sherman, a food safety consultant who spent 27 years with the USDA’s Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS). His last position at FSIS was heading up the small plant help desk, helping small processors of livestock stay in compliance.

“Dr. Sherman spent hours on the phone with us, sharing information at no charge,” says Schafer. “He is a super champion of the small guy.”

Schafer has already made poultry processing easier on farm. Until a few years ago, he raised free-range chickens himself. In 1996 he submitted an article to FARM SHOW (Vol. 20, No. 1) on how to make a tub-style poultry plucker with the suggestion that someone should make

one to sell. Four years later he did. Today his company, Featherman, sells a full line of scalders, pluckers and other equipment for processing chickens.

With a full line of Featherman components, the Plant in a Box will be priced at just under \$100,000. Schafer says that is about a quarter the cost of a bricks and mortar plant.

The actual processing equipment is less than 8 percent of the total price. Costs include the container, which has walls and flooring that can be easily washed down and cleaned, and an overhead rack to reduce labor and increase worker comfort and ease. Cooling processed birds is also a priority.

“We have a heavily insulated cooler room that can store around 600 chickens,” says Schafer.

Because the Plant in a Box is designed to set on a slab and is portable, Schafer says it is property tax-free. However, he doesn’t advise moving it once it’s set up.

“It’s a lot more efficient to bring the birds to a low-cost, highly effective operation in one location,” he says.

He says the Plant in a Box was a natural addition to his product line. Like his rotary scalding, it’s the result of a customer request. He also recognizes that the time is right. More pastured poultry producers want to exceed the 1,000-bird limit for on-farm processing.

“They’re going up against the regulators,” he says. “With Plant in a Box, they’ll have a better chance of being successful.”

To make sure his customers are successful, Schafer plans to offer training. “There are a lot of things that dictate whether an operation is going to be successful with a processing line,” he says. “We want them to be successful.”



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Processing plant allows small producers to exceed the 1,000-bird limit for on-farm processing.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, info@featherman.net; www.featherman.net; Featherman Equipment, P.O. Box 62, Jamesport, Mo. 64648 (ph 660 684-6035);

Rare Turkeys Thrive Outside

Christina Allen doesn’t baby her rare breed Jersey Buff Turkeys. By the time they’re 3 weeks old, they’re released to roam her orchard. Until then they’re confined to a nursery inside a protective aviary. The nursery is where the flock’s nesting boxes are.

“If I have to be gone for the day, I’ll keep them locked up in the aviary,” says Allen. “They have grass and water there with plenty of room. At least 95 percent of their food is from grazing on bugs and fallen fruit from the orchards. They eat the bad ones as fast as we throw them to the ground and will also eat any they can reach on branches.”

Allen, an artist and children’s author, and her husband, Frank, operate Allen Heirloom Homestead. In addition to the turkeys and orchard, they raise heritage chickens and sheep. The Allens raise much of their own food, make and sell handspun yarn, soap and more at their on-farm store. They also host pre-arranged tours of their farm.

Allen has written about her Jersey Buffs, in particular Chip, a young Tom that she nursed back to life. He has since become a mascot for the farm and a popular draw for agri-tourists.

The aviary is 200 by 300 ft. with game bird netting on the sides and over the top. She uses 16-ft. rebar with 4-in. wide plastic caps to hold the netting up. At the sides, hardware cloth dug into the ground around the perimeter keeps out predators. The side netting is attached to the hardware cloth with hog rings.

Allen says she has little problem getting

the turkeys to return to the aviary. She has them trained to respond to the tapping of a bamboo pole.

She initially picked Jersey Buffs to breed because they’re endangered. She says they’re good mothers and are rated as one of the best tasting heritage breeds.

“I figured if it didn’t work out to breed them, we could always eat them,” says Allen. “They’re light colored and dress out beautifully.”

Allen says the mothers do a lot of co-parenting, often with 2 mothers setting on the same nest of eggs. They’re also prolific, hatching out a brood and raising them for a month before repeating, as often as 4 times in a year.

“Each hen can lay up to 60 eggs a year,” says Allen.

Allen started with a few birds and has built her breeding flock to 9 hens and 3 toms. The birds have rich, reddish-buff body feathers with white to light buff tail and wing feathers. Hens will reach about 14 lbs., and older toms will reach 28 lbs. Each year she sells about 50 turkeys for meat, processing them on her farm herself.

Allen, her husband and her Jersey Buff turkeys were recently featured in The Dinner, a documentary available online. Check out a preview of the movie at <http://thedinnermovie.com/preview/>.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Christina Allen, 18988 Point Lookout Rd., Lexington Park, Md. 20653 (ph 301 862-3421; corncribstudio@gmail.com; www.comcribstudio.com).



At 3 weeks old, Christina Allen’s rare breed Jersey Buff Turkeys are released to roam her orchard. Until then they’re confined to a nursery inside a protective aviary.



Along the sides of the aviary, hardware cloth is dug into the ground to keep out predators.