

Shelter in poultry outdoor runs

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Introduction

The availability of an outdoor run is obliged for organic poultry. However, this does not mean that all animals really use this. A survey among 37 flocks of laying hens in the Netherlands showed that in 38% of the flocks less than half of the hens of that flock used the run. There was a strong correlation between shelter in the outdoor run and the number of hens that used it. It also appeared that use of outdoor run is of crucial importance for the prevention of feather pecking (Bestman, 2000; Green et al., 2000).

Description of project

Therefore in the summer of 2001 the Louis Bolk Institute together with poultry keepers tried several methods of shelter. Because we were aware of the big differences between the farms in age of the flocks, number of hens, size and shape of the stable and outdoor run, etc., we were most interested in the personal experiences of the stockpeople with different kinds of shelter.

Results and conclusions

The experiences with nearly the whole (80%) surface covered by maize or small parts (at most 10%) covered by maize or army camouflage nets were most promising. If completely covered by maize, the hens seemed to regard the run as a dense forest in which they felt very comfortable and in the end the farmer could harvest 3 tons of edible crop for his animals. If lesser cover was realised (with maize, sunflowers or army nets) it seemed to be crucial that from all over the outdoor run the hens had to walk at most 10m to reach the cover. Advantages of this artificial type of shelter are lower costs, independence of season, good visibility of the hens and the run could be shared with larger animals like sheep and cattle.