

Chicken Workshop Focuses on ‘Humane’ Slaughter

Michael Short Delmarva Correspondent Sep 25, 2017 Updated 18 hrs ago



BISHOPVILLE, Md. — It’s safe to say that killing an animal is not for the faint of heart.

But for Brett Hines and Megan Mudron, owners of Naturally Sunkissed Farm in Bishopville, they do it to ensure their animals are killed humanely and quickly.

“Most people don’t know this skill,” Mudron said. “We learned a lot and thought we might as well share that part so they don’t make the same mistakes.”

About a dozen people visited the farm Sept. 16 for a workshop put on by Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (CASA).

The chicken processing workshop was geared toward small, beginning farmers interested in raising small flocks and pasture-raised birds.

The very hands-on workshop taught visitors how to kill the animals before scalding, plucking and cleaning the birds to have them ready for market.

Mudron’s suggestion for beginning backyard poultry farmers is to “start small. Don’t try to do 1,500 birds.” She and Hines raise 35 to 40 birds at a time.

She also suggests farmers network with other farmers and practice before they commit to going commercial with their product.

The pair take their commitment to sustainable agriculture and humane husbandry seriously. Before killing the first bird, they asked for a moment of silence and stressed the use of sharp knives and always having a second knife available in the interest of quickly dispatching the birds.

“We try to do it in the most humane way possible. ... This is not something we take lightly,” Hines said. “You’re in charge of the animal.”

Farmers began by putting kill cones on the animals. The birds were quickly killed with a slice across the throat. After waiting to make sure they were dead, they were quickly dipped in scalding water eight to 10 times in order to loosen feathers and make plucking easier.

The birds were then placed in an automated plucker that spins and uses “rubber fingers” to remove almost all the feathers.

From there, the birds were taken to the cleaning table for the most time-consuming part of the day. Any remaining feathers are plucked and then the heads, feet and entrails are removed. Farmers kept the liver and heart while discarding most other organs.

The oil gland at the tail was carefully removed and farmers learned to avoid the bile duct while saving the tasty chicken livers. Many people keep the gizzards, but Hines said that cleaning the gizzard is very time-consuming, and he chose not to do it on Saturday.

The necks were also kept because they make a fine chicken stock or can be used as crab bait. After cleaning the birds, tucking the legs into a fold of skin and giving them a final cleaning, they were plunged into an icy bath to quickly get cooled.

The process is time-consuming and expensive, but Mudron said there is a market for pasture-raised poultry that is considered healthier, tastier and more humanely raised than other birds.

A handout at the workshop estimated that food, the cost of chicks, electricity, packaging, propane and cleaning supplies cost \$12.06 per bird. Despite the cost, Mudron said consumers seek out pasture-raised birds.

“My farmer friends as well as Deanna Baldwin at MDA (Maryland Department of Agriculture) said yes, there definitely is a need for this type of class,” said Niamh Shortt, the Delmarva program manager for Future Harvest CASA. “MDA offers workshops on poultry production and safety, but Deanna said they are always getting requests for a class on how to slaughter chickens correctly and that MDA just didn’t have the ability to provide that hands-on learning for them. My farmer friends echoed this, some have been trying for years to get someone to teach them how to slaughter chickens and in the end no one came through. ... I think folks learned a lot and everything went smoothly.”

Jon Moyle, University of Maryland Extension, talked about biosecurity.

A tour of the farm, with its walnut trees, hops vines, vegetables, and small sheep and goat flocks followed.

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