Please note: this is a supporting document. If you have specific questions, please feel free to reach out to your American Humane Society Farm Operations Manager at any time.

OUTDOOR ENRICHMENT GUIDE
for Laying Hens

Hens are naturally curious and highly motivated to scratch, forage, dustbathe and explore, but without features in the outdoor environment that activate those behaviors, most birds will cluster near the house and leave the majority of the range unused. Strategic placement of enrichment items beyond the near-range zone doesn't just improve welfare outcomes, it directly addresses one of the most common compliance challenges in free range systems.

The good news is that effective enrichment doesn't have to be expensive. Elevated perching areas, shade, and dustbathing areas can deliver measurable improvements in range utilization at low cost. This guide covers different types of enrichment with examples that work throughout the flock cycle.

Dustbathing areas

Dustbathing is a highly motivated, time-consuming behavior that hens will perform regardless of whether good substrate is available, providing good substrate makes the behavior satisfying rather than frustrating. The following are engaging dustbathing opportunities:

- Designated sand pits or trays filled with dry, fine-particle sand
- Covered dustbathing areas under shade structures to keep substrate dry (wet substrate prevents effective dustbathing and will be avoided)
- Peat or loose dry soil areas in sheltered spots
- Combination substrate areas mixing sand with diatomaceous earth
- Roofed wooden box dustbaths placed at intervals across the range, positioned away from the shed to draw hens outward

Shade or Cover

Shade is one of the most practical and impactful investments a free-range producer can make, yet it is one of the most commonly overlooked features of the outdoor environment. Hens are highly sensitive to heat and solar radiation, and will avoid open, unshaded range areas entirely on warm or sunny days, effectively making that space unavailable to them regardless of how much is provided.

Natural

- Mixed-height well-managed shelterbelts using trees of varying heights (1–3 m) positioned at 10 and 20 m intervals from the henhouse
- Well-managed small bush clusters combined with fresh grass are preferred over mature trees with sparse ground cover underneath

Artificial shade structures

- Shade cloth panels or tarp suspended on posts at 10 and 20 m from the shed.
- Portable A-frame or lean-to shelters that can be moved as range areas are rotated

- Wooden covered platforms or “wigwam” style structures that provide overhead cover and a physical object to interact with
- Recycled agricultural equipment or trailers repurposed as covered areas
- Shade netting tunnels or corridors running outward from the shed, creating a covered pathway that guides hens into the range

Perches and elevated structures

Perching outdoors serves anti-predator vigilance, exercise and offer resting functions. The following examples offer perching opportunities for hens:

- Horizontal wooden poles or rails mounted at varying heights (30–80 cm) under shade structures
- Natural tree branches or logs laid horizontally across supports
- Straw bale stacks that create multiple height levels for perching and jumping
- Wooden pallets stacked and stabilized
- Tree stumps of varying heights placed throughout the range
- Portable A-frame climbing structures with perch rungs
- Log piles that offer multiple perching heights and foraging opportunities in bark crevices

Novel objects and sensory enrichment

Research on early rearing shows that exposure to novel, changing stimuli builds the cognitive flexibility that makes hens willing to explore unfamiliar outdoor environments. The same principle applies on the range.

- Regularly rotated novel objects - the key is novelty and change. The same object left indefinitely loses its enrichment value. Research shows rotating items every 1–2 weeks maintains engagement
- Colored or reflective objects (CDs, mirrors, colored plastic bottles) that provide visual stimulation
- Objects that move in the wind (hanging bundles of plastic strips, wind chimes)
- Novel textures placed on the ground, like rubber mats, astroturf patches, gravel areas
- Scent enrichment, like placing fresh herbs, spices or wood shavings in exploration areas, adds olfactory novelty

Foraging substrate and manipulable materials

Foraging (scratching, pecking and investigating substrate) is one of the most time-consuming natural behaviors. Thwarted foraging is a primary driver of redirected feather pecking. The following are examples of foraging enrichments:

- Loose woodchip or bark mulch areas that can be scratched through and may harbor invertebrates

Please note: these are recommendations, options are not limited to these. If you would like to use other options, we are always happy to review them with you and determine if they meet our requirements for usable enrichment.

AMERICAN HUMANE CERTIFIED FARM ANIMALS

A Program of American Humane Society

AmericanHumaneFarm.org