



Combining woody plants with free-range poultry

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An increasing demand seems to exist by consumers for the production of high-quality chicken-meat or eggs with attention for animal welfare. At present, several poultry-farms are already trying to meet this demand by providing a free range area for their laying hens or broiler chickens. Chickens are however forest animals by origin and because of the resulting preference for cover they often only make use of the free range area to a limited extent. This can in part be coped with by planting woody vegetation (such as short rotation coppice or fruit trees) in the free range area or by using existing woody cropping systems (such as orchards) as a free range area for poultry. This furthermore contributes to the efficient use of available farmland. Part of the produced fruits or nuts can possibly be integrated in the feed of the chickens. This is for example the case for flour of hazelnuts or acorns. In case of young trees or shrubs, tree protection against the chickens may be necessary because excessive rooting may damage the roots or make them surface which may lead to production-losses or even dying off of the plants. To further increase the actual use of the free range area, mobile stables can be used which are moved through the free range area, one can maintain a limited number of mature hens which are familiar with the free range area and are followed by the young chickens or food and drinking facilities can be placed at further distances in the free range area instead of in or nearby the stable.



Figure 1: Chickens in a Belgian agroforestry systems. Source: Bert Reubens, Consortium Agroforestry Flanders.

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