

Truck Box Converted To Chicken Coop

The neighbors weren't sure what Nathan Hawkins was up to when he used his tractor and skid steer to drag, push and pull a cube truck box aged with moss and mold that had been abandoned behind the barn of his property. But they understood his vision after he remodeled it with reclaimed materials and bright red metal siding to create an attractive coop for 50 chickens.

"It was a labor of love for the chickens as well as showing my husband's deep love for salvaging used items," explains Hawkins' wife, Leah.

The 8 1/2-ft. wide by 18 1/2-ft. long box had plenty of room for a chicken coop and a small room to store chicken feed and bedding.

Hawkins used a grinder and reciprocating saw to cut through the metal walls to cut in three windows and a door, all of them reclaimed. After removing the rollup door and framing the end with used lumber. He also cut a small door for the chickens and added a nesting box that can be accessed from outside to gather eggs. He used 2 by 6 lumber scraps from a nearby factory to make trusses to create a roof that matched his barn's roof.

Hawkins cut out boards from a section of old stairs for roosts and converted an old feed bin into a light. The ceiling of the cube box already had foam insulation, so the coop has been cozy, even in the winter. Hawkins usually opens the windows a little for ventilation.

"The chicken coop is elevated on a



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platform, so in the summer the chickens can go underneath for shade," Hawkins says, adding they have free range in a large, fenced area that includes a pond.

"The best part is there are no rats," he says, as there had been with his old coop.

His final touch was adding a Canadian flag on a short flagpole that he made from a curtain rod.

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Older growth tobosa grass with dormant, less palatable stems.

Tobosa Makes Good Forage - If You Burn It

Tobosa grass is one tough grass, growing in arid areas from West Texas through New Mexico and Arizona to southern California. Not only will it come back rain or no rain, but it also holds its leaves, which is why it needs fire.

"Tobosa grass can be a really good grass for grazing if you know how to manage it," says Ricky Linex, wildlife biologist and author of "Range Plants of North Central Texas."

He compares it to Bermuda grass in quality if well managed. However, it grows well where Bermuda grass won't, on deep clay saline and alkaline soils. It likes drier areas and is well adapted to them.

"Like most range plants, it doesn't respond to inorganic fertilizers," says Linex. "It just needs to be burned every 4 to 5 years."

The reason fire is needed is the leaves in the center and top go dormant but can last for several years. They catch and hold blowing sand. Cattle will eat the new leaves that grow up beside the old but will prefer other grasses like buffalo grass.

"When you burn the tobosa grass, you get rid of the dry, old, unpalatable leaves, and the sand falls to the ground," says Linex. "Burning puts the ash on the ground, and the plant gets the benefit."

Linex describes tobosa stems as reaching 2 to 3 ft. in height. Plants originate from seeds or rough, scaly rhizomes. Stems are stiff and harsh, flat or often inrolled, 1/8 in. wide and 1 1/2 to 6 in. long.

"After a prescribed burn, if there's adequate moisture, the plant will green up in the spring with leaves being tender and palatable and readily eaten by cattle and sheep," says Linex. "The effects of burning will generally improve forage quality for up to 2 years."

Linex is unaware of any seed being available or of it being harvested by anyone. However, where it now grows, he advises it could be of benefit to livestock if managed properly. Even left alone, it provides soil conservation benefits and habitat for bobwhite quail and other ground-nesting birds.

"Parts of the Texas Panhandle and New Mexico where tobosa grass grows were hard hit by the Dust Bowl in the 1930's," says Linex. "Plowing up native grasses like the tobosa that were holding the soil in place was a likely contributor."

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Above ground, the KestrelMet 6000 weather station gathers information about rainfall, wind speed and direction, relative humidity, temperature, and barometric pressure.

Affordable, Easy To Use Weather Station

Before the Kestrel team developed the KestrelMet 6000 weather station, they listened to customers, who said they wanted a model that wasn't too expensive and was easy to set up.

"They wanted a solid tool that would last a long time and they didn't have to think about," says Monica Devlin, director of brands, with Kestrel.

The sturdy tripod design that secures into the ground is one mounting option. The weather station has an optional soil sensor array with three probes for soil temperature and moisture throughout the root zone. Above ground, the KestrelMet 6000 weather station gathers information about rainfall, wind speed and direction, relative humidity, temperature, and barometric pressure.

For accurate readings during intensive heat, a 24-hr. aspirated fan shields the temperature and humidity sensors, Devlin notes, which sets the KestrelMet apart from other weather stations.

Current measurements, historical data, and charts can be accessed on the AWN (Ambient Weather Network) app or website. Producers can access the cloud-based

information anytime on a cell phone or laptop. The KestrelMet station offers Wi-Fi data transmission up to 1,000 ft. line of sight or a cellular version that comes with a data plan that is free for the first year. Alerts can be set regarding low moisture or specific weather conditions, for example.

"In addition to weather alerts for crop and field conditions, we heard from growers that they're using temperature alerts to help their workers, which is an added benefit," Devlin says.

The Wi-Fi unit starts at \$999, and the cellular model starts at \$1,299. There are also optional sensors for leaf wetness, solar irradiance, solar moisture, and soil temperature. The weather stations are powered by solar with a battery backup.

The KestrelMet 6000 can be purchased online through the company's website. It's shipped pre-configured for quick and easy installation.

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Their Goats Eat Xmas Trees

Christmas isn't over for the Driftless Goat Co. until owner Peter Ruen makes the rounds of the local community, picking up discarded Christmas trees. Once back at the farm, the trees are parceled out as treats to his goats, who spend their summers controlling unwanted vegetation for landowners in the area. It's a win-win for Ruen.

"The goats really enjoy the trees, but the best part of the program is the interaction with the community," he explains. "We get a call or text with an address and find Christmas trees stuck in snowbanks."

Ruen and his wife Cynthia started the program in 2018, not long after they started their vegetation control business. Each year the program has grown, and not just locally.

"We had a call from a suburb of Minneapolis, about 100 miles away," says Ruen. "They offered us four pallets of trees, but we couldn't justify the distance."

In early 2022 he took a call from a woman 35 miles from his location. She had seen a story about the Christmas tree collection on a local TV news program.

"She asked if she could deliver her tree to our place," he recalls. "The next day, she showed up with a tree sticking out of the back of her Subaru. This year she, her son-in-law, and her grandson pulled in with a trailer of trees. They had a great time visiting the goats."

Ruen says that was an example of how the program fits as part of the Driftless Goat Co. business model of creating pleasurable experiences. That said, he does have limits.

"We tell people we need clean trees, no chemicals or paint, and they understand," he says. "People have become very focused on natural trees."



Tree branches serve as handy off-the-ground spots to tuck hay for the goats to nibble on. He adds that feeding the trees to the goats is a good alternative to burning or landfilling them.

Ruen sees multiple benefits from the program. Tree branches serve as handy off-the-ground spots to tuck hay for the goats to nibble on. He adds that feeding the trees to the goats is a good alternative to burning or landfilling them.

"Like with our vegetation control business, we don't advertise the service," he says. "We just focus on our mission to answer the calls we get...and the calls keep coming."

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