9-1-1940

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CAPONS
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Photo used on cover courtesy Professor J. G. Halpin, Department of
Poultry Husbandry, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
Capons in Iowa

By

R. E. Phillips* and A. D. Oderkirk**

Interest in capon production is rapidly increasing in Iowa, the top-ranking state in poultry and egg production. Chickens are found on more than 93 percent of all farms in the state, and in 1939, there were more than 43 million chickens produced on Iowa farms. Due to this widespread production, a large number of broilers, fryers and roasters are marketed annually from the state. This abundant seasonal supply, marketed during a relatively short period, is one of the causes of the seasonal decline in prices of young chickens. Therefore, instead of marketing all of the young cockerels when prices are low it would be advantageous to caponize some of these birds for later sale or for home consumption. This would help maintain higher price levels for broilers and would extend the poultry income to a period when few sales are normally made.

This bulletin will present information concerning the various phases of capon production and marketing.

SUITABILITY OF CAPONS TO THE FARM ENTERPRISE

Capons can be raised on most Iowa farms. There is ample range, which is important to successful capon production. Plenty of clean range for the growing birds minimizes disease hazards. In addition to having plenty of range, the capons need an abundance of low-cost feeds which are readily available. Capon raising fits advantageously into the general farm enterprise, since the birds require a minimum amount of care. Plenty of feed, water and young, green grass range plus an inexpensive range shelter are the primary necessities for successful capon production.

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THE TIME AND BREEDS TO HATCH

The ideal time for hatching the chicks to be caponized is from the middle of April to May 15. Hatching the chicks during this period keeps the brooding expenditures at a minimum, yet the birds will reach the most desirable weights for the late fall and winter marketing season, when prices and demand are most satisfactory.

The most desirable chicks for caponizing are the heavy breeds (Plymouth Rocks, Rhode Islands, Orpingtons, Giants, New Hampshires, etc.). The light breeds (Leghorns, etc.) are not well suited for caponizing, because they do not reach the most profitable mature weight of 8 to 9 pounds. Those breeds which have feathered shanks are usually "leggy" and not as desirable. A bird that has a compact, well-fleshed body makes an attractive package which appeals to consumers.

It is important to select not only those breeds that can be expected to weigh 8 to 9 pounds at 7 to 10 months of age, but in some communities it is best to use the white or buff varieties of those breeds. Many poultry buyers are paying a few cents per pound premium for white or buff birds, because they usually have a more pleasing appearance when dressed for market. This point should be carefully checked if one is planning to engage in large-scale production of capons. However, there is little reason for discrimination against dark-feathered breeds if they are fully feathered and possess other comparable qualities.

WHEN TO CAPONIZE

Greatest success results when the caponizing operation is performed at the time the cockerels are 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 pounds in weight or 5 to 8 weeks of age. At this age the reproductive organs (testes) are the correct size so that minimum difficulty is encountered with the operation. When the testes are just a little larger than a kernel of wheat, it is much easier to remove them intact. Unless all of the testicular material is removed, it will continue to develop, resulting in a slip (an incompletely castrated cockerel). Usually a slip is purchased at the same price as an uncastrated bird.
The caponizing operation is most easily done on a bright, sunny day. The operating platform should be in a position to be easily moved so that the direct rays of the sun will penetrate the incision in the body wall, allowing plenty of light in the body cavity. Serious complications may occur if the operator cannot clearly see the internal organs.

Some difficulty is encountered in determining the sex of broilers of caponizing age. In some cases sex may be determined by the size of the comb, or by the difference in vocal noise. The males have a characteristic high-pitched tone, while that of the female is lower. A third method that may be helpful is the difference in the shape of the feathers in the hackle or neck region and the saddle region at the base of the tail. The feathers of the male are long and pointed, while those of the female are short and blunt. Very often the females show more complete feathering than males of the same age.

CAPONIZING INSTRUMENTS

Only four instruments are required for the caponizing operation. A sharp, pointed knife with a narrow blade is needed for making the incision; a small, adjustable wire spreader is needed to hold the incision open during the operation; a small probe with a hook at one end for tearing the membranes inside the body, and an extractor for removing the testes. The extractor is the most important instru-

Fig. 1. Caponizing instruments.
ment in the caponizing set. Many types of extractors are available on the market, but those having a slightly curved handle are the most satisfactory. (See fig. 1.)

Electric caponizing outfits are also on the market. In most cases these have given very satisfactory results. One of the main problems has been the difficulty encountered in the field in obtaining electricity. Other problems are the frequent necessity of scraping burnt tissue from the heated part of the instrument used for severing the organs and the danger of injury to the walls of the major blood vessels.

CARE OF BIRDS BEFORE THE OPERATION

Select only cockerels for the operation that appear to be vigorous and average or above in size for the age and breed. Avoid caponizing the undersized birds because, contrary to general opinion, castration does not appreciably increase the mature weight. The primary purpose of castration is to improve the eating qualities of the carcass.

After the cockerels have been selected, confine them to a pen and do not give them any feed for 24-36 hours before the time of operation. The birds should not have access to water 12 hours prior to the operation. This short starvation period does not harm the birds, and it is one of the most important steps in a successful operation. Serious damage may occur if the intestines are filled, since this necessitates probing around in the body cavity. Proper starvation prior to the operation minimizes this hazard, and the withholding of water seems to cause the blood to clot more rapidly.

METHOD OF OPERATION

When the beginner is first learning the operative technique, it may be decidedly helpful to remove each testis from an incision on each side of the body, but if the birds are not too large and if they have been properly starved prior to the operation, no great difficulty should occur by completing the operation from one side. This is the type of operation described.

A small table, wide board, barrel or some similar object will be satisfactory for an operating table. Heavy cord, a
wire spring or any device that will hold the birds securely in a stretched position is essential. Both legs and both wings are tied. Although the bird does little struggling during the operation, less difficulty arises when the cockerel is tightly fastened to the operation board.

After the bird has been stretched out on the left side and tied to the holder, the feathers covering the ribs on the right side of the body should be plucked. By tightening the skin (pushing the skin toward the tail) the underlying ribs can be seen. The last rib, the rib most distant from the head, should then be carefully located. The incision is made midway between the last (seventh) and next to the last (sixth) rib. (See figs. 2, 3, 4, 5.)

Before cutting the
Fig. 4. Showing the removal of the testis from the body cavity by using the extractor.

Fig. 5. Showing the appearance of the wound when the operation is complete. Note how the muscles and skin cover the wound.

skin and underlying muscles, the operator should push down firmly on the skin with the fingers of the left hand and push toward the left or toward the tail of the bird. This is done to push aside a large muscle that extends diagonally from the thigh region of the leg to the backbone. Unless this muscle is pushed to one side, considerable surface bleeding occurs.

After these tissues have been pushed aside, grasp the knife in such a way that only \( \frac{1}{4} \) to \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch of the blade point is exposed. Holding the blade at right angles to the body, push the blade through the skin and muscle about \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch from the backbone, and with one motion make a downward "C"-shaped incision. The peculiar shape of the ribs makes it necessary to make this curved incision in order that the seventh rib will not be cut. (See fig. 6.) The incision need not be longer than \( \frac{3}{4} \) to 1 inch in length.

After the incision has been made wire spreaders should be placed in the wound. Then by looking into the body cavity numerous white membranes can be seen. Some of these make up a part of the abdominal air sacs discussed later. (See page 479.)
probe. The tissue heals more quickly when handled in this manner. After the membranes have been torn, providing that plenty of light is shining directly into the body cavity, the two testes may be seen lying next to the backbone between the lungs and the kidneys. The color of the testes may vary. The usual color is yellow, but occasionally a part or all of the organ will be dark. The cause of this condition is not definitely known. When viewed from the right side of the bird, the left testis is underneath and slightly posterior (toward the tail) to the right testis.

Between the two testes are located the largest blood vessels in the body of the bird. It is believed that rupturing these blood vessels is responsible for a large part of the mortality which occurs during the caponizing operation. The rupturing of these blood vessels would immediately result in the
death of the bird, but fortunately they are located in such a way that they are not very bothersome during the operation.

The blood vessel which is mainly responsible for the hemorrhage occurring during the operation is located in the thin membraneous sheet in the mid-line of the body cavity. Plenty of light in the abdomen will easily illuminate this blood vessel, the size of which is about that of a pencil lead.

After the operator has become acquainted with the exact location of the blood vessels and the reproductive organs, the extractor should be inserted into the body cavity beyond both of the testes. Then by pushing downward on the handle of the extractor the jaws come to rest against the left or underneath gonad (testis). The whole secret of carrying out the caponizing operation from one side depends upon the ability of the operator to successfully get this organ to roll over the ends of the extractor's jaws and come to rest between them. As soon as this has been accomplished and after being certain that the entire organ is within the jaws of the extractor, the edges should be tightly locked. Then, giving the instrument a quarter turn, the testis on the left side of the body can be withdrawn from the cavity. A small amount of hemorrhage will result but it is not serious provided the blood vessels previously mentioned have not been ruptured. The field is then clear for the operator to again insert the extractors into the body cavity to remove the right testis. If the upper organ is removed first, the hemorrhage resulting from the extraction serves to obscure the rest of the operative field. It is for this reason that **the lower testis should always be taken out first if the operation is completed from one side.** Experienced operators will have a bird mortality of less than 5 percent.

The operator can get some idea of the success of the operation by closely examining the testes after they have been removed. The organs should not be broken, and a small amount of tissue will be observed clinging to each testis. In most cases this is the vas deferens, a part of the male reproductive tract, which conducts the sperm cells from the testes to the cloaca. If any fragments of the testes are left in the body cavity the parts will regenerate and the bird will develop into a slip.
After these observations have been made, the spreaders are removed, and the bird is released without sewing the wound. Very rarely will a bird die from operative effects after it has been removed from the holder. This is partially due to the fact that the bird is not very susceptible to infection, and for this reason no special antiseptic conditions need to be maintained during the operation.

CARE OF BIRDS FOLLOWING THE OPERATION

The operated birds should be confined to a pen in a cool, shady place. Water may be given to them immediately. It is best to wait a few hours before giving them a wet mash feed. Scratch grain should not be fed for 2 or 3 days following the operation.

If possible the birds should be rather closely confined for at least 2 weeks. At the expiration of that time they should be examined individually to determine if there is any indication of swelling on the side where the incision was made. In about 50 percent of the birds, a condition known as wind-puffs will develop. This is due to air escaping from the body cavity, coming through the muscular wound and collecting underneath the skin.

The respiratory system of the bird is quite unique in the fact that the abdominal air sacs which have been previously discussed are continuations of the lungs. If the skin wound heals before the edges of the flesh wound have grown together, the air becomes pocketed under the skin. To relieve this condition it is only necessary to take a sharp knife and puncture the skin. Once the flesh wound has healed there will be no trouble with wind-puffs.

FEEDING AND MANAGEMENT

The housing of the caponized birds is rather a simple problem. They should be handled exactly the same as growing chicks. In many cases a range shelter will satisfy this requirement at the time caponizing is usually performed.

No special kind of feed is needed for the birds. Any good growing mash will be satisfactory. When the birds are more mature, the growing mash should be supplemented with scratch grain to secure the most economical gains.
Keeping the birds on a range that is well covered with green vegetation is highly desirable. Seeding a plot of ground to oats, wheat or alfalfa will provide an excellent range. Considerable nutritive value can be derived by the birds from such a range, since the immature plants are excellent sources of all the known vitamins needed by poultry with the exception of vitamin D. This vitamin is derived from the ultraviolet rays of the sun, or from feeds containing fish oils.

As soon as the birds begin to mature it is possible to distinguish the capons from the partially castrated males (slips). The easiest way of distinguishing the slips is by observing the comb and wattle development. The comb and wattles of the true capon will remain quite small or shrunken in appearance, while those of a slip may grow as large as those of a non-caponized bird. It is advisable to separate the slips from the capons as soon as they are detected. They may be sold as roasters or kept for home use.

The cost involved in the production of capons is subject to many variable factors. Each producer must decide the most profitable time to sell his birds. The feed cost and market price are the most important factors to consider on this point.

The most economical gains are made when the birds are young and growing rapidly. As the birds approach maturity, they require a greater amount of feed to produce a pound of gain, because the increase in body weight is slower while the amount of feed consumed increases. On an average, 10 to 12 pounds of feed are required to produce a pound gain when capons are about 7 months of age. This feed cost may be reduced by keeping scratch grain before the birds at

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**Growing Mash**

(Iowa State College)

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<tr>
<td>Oats</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bran</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corn gluten or soybean oilmeal</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>5</td>
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all times after they are 16 to 20 weeks of age. From an economical standpoint it seems advisable to market the birds as soon as they have attained the body size for which premium prices are being paid.

**MARKET CHANNELS FOR CAPONS**

Capons are a specialized product, requiring somewhat different marketing methods for successful results than are normally followed by producers in selling other chickens.

Iowa capon raisers have several alternative local market outlets. The method of marketing may depend upon: 1. The number of birds raised per farm, 2. the extent to which there is a concentration of production within a community, 3. the location of producers near some processing plant or buyers specializing in the handling of capons, or in the absence of a local market equipped to handle capons, 4. the direct shipment of birds to terminal markets and 5. local retail demand.

Most of the capons produced in Iowa are sold by producers directly to processing plants, where birds are dressed and packed for shipment to eastern markets. Capons are being raised in large numbers in the vicinity of a few Iowa plants where a special effort has been made to provide a satisfactory market for such birds. This development has been brought about by the cooperation of producers and buyers so that economies of large-scale processing and shipment have been effected. In some cases capons are also being sold by producers to local buyers who in turn sell to processing plants or supply a local demand from butchers, restaurants, hotels, clubs and household consumers.

An opportunity exists for producers to supply consumers in local Iowa markets with either freshly killed or frozen capons during the period extending from the fall holiday season to the spring months. In addition direct sales may be made to restaurants, hotels and clubs in instances where there is sufficient production to supply the demand from such institutions.

Many urban consumers are unacquainted with the qualities of capon meat and would utilize capons to a greater extent if their availability were known. The increasing number and
availability of refrigerated locker plants in many Iowa cities permit local urban consumers to purchase dressed capons, or to kill and dress the birds themselves for storage in their lockers.

If producers do not have a satisfactory local market for capons, it is well to contact reputable receivers in terminal markets and obtain information relative to probable prices and how to prepare and pack the birds before making a shipment.

Some shipments of live capons to nearby terminal markets are made by Iowa producers, when the relation of live to dressed capon prices is favorable to live shipments. Where shipments of live capons are made by express or truck, however, producers should consider weight shrinkage and transportation as well as other cost factors, since these costs may be sufficiently high to overcome any apparent advantage of selling live capons in the large market as contrasted with sale in local markets. In live capon shipments, weight shrinkages may vary from 3 percent to over 10 percent, depending upon distance transported, time and care in shipment and handling by receivers in large markets.

**METHOD OF SALE**

Capons can be sold live or dressed on three separate bases in local markets.

1. Cash
2. Consignment
3. Pooling

The first method is in most common use, although the latter two are expected to become more important in future years. In a consignment method of sale, producers receive the final selling price less the cost of processing, transportation and selling costs on his own lot of capons. In a pooling basis, the method often used by cooperative organizations, the same considerations as in consignment selling are used by the producer except that the average market sale prices for a particular period may be used as a basis for returning a net price for the poultry.

Where birds are handled on either a consignment or pooling basis, it is essential that they be graded when marketed
so that payment can be made upon a basis of recognized market descriptions of quality and weights.

MARKET DEMAND

Capons are considered one of the choicest of poultry products and appeal to consumers demanding a well-fleshed and tender-meated bird. The consumers using capons are usually those willing and able to pay a higher price for a quality product and are among the most discriminating of poultry users.

Capons should be of the finest quality in respect to covering of flesh on the breast, as well as texture and quality of fleshing. Where there are market defects or where the bird is not well-fleshed when received at the processing plant, it is usually placed in one of the lower quality grades of roasters rather than being marketed as a capon. Birds in which the caponizing operation was not successful should be sold as soon as they are observed, since these slips sell for little or no more than roasting chickens of the same weight. Slips are also packed in second and third grades of capons according to the tentative United States grades and other market specifications.

Freshly killed capons sold on the terminal markets are available in largest quantities during the months of November to March. During the winter months, demand for such birds is greatest, since freshly killed roasters have become "staggy" and have lost the soft-meated, fine-textured quality most desired by the consumer.

Frozen capons are sold on the market in greatest quantities during the late winter and early spring months when freshly killed capons and heavy roasting chickens are not available. Storage facilities for holding capons over long periods in processing and storage plants are adequate. While the prices quoted in the markets distinguish between frozen and freshly killed capons, there is little to distinguish between the quality of birds stored for several months and those sold to consumers immediately after killing and dressing, if they have been handled and stored under proper conditions.

The varying demand for live capons in large markets such as New York, Chicago and local Iowa markets may arise
Fig. 7. Relation of 5-pound dressed capon prices to 5-pound roasting chicken prices at New York City, 1934-38 inclusive. (Producers Price Current, New York City.)

from consumers who desire poultry at holiday periods or who, due to customs or religious preferences, desire to dress their birds at home or immediately before use. Such demands must be considered in the method of marketing used.

**CAPON PRICES**

Prior to 1928, turkey prices were higher than capon prices in a market such as New York, which is the largest consuming center in the country. During the past 11 years, rapid increases in turkey production without an equally appreciable increase in capon production has resulted in capon prices remaining above turkey prices. The future price relationship with other poultry may be less favorable to capon production unless there is a stimulation of demand accompanying production increases.

Comparisons of 5-pound dressed capon prices with highest prices for 5-pound roasters in the New York market are shown in fig. 7. This comparison indicates the marked advantage in the price of this or heavier weights of capons over roasting chickens.

Terminal market prices and methods of quoting classes and quality specifications largely determine the buying methods used in local Iowa markets. Prices quoted on both the New York and Chicago markets are most important in influencing
prices paid by Iowa processors and handlers of dressed and live capons.

Heavier weight birds, because of their scarcity and desirable quality and size, command a higher price than lighter weight capons of identical quality of fleshing. These lighter weight capons compete more directly with roasting chickens.

The increased feed cost of growing capons to heavier weights and the possibility of mortality in holding birds for longer periods influences capon producers to market live birds at weights of 8 to 9 pounds. This weight range receives satisfactory optimum prices on the markets.

Prices of dressed capons are quoted by weight classes from 4 to 12 pounds and above on the various markets. The Chicago quotation for live capons usually is on a weight basis of

![Graph showing prices of live capons in Chicago, 1935-39 inclusive. Prices of live capons are usually quoted seasonally from November to March. (Chicago Price Current.)](image-url)
under 7 pounds, and 7 pounds and over, with slips quoted separately. The seasonal trend of live capon prices in the Chicago market from 1935 to 1939 is indicated in fig. 8.

While no specific grades are defined for capons on the live poultry markets, other than the usual quality requirements for live chickens, the quotation of the market refers to first-grade capons, while second-grade quality birds command a lower price in accordance with the extent of their defects. These differences in prices range from 5 to 6 cents a pound below the highest grade price.

Prices of dressed capons are usually quoted upon the principal markets from September or October until March as freshly killed birds, while frozen capon prices are usually quoted from March to September each year. In some years there are no quotations during certain months for specific sizes of capons, due somewhat to lack of demand but also to
the lack of sufficient supplies on the market to warrant a price being quoted.

The trend of the dressed capon market at New York for various weights during the period 1934 to 1938, inclusive, is shown in fig. 9. This indicates an average price advantage in the heavier weights over lighter weights of 1 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents for each 1-pound increase in weight.

**TIME TO MARKET**

Capons are most in demand during the winter and spring months when supplies of freshly killed roasters are not available.

The longer growing period coupled with a desire to avoid direct competition with other types of poultry has influenced producers to market their capons from December on, after the heavy market movement of roasting chickens has ceased. Most Iowa processing plants have completed the processing of capons by Feb. 15. From March on, frozen birds are the most important source of capon supplies on the large markets.

The markets upon which producer prices are based are usually somewhat higher from February to March, inclusive, than during October, November and December. Prices depend upon the supplies available and the demand for immediate consumption and for storage.

**QUALITY GRADES FOR CAPONS**

Since the greatest proportion of the capons marketed are processed in the state for shipment to eastern markets, the dressed quality of the birds is important to producers even though the birds may be sold alive.

Quality grade specifications have not been clearly defined upon the principal markets, and the only available definition of dressed quality grades of capons are the United States tentative specifications for standards and grades.

These dressed capon grades are four in number: U. S. Special or Grade AA, U. S. Prime or Grade A, U. S. Choice or Grade B and U. S. Commercial or Grade C.

Dressed capons of the quality of U. S. Prime or Grade A are defined as young caponized male birds, well-fatted and
fine-grained, well-fleshed breast, well covered with fat and with soft glossy skin and practically free of pinfeathers. No flesh bruises and only very slight skin bruises, abrasions or discolorations permitted, none of which shall be on the breast. No crooked breasts or other deformities allowed. Other specifications for this grade relate to qualities affected by dressing methods.

The specifications of the U. S. Prime or Grade A indicates the type of capon desired by market agencies in local markets. Live birds not possessing these qualities must be packed in lower grades of roasters or capons. Birds which are unfinished and thin in flesh, crooked breasted or poorly feathered are discounted from 2 to 4 or more cents a pound below the price paid for prime quality birds.

KILLING AND DRESSING CAPONS FOR LOCAL CONSUMPTION

Many producers desire to dress birds for sale to local consumers or to restaurants and hotels. In order to prepare a bird so that it will appeal to consumers, extreme care must be taken to have the bird well bled and to completely remove the feathers without causing flesh or skin blemishes.

Detailed explanations of the killing and dressing operations are described in Farmers Bulletin 1377. This bulletin may be obtained from the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., or the Iowa Agricultural Extension Service.

HANDLING CAPONS AFTER THEY ARE DRESSED

Few producers have a sufficient quantity of poultry to justify facilities for cooling the birds promptly. For this reason, farm dressing is desirable only in cases where the birds can be held under refrigeration or in a frozen condition, where birds are to be used by local trade within a few hours after killing or where they can be preserved by canning.

The capons can be prepared in various ways for local trade. The usual practice is to sell birds as New York dressed (bled and picked), or as drawn birds (bled, picked and with head, feet and all inedible organs removed).
Dressing loss (blood and feathers only) averages approximately 10 percent under commercial conditions.

MARKET INFORMATION

Daily radio reports on capon prices in the New York and Chicago markets provide producers with the latest information as to the prices in these markets. While capon prices are quoted only seasonally, producers can gain information by listening to radio station WOI daily during the season when they are marketing their birds. The usual periods for quoting capon prices at New York and Chicago are from October until February and March.

Local processing plants are usually supplied with market information concerning the trend and condition of the market. Daily papers in the state also carry complete reports of prices in the larger markets.

MARKETING SUGGESTIONS

Capon producers can secure best results by selling to market agencies equipped to process and pack birds in uniform grades for shipment. While local consumers may offer a limited outlet for capons in many communities, most of the birds are sold in eastern markets and can be most economically handled by local agencies in direct contact with the market. Producers of quality birds appear to have a better opportunity to gain satisfactory returns if sales are made on a grade basis rather than an ungraded basis. Usually weight classes, where capons are purchased alive by local buyers, are closely related to the various dressed weight classes in the principal markets.

To secure a direct expression of market demands and a comparison of terminal market prices with local prices, the selling of capons by producers after the birds have been processed, on a basis of uniform weight and quality grades, appears desirable from the standpoint of producer and buyer alike. Since grading can be more clearly defined on dressed carcasses than on the live bird, producers who sell on a dressed basis can gain more information concerning quality of capons they produce. In addition, it is possible for the buyer to
place more definite value on dressed birds, since their relation in price to the market is more evident than in the live condition.

Since capons cannot be fed satisfactorily in fattening stations of processing plants, they should be marketed only when in a prime condition suitable for immediate processing upon arrival at the plant. The condition of the birds should be the principal factor determining the time to sell, since unfinished or poor-quality birds are not desired by a discriminating trade.