Litter

Article by: Frank Wiedlocher

Every pigeon breeder, when first getting into the fancy, has a number of decisions to make as to the best housing and feeding available. Many young breeders have been blessed with a mentor, who can guide them until, through their own experience, they can make quality decisions on their own. When I first got into pigeons, ground corncobs were the breeders' choice in my area. Many suggested that this be top dressed with sodium bisulfate to provide an acid environment hostile to the growth of the paratyphoid organism. I, too, used this method, but realized that the availability of corncobs was coming to a close as picker-sheller equipment became more prevalent in the fields. There was also a problem of the bi-sulfate crystals not sticking well in the litter, besides being a somewhat poisonous substance. There were commercial litters available back in those days (cotton seed hulls treated with carbolic acid was popular with the poultry raisers). Most of these litters were pretty expensive for the average raiser, who preferred to spend his money on better feed, housing, and breeder stock. Wendell Levi suggested that the bird's own dropping could be used as litter in wooden-floor lofts. Trying this, I found that is was satisfactory for smaller birds, such as rollers, but was useless with the large utility breeds in the high humidity environment of the Midwest where droppings were slow to dry. Some breeders suggested sand, but it has no acid content, invites eating as grit, and seems less than idea especially in my area. Experimenting with wood shavings, I found them to be too light, blowing away and ending up in corners and waterers. Furthermore, Levi thought exposure to fresh milled wood was conducive to the occurrence of paratyphoid in the loft. What I needed then, was a litter that was locally available, economical, having an acid content, and that could be used on wood, concrete, and even dirt floors. About this time, using the draino/ corncob litter I got paratyphoid in my loft for the first (thankfully only) time.

Not far from me was a sawmill where local hardwoods (mainly oak) were cut for use in pallets, railroad ties, ect. The bark was ground off before the logs were sawn to save wear on the blades. This accumulated in great piles and, at that time, could be hauled off by the truckload by anyone who wanted. I tried this for litter after re-establishing my flock and found it to be the perfect litter for my needs.

On wood or concrete floors I screen out the fines and chunks and layer it about 3" deep. On dirt floor lofts I pretty much use it straight and layer it about 6" deep. In my dirt floor lofts I remove a couple of inches of the dirt first and replace it with Ag-lime. It is necessary to place the bark thickly over this so the birds can never get to the lime and eat it for grit. I occasionally rake out the bark, sometimes add some if needed, and remove clumps of droppings under perches, ect. where they mat into the bark. The bark keeps the floor dry. However, in places where waters ect., are and splashing might make the floor damp, I am equally as safe due to the release

from the bark of tannic acid which creates an adverse environment for most organisms that cause disease in pigeons.

In the late fall, after molting, I entirely replace the bark, which I pile at the end of the garden and let compost for the shrubs and flowerbeds. Hardwood bark has a pleasant smell and tends to incorporate dust and feather dander, keeping the loft a more pleasant place.

From time to time I have not been able to obtain fresh hardwood bark and offer some thoughts on substitutes. If you can obtain composted hardwood bark at a local nursery, it works almost as well, although there may be more fines to screen out. While pine bark mulch isn't as acidic, it will work although "nuggets" tend to be too course. I suspect "millrun" softwood bark in the northwest would work almost as well as our local hardwood bark., but have never used it. Bagged "cypress" bark mulch in inadequate.

So for those of you living in humid areas of the country where bark is available, especially oak/hardwood bark, you might want to give it a try.

More About Floor Litter

Thanks to Frank Weidlocker for the very information article in the last issue of the Bulletin about different types of material and their preparation. I would like to add to that article with the method that I use and have found very good over the past 25 plus years.

I start out with a totally clean loft, scrapped and swept out completely. Wooden floors serve me the best. Then I spray the entire loft and all the surfaces of the feed containers, not the area where the feed goes, with Malathion 50%.

After that is dry, I then put down a sprinkling of either Flowers of Sulfur or the agriculture Sulfur which is a very small, flat pellet that looks like a small lentil. The pellet will turn to a powder and work just like the Flowers of Sulfur.

The last step is to put down about 2 inches of the least expensive cat litter or oil dry you can buy. This method makes it very easy to rake and pick out the clumps of waste and the feathers during the molt. I pick out and rake about twice a week. It takes me about half an hour to one hour to do 5 lofts.

The cat litter or oil dry is a type of dry clay that I understand they get from Missouri. When you rake and pick out the loft, it makes for good compost for the yard or garden.

As for adding any of the chemicals that Frank referred to, I do not do that but will look into the matter further.