Keeping Chickens

Why Keep Chickens? Well, quite simply put, Chickens are fun. Ideal for a free source of eggs, probably the best quality eggs that you can lay your hands on, keeping chickens can be both a rewarding and entertaining introduction to the routines of keeping and looking after livestock.

People keep chickens for many reasons: to show, for food, just for eggs, to rescue them from the terrible conditions in which they are kept on a lot (although not all) commercial farms, or maybe for a combination of reasons. They are simple to keep and maintain. They take up very little room in comparison to most other forms of livestock, and until only very recently almost every household in a rural or semi-rural environment had chickens at the bottom of the garden.

Oh I can't keep chickens! What will the neighbours think?

Well, probably nothing at all actually. Most chickens are particularly docile and will only make a noise when they are excited, by either food or fear. Sometimes our hens make a terrible racket if I am throwing them slugs and snails from the garden, much more than when they are fed their rations. They will also make a lot of noise if there is a predator about such as a fox, but other than that they rarely disturb (certainly no more than a loft full of pigeons).

One thing to remember though is, if you want to hatch your own eggs, then you will need a cockerel, and most city dwelling folk probably wouldn't appreciate a cockerel letting rip first thing in the morning, every time it finds food (to call the hens), whenever it notices you about the place or just because he likes the sound of his own voice. You don't need a cockerel for the hens to produce eggs, they can do that quite happily on their own. So there is no real reason not to have a couple really.

Note: Some new developments (and some older developments) actually have clauses in the deeds for the properties specifically excluding you from keeping chickens. It is best to check the deeds before you take some chickens on.

So where can I house my chickens?

Provided that they afford the opportunity for the chickens to stay dry and out of draughts, many structures could reasonably become a suitable chicken house, with a few minor alterations. You could buy a purpose-built chicken ark or commercial plastic chicken house, you could convert an old shed or if you are really handy you could easily make a house out of wood reclaimed from pallets.

Traditionally garden-kept hens would live in a moveable chicken ark about 3 foot wide by 8 foot long, with a nice comfy 3 foot square house to sleep and lay their eggs in. This would provide adequate space for three hens to live, with access to grass to scratch about in. If they have handles these are easily moved around the garden and can save the grass being stripped bare, and a door at the end for easy access will provide the opportunity for the hens to be let out to roam a bit more.

Again, if you are handy you can normally build one of these for less than £50 and it should last for years.

One point though. Chickens and well-kept gardens don't mix. They will eat and scratch at anything green in the garden, either to eat the plant itself or the bugs on, around or underneath it. If your garden is your pride and joy, then extra thought to housing may be required, because left to roam they will have an impact!!

What can I feed my chickens?

Chickens are omnivorous. If left to be totally free range, with a handful of Layers Pellets in the morning, and a handful of grain in the evening, all chickens will thrive on what they can find around the garden. However, the garden won't thrive around the chickens as three hens can do a surprising amount of damage, especially if they get into your vegetable patch. Chicken feed can be obtained easily from most agricultural suppliers and if you have the space go for the 25kg sacks.

Basically, for the beginner there are two types of feed to think about: Layers Pellets and Mixed Grain. Layers Pellets are a commercially formulated feed which can (but does not always) include medicinal additives to control certain chicken diseases. If required, organic Layers Pellets, with only natural additives, are available. Mixed Grain is literally what it says. Basically, when feeding hens ideally:

- Feed them 2oz of Layers Pellets in the morning, and 2oz Mixed Grain in the evening
- Give them slugs and snails as treats
- Change the water every day - chickens are thirsty creatures, and fresh water every day is essential. Don't leave water from yesterday in the drinker if the drinker looks full - that way bugs can't get established in their water supply.

Are chickens hard to care for?

Most breeds of chickens are particularly hardy and will require very little care if given sufficient space in which to roam. The key to maintaining a healthy flock is as much about prevention and good husbandry as treating illness and regular visits to your local vet. Proper food, access to clean fresh water, a dry and draught-free roost, and space to roam will ensure that your flock will remain in very good health with little involvement from you.

Most of the care-related problems affecting chickens kept commercially simply won't affect you as a small poultry keeper. Claws are kept short, and don't become overgrown, because the hens can scratch. Feathers aren't pecked, because the hens have enough space. Some basic knowledge on care is important, but almost without exception questions about care can be answered by the breeder/rescuer who sold you the hens, or on specialised poultry forums, other forums for general smallholding and sustainable living, or indeed our own green forum.

In short chickens are very easy to care for, can make great pets and give a wonderful return in eggs.

Which chickens to keep?

Different chickens exist for different jobs. Rare breeds tend to be for meat or eggs (or in some cases are classified as dual purpose and are good for both) and can be expensive to acquire as laying hens.

However, there are a number of organisations who rescue (although I like to think of this as another form of recycling) year-old battery hens who have completed their first year of lay, and are now less commercially viable than a new hen. Although these hybrid brown hens still have a number of years of laying before them, commercial farms just want rid, so either pass them on to re-homing organisations or simply send them off to slaughter. Most of these organisations only charge a nominal amount (if at all) for you to re-house one of these hens, and can be used to acquire lovely friendly hens, just wondering what the great outdoors has to offer.

If you are thinking of keeping hens for the first time, this should be a serious consideration.

Keeping chickens is good economics!!!

25kg of Layers Pellets will cost you approx £7.00

25kg of Mixed Grain will cost you approx £7.00

… and this will feed three hens for 126 days (roughly) … so allowing a little spare, three hens would need six bags of feed a year (i.e. £42).

Now if each hen produces 6 eggs a week for 10 months of the year (let's say she has a day off every week, and two months off for the moult), three hens would lay 780 eggs or 130 half-dozen boxes. Now at current prices for organic eggs (£1.80 per half-dozen) that is £234.00 worth of eggs for £42.00. Bedding can be found for free from various sources but equally, bought is not that expensive. So chickens in the garden are good value.

So what next?

Check out the following sites for details on rescued hens.

The Battery Hen Welfare Trust

www.thehenshouse.co.uk/links.html

DEFRA

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/farmed/layers

Practical Poultry

www.practicalpoultry.co.uk/