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Opening Extract from...

Chicken Manual

The Complete Step-by-Step Guide to Keeping Chickens

Written by Laurence Beeken

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INTRODUCTION

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Why keep chickens?

Up until as recently as the 1950s it was the norm for many households – even in inner city areas – to keep poultry alongside their vegetables. It was a practical way to get fresh eggs and the occasional roast bird, and a means of controlling pest infestations in the garden, so that in effect chickens contributed as much to the kitchen garden as plants did. Unfortunately the rise of post-war consumerism and the ensuing availability and cheapness of meat from the new 'super' markets more or less saw an end to this aspect of domestic gardening. Regular salmonella scares in the 1980s and, more recently, concerns over bird 'flu (Avian influenza) have since resulted in further decline, and now most gardeners seem to have largely forgotten that chickens once played an integral part in sustaining the family.

Fortunately, however, there has recently been a resurgence of interest in keeping backyard chickens, due in no small part to concerns about welfare, pesticides and genetically modified foods, as highlighted by the proliferation of lifestyle programmes on our television screens as we sit down to our evening meals.

For the kitchen gardener there are several very good reasons to employ a few birds around the place, as chickens are great company, especially for children; and as far as your household is concerned they'll earn their keep by providing enough eggs for a small family to cook with and eat. Furthermore, since you control their intake of food and water you'll know that your eggs are from happy healthy chickens, not a factory farm, and need have no fears of them being affected by antibiotic treatments or anything genetically modified.

Below: Chickens are an essential part of the kitchen garden.





Above: Children are fascinated by poultry.

An additional benefit is that in return for a balanced layers' ration and the ability to free-range, your hens can be counted on to seek out and destroy all manner of pests that might infest your garden and lawn, and will produce high-quality manure which, when combined with your compost, will make an ideal fertiliser for your plants.

Where to put them

How many times have you thought 'If only I could do something with that bit of garden,' or 'It's about time that weed bed was sorted out'? Well, that piece of spare ground might be just the area where a few chickens could thrive, if properly managed. Keeping chickens there will make it productive and will create an area that suddenly the whole family is interested in, particularly the children, who seem to delight in the funny ways of poultry – for them it will also be an educational experience, teaching them about livestock and providing an understanding of the practical issues relating to husbandry.

Below: Free range is the best option for your birds.



You are what you eat

Since you have full control over the diet that your home-kept birds are fed, both in quality and variety, you can contribute directly towards the nutritional content, so that eggs from your own hens may well be healthier for you. There is some evidence that free-range eggs contain a greater amount of folic acid, Vitamin B12 and Vitamin A than battery eggs, and with a more varied diet the eggs produced by your own chickens may well be even better for you than those from commercial free-range birds. Certain types of egg, such as those from Araucanas, may even be lower in cholesterol, and since eggs in general contain less harmful cholesterol than was originally thought, if you remove the yolk you have a high protein, low fat snack. On the downside, there are increasing consumer concerns regarding the levels of potentially dangerous drug, hormone and antibiotic residues that may be present in intensively produced eggs.

Home-produced eggs

Today, eggs purchased from supermarkets and shops are generally of high quality and freshness thanks to initiatives such as the Lion Quality stamp, which means that people no longer have to break an egg into a cup first to check that it hasn't gone off. Despite this, however, most backyard poultry-keepers will still tell you that their eggs are far superior to shop-bought eggs of whatever type – and it's certainly true that if you've never cracked a home-produced egg into a frying pan and watched the deeply coloured yolks sizzle, then you really don't know what you are missing.

Just as people say that home-grown vegetables are much tastier, the same could be said when comparing home-produced eggs to those supplied through a supermarket. You only have to crack one brought from a shop to notice the thinner shell and the watery contents, whereas your own carefully fed free-ranging birds will lay eggs with a fantastic yellow yolk and a thick white – not a bit like some insipid shop-bought ones which have often been artificially enhanced with colorants to make them more appealing to unsuspecting shoppers.



Above: The lion stamp guarantees quality.

Table birds

Whilst some keepers may want eggs, and some want pets, others find it more useful to keep poultry for meat, and their chickens are consequently referred to as 'table birds'. Understandably, the thought of killing the birds may be abhorrent to some, but just like home-produced eggs, those who have made the leap to home-reared table birds will never go back to shop-bought poultry. But if it is your intention to keep table birds then it must be clearly understood and accepted from the start that the day will come when they must be killed, dressed, and eaten, and

Below: Light Sussex make an ideal table bird.





Above: Free range gives a much better texture to the flesh of table birds.

unless you're prepared to do this humanely and properly then this is not the option for you.

As far as the quality of meat is concerned, a bird kept free-range will have a more meaty texture to its flesh as well as a better flavour, as it has been able to range freely, allowing the muscles to become developed and rich in blood supply and therefore nutrients, meaning in turn that its bones are stronger and less likely to splinter. Quite often birds sold as free-range in the shops have only met the minimum requirements laid down to qualify as such, and if you compared their meat to your own birds you'd be very much surprised by the inferior taste.

A breed that attains a good size for the table and has hens which produce a good quantity of quality eggs in the laying year is referred to as a utility breed, and it is from the original utility birds that all of today's breeds and hybrids have descended. A breed that produces birds of both table and laying quality is described as dual purpose.

Below: Showing is a rewarding hobby.



As a hobby

Living in a world with so many stresses and strains, keeping poultry can be more than just a productive hobby. One of the most regularly prescribed cures for people who have stress-related illnesses or have suffered heart problems is to get a hobby, while someone nearing retirement age is frequently advised to 'keep yourself occupied'. And as a hobby, keeping poultry has one distinct advantage over, for example, fishing – which is that it's a seven days a week, 52 weeks a year pastime; in other words, it generates continued interest.

Depending on the time and money available to you, keeping chickens for a few eggs can eventually progress to an interest in exhibiting purebreds, which was one of the most popular and high-profile pastimes of the Victorian era and is today slowly re-emerging as a popular hobby. Many new and experienced owners, having found hobby keeping to be fun, are only too willing to show off their birds, perhaps starting with a local summer show and then progressing, with experience, to the larger national events, where winning brings attention to you as a breeder and attracts a higher price for your stock.

If you find exhibiting live birds too much trouble but enjoy the competitive spirit, there are always egg classes too where competition is just as buoyant and equally fierce.

Welfare concerns

Nowadays, more than ever, we are increasingly aware of animal welfare and organic culture, so one compelling reason for keeping your own chickens must be that their lives will be better and you need not feel the guilt of suspecting that your food might be the product of cruelty or neglect. Even when you're rearing a bird for meat, you're safe in the knowledge that it lived a comfortable, healthy life before being quickly and painlessly dispatched without being subjected to the trauma of travel.

Below: Battery hens are a sorrowful sight when first rescued.





Above: The Sultan is a rare breed worthy of conservation.

Conservation

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust (www.rbst.org.uk) is the leading conservation charity working to restore Britain's native livestock breeds to their rightful place in our countryside, and is funded entirely by membership subscriptions, donations and legacies. As with many things fads and fashions come and go, and it is no different with poultry, where different breeds become popular for a season and are then forgotten. The hobby keeper can do much to help by keeping a few rare breeds as part of the garden flock (as long as you remember to keep them segregated from other breed males during mating), and thus maintaining a genetic pool for the future.

Selling and profit

You'll never become a millionaire by selling chickens for profit – in fact most people will only tend to break even, especially as feed costs continue to rise. But having said that, chicken-keeping is still a hobby that can pay for itself when you sell birds, eggs and meat (taking into account any relevant legislation, for which you should visit the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website at www.DEFRA.gov.uk/foodrin/poultry/trade/index.htm).

Eggs can be sold on a small scale to neighbours and friends, and you'll find a steady stream of people only too willing to take a slaughtered table bird off of your hands. Fertile eggs can be sold via eBay as well as the sales sections of certain poultry websites, although there are website and legal guidelines that you'll need to research. Good exhibition results will certainly help you achieve higher prices, as will a keen eye for the next popular breed or colour.

Local farmers' markets and established poultry auctions are ideal for selling live birds, but again you need to be fully conversant with the pertinent regulations – both statutory and bespoke to the market – before selling, as a bad bird will be associated with your name well into the future.

The selling of sundries and equipment may well be a more profitable option if you're of a mind to set up your own business, but a thorough knowledge of poultry is essential if you're to compete with the major players in the market.

The law

Under new laws introduced to control Avian influenza, you must register with the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) if you own or are responsible for a poultry premises with 50 or more birds.

This requirement also applies even if the premises are only stocked with 50 or more birds for part of the year. At present premises with fewer than 50 birds are not required to register, based on expert advice that smaller flocks are less likely to play a significant role in the spread of disease, but keepers are still encouraged to register voluntarily. In addition to this, if you're a poultry breeder with over 100 birds you'll also need to register your premises and apply for a registration number, which will need to be quoted on all dispatches from your premises. Full details can be found at www.DEFRA.gov.uk/foodrin/poultry/trade/marketregs/hatchingregs.htm (click the link that relates to the production and marketing of hatching eggs).

The regulations don't necessarily mean or refer to 50 of one species (although this may be the case) but 50 overall – for example, if you have 30 chickens, 15 geese, 4 ducks and a rhea you'll still need to register.

Below: Eggs can still be sold at the gate.

