

Chicken Keeping

Contributed by Treacodactyl

Chickens are one of the first animals people consider keeping when they think about downsizing. They are ideal as they can be easy to keep, they are manageable and they can give quick returns. Now is a great time to consider keeping them as there has been renewed interest in keeping poultry over the last few years.

{kl_thumbimage img="henhols.jpg"}

Keeping Chickens in the Garden

I aim to give an introduction to keeping a few hens based on our own experience of keeping three hens in our back garden. More in depth articles focussing on specific areas such as housing, feeding, moulting, pests and diseases, will hopefully appear in the following weeks and will draw on other peoples experiences and comments. If there are any comments, suggestions or disagreements please post in the poultry and animal section or PM me and they will be taken onboard.

I regard myself as a novice poultry keeper but after keeping hens for a couple of years feel I can help people get started. There are many useful resources available to a new poultry keeper from books to online forums. Details can be found in the links section and don't forget to check out the poultry and livestock forum on this site!

After the initial semi-serious suggestion I made, we thought that it would be an excellent idea to keep a few pet hens. Our idea was to have a supply of eggs from hens we knew were well cared for and we knew what they had eaten. Additional benefits would be their ability to help keep the pests down in our garden and to supply a ready source of compost (from their bedding and droppings). Buff and Speckled Sussex Chickens

After some research we decided to get some Sussex hens as they are a common hardy breed that should be easy to keep and happy in our garden. As we have close neighbours we decided against keeping a cockerel due to the noise that some people can object to. We managed to track down a breeder who was happy for us to visit before we decided what birds to choose. It is important to visit the breeder if at all possible as this enables you to check the conditions the chickens have been raised in. Put simply, they should look clean, healthy and happy. It is often recommended not to purchase from auctions or markets as there is a greater risk of buying diseased or badly kept birds.

Transporting the Chickens

We decided on a Speckled Sussex and a couple of Buff Sussex hens as the buffs should lay a little better but I've always wanted a speckled hen! They were 12-15 weeks old when we picked them up. To transport them home, we carefully placed them in a cardboard box in the back of our car. The breeder gave us some instructions and a little growers feed. We drove home with the occasional 'peep peep' emanating from the boot each time we went over a bump. To ensure our new arrivals were happy we left them in a large cardboard box in the kitchen overnight so we could keep an eye on them. This also gave me the opportunity to finish the construction of their ark.

Keeping Chickens in an Ark

There are many ways to keep chickens. When only keeping a few birds, especially if they become pets, protection from predators is essential. I have often read people saying they thought their chickens would be fine and that they thought no foxes were in the area, until all the family pet hens were killed one day. I do not think there are many areas where predators (foxes, cats, dogs etc) will not exist so I feel it is best to assume they are in the area. Certainly at night and, unless you can keep a reliable eye on them, during the day a good protective enclosure is essential.

One of the simplest ways to keep chickens is in an ark. These can be purchased from an ever increasing number of suppliers or can be constructed yourself. I decided construct my own one to keep the price down. As often happens, it took a little longer than expected but it has lasted well and the hens seem happy with my handy work. Some people feel that an ark is too small to keep poultry in permanently but I find it a matter of personal preference. The chickens will have far more room than most farm birds and if they can be let out for while each day they will be far happier than most chickens in this world. Ours tend to be let out most weekends and for as much time during the week as possible. They initially seem to object to being shut in, but once they have decided they're not going to be let out for a while they seem quite contented. When they spend the whole day free in the garden they often end up sitting around (often in our house) once they have fed, bathed and preened themselves.

There are many designs for arks and movable hen houses. Before deciding which one to choose I have a few points to

consider. If you plan to move the house around the garden then make sure it is movable, my home made ark is a little too heavy. Make sure that the run area has suitable mesh on the underside as chickens can dig quite deep holes and predators could also dig under. I feel some of the number of birds that some manufacturers state can be housed in their arks is a little optimistic. It is always worth checking that the number of birds you wish to keep will be suitable, but this will depend on the type and size of bird.

Once our hens settled in they quickly became part of the family. After initial worries about letting them out, I decided to give them a taste of freedom while keeping a very close eye on them. As they had spent several weeks getting used to us as sources of food it was easy to control them by having a handful of corn or other titbits. What was a little surprising is that it took them several weeks to start eating what I regarded as typical chicken food, i.e. worms, slugs and other creatures. Now though, as soon as they are let out they go rummaging around the garden after all sorts of morsels. We try to ensure they do not get hold of anything we don't want them to such as slow worms, frogs and toads as they will happily tackle quite large prey!

During their life we have had a few problems with them that I will go into detail in future instalments but one thing we both agree on is that we do not regret getting them and would recommend them to anyone who can spare some time to look after them. They have become very dear pets, each with a unique character.

If you are interested in seeing our hens and for a few more details, visit: www.dugo.demon.co.uk

For some useful links click here:[Web Links](#)

To discuss Poultry keeping click here:[Downsizer Forum](#)

To see an article about feeding my Chickens click here

To see an article about problems with my Chickens click here