

Thorny problems



Helen Yemm

answers
your
questions

Hen heaven

I saw an advertisement recently for a small, pod-like, minimalist hen-house which made me realise that, spurred on by food scares and the laudable desire to grow one's own, garden poultry could become the next ornamental must-have. The eggs are fabulous and chickens make great pets, but they do need a lot of care, attention and ideally, as reader Tricia Hobbs points out, space.

It is some months since I gained my new feathered friends – a lame young cockerel (Trevor) and three sassy females. The presence of a cock makes hens infinitely more interesting and, apart from his limp (caused by gout, for which he needs regular injections), Trevor seems to be a remarkably satisfied bird.

The cost, however, is considerable. Vet visits were just the start: we had bought the wrong kind of hen-house, one best suited to bantams or medium breeds (which we originally intended to keep), with a sleeping loft and nest box accessible by ladder. This turned out to be fine for wife No. 1, Janet (an agile, regular-sized hen), but unsuitable for the larger Marans. And it was certainly a bit tough for poor Trevor. So the ark is up for sale (almost new... four careful owners...) and has been replaced with a larger, ladder-less hut. A ridiculous fuss? Perhaps.

The good – and more sensible – news is that the solar/battery-powered moveable mesh fencing continues to work a treat, so the hut is surrounded by a generous predator-safe scratching ground.

In the early days, one or other of the girls would occasionally escape by flapping lumpily off the roof of the hut (where they all like to sit in a row in the afternoons). It is on wheels, so we now take care to site it well away from the perimeter so that the hens crash-land well within their compound. When I am gardening, I switch off the power (allowing the solar panel to perk up the battery) and drop the fencing down to let the little troupe forage freely in rougher parts of the garden. Under Trevor's watchful guidance they scratch around, tails up, heads down, tut-tut-tutting softly to each other as they unearth goodies under hedges, in old grass heaps and anywhere I happen to be working. They always greet us with a mass flap-and-run (Trevor actually gallops) and will take treats from our hands. Anything goes: they snap up worm or grub look-alikes such as cold spaghetti and rice, and get quite frenzied over wrinkly grapes from the bottom of the Christmas fruit bowl.

There have been problems. Wily pheasants and hoards of squabbling sparrows constantly strip the poultry pellet-hopper. Catching everyone for regular de-lousing can be a flappety business for all concerned, which alarms the young, protective Trevor. And taking him to the vet involves plucking him off his perch after dark, putting him in a cat basket for the night and driving him 12 miles to Tunbridge Wells next morning.

Sadly, neither of the original Marans hens is still with us. One turned nasty, the



Pictures: MARTIN POPE; PHILIP HOLLIS

went barmy. An experienced friend of ours put her out of her misery.

Happily, however, the troupe seems to have settled down. We have three happy hens, two of which – the original black Janet and a new, rather glamorous, Gold Laced Wyandotte (Nina) give us daily eggs. The third is another new-comer, Sandy, a timid little brown scrap re-homed from a poultry farm, who is growing bolder by the second now that she is living in what must seem like hen heaven. She will, I am sure, start laying imminently.

I have had scores of encouraging letters from poultry-gardeners who regard our rather embarrassing antics to date as quite normal. But I do worry about the intrigued readers toying with the idea of keeping chickens, which is why I am highlighting the problems. In return for the pleasure – and eggs they give – domestic chickens definitely appreciate human contact and need attending to twice a day, rain or shine. You have to open their door in the morning to refresh their food and water, then close them up again after dusk, their "bed-time", absolutely without fail. Since ours live behind an electric fence, I would risk leaving their door open for an occasional night, but I will certainly have to rely on friends or neighbours to shut

The weekly clean-out is a mucky, dusty and unpleasant chore, although all that guano is good for the compost heap. Keep confined in a tiny house and run, chickens will quickly become tetchy and smelly. But let them roam in a smart, manicured garden and they will scratch it to bits in a couple of months, as town gardener Rosi Rogers discovered. Things do go wrong, and it came as a surprise to find how few vets have had poultry experience. And we cannot imagine how we, or our chickens would have fared without the help and support of experienced poultry-keeping friends.

A final thought: if you love the idea of chickens but really can't provide them with what they need, keep them by proxy: £20 will buy five birds and a coop that can dramatically improve the life and prospects of a South Indian villager. Try www.goodgifts.org. For information about electric poultry fencing call 01732 833976 (www.electricfencing.co.uk).