

episode 29 show notes and advice

For regular listeners, or those familiar with Arthur's family of feathered friends, you'll know that hens are his area of expertise. From those that are ideal for egg laying, to those that make pleasant poultry pets, Arthur can recommend the right breeds. This week's episode of 'Grow, cook, eat, arrange' is all about how to choose and care for hens of your own.

Sarah & Arthur divulge their experiences with picking a suitable chicken coop, keeping them safe from foxes and other foes, and we hear Arthur's take on a classic cake recipe using your own fresh eggs – the classic Victoria sponge.

In this episode, discover:

- How to protect your hens from foxes and other predators
- The best breeds to keep as layers or as pets
- What & how often to feed, and keeping feeders out of reach of rodents
- How to put your hens' eggs to delicious use in making a Victoria Sponge

Links & references:

Shop on the Sarah Raven website: <http://bit.ly/3jvbaeu>

Get in touch: info@sarahraven.com

Follow Sarah: <https://bit.ly/3jDTvBp>

Follow Arthur: <https://bit.ly/3jxSKK5>

Episode 29 advice sheet | Hens in the garden

Along with gardening, hens are Arthur's great passion in life. He has had hens since he was 5, and only had a break when he was living in London for a year while training at Kew.

Arthur thinks different hens serve different roles in our life; he loves them all but he divides the many different breeds into two different classes:

- Hens for laying eggs, usually hybrids or dual-purpose pure breeds. These lay beautifully coloured eggs in large numbers, especially in their first three years. These breeds are all hardy and robust and best kept behind chicken wire for the sake of your garden. Arthur recommends a

flock of 3 or 5 of these hens in a large garden or allotment to supply a family with plenty of home laid eggs through the year.

- Hens as companions. Suitable breeds usually have larger characters than the layers and can be treated as beautiful objects of drama in your garden. These breeds include the pure breed tiny bantams that are hens in miniature (like toy dogs!) and many have plumed feet that reduces any damage to the garden. Eggs, however, are not laid in huge numbers and are often small. Many of these breeds also go broody in the summer months which can be problematic for new chicken keepers or if eggs are the priority. In the winter months these hens will need extra attention, such as having their feet cleaned from any mud weekly!

So just like when you're buying a cat or dog, you need to research hen breeds to get the animal that suits you best.

The layers

These are the easiest, lowest maintenance breeds to keep and are ideal for beginners.

Newer hybrid breeds bred for laying e.g. Warrens, Columbian black tails and Hylines have all been developed from the pure breed American Rhode Island Red hen. They are bred to lay an egg a day for say 12-18 months and they lay themselves out, almost to breaking point. Under commercial systems they are then sent to slaughter because the supermarkets demand eggs with uniformed shapes and very strong shells.

In a domestic situation, they will carry on laying well but because of the huge numbers of eggs their bodies want them to lay, they often look a little tatty and eventually they do suddenly tire out, a term known to old hen keepers as 'going light'.

Hybrids are suited to small spaces and get on with life happily with minimal fuss. They'll have a much nicer time in a pen in your back garden or allotment than they would in a commercial flock of several thousand birds, as long as they are kept clean and well fed.

It's very rewarding rehoming ex battery hybrid hens. They will be very scared and tatty looking to begin with but quickly gain confidence and grow new feathers, and enjoy their retirement

home. They won't live hugely long lives but they will still lay eggs for you, a good reward for having saved them from slaughter.

Other hybrid layers include Black or Rhode Rocks, Bluebells, Speckledys and Ambers. Hybrids are all vaccinated as day old chicks as they are hatched commercially.

Arthur prefers the older breeds that have the common sense to take a break between laying eggs so their bodies can recover from this huge demand of energy and nutrients. As a result these older breeds can live up to a decade or more.

Examples of old breeds include:

- Cuckoo Maran are big speckled French hens, a very hardy breed, which lay a light brown egg, occasionally speckled, making them very charming still lifes in the egg bowl. Because Marans are a heavy breed, bred for both laying and meat, one needs to limit the amount of corn they are treated too as a fat hen doesn't lay many eggs!
- Copper-black Marans have black and ginger feathers and usually lay a very dark egg, the colour of a gingernut. When they first come into lay in spring, the pigment is the most intense colour which fades a bit through the season. The popular Burford Brown hens were bred from these.
- Sussex are the original British-bred layer which were kept in many back gardens during the Second World War. The light Sussex is the most commonly known, but Arthur prefers the Buff and speckled Sussex because they don't show up the dirt on their feathers like the white bodied light Sussex do. These are steady and calm characters, laying a tinted pink egg.
- Welsummers are a very pretty Dutch breed which lay a lovely dark terracotta egg, but these are very flighty hens and so best suited to free-range as they panic easily.
- Hamburgs are rather flighty (they escape all the time from Sarah's hen run), but this does mean that they have a better chance to get away from the fox as they can fly up into a tree. And they love to roost in trees too. They are a rare breed but are one of the best layers of white eggs and being a British breed, very hardy to the elements. They come in silver or gold spangled.

- Cream or Cotswold Legbars are elegant hens with little feathered hats and large floppy combs. Bred using the South American Araucana hens resulting in them laying a pastel-coloured egg in good numbers. They can be a little skittish as young birds but they do settle in time. Recently cross-breeding these with a Maran cockerel has resulted in hens called Olive Eggers, that lay a pastel olive-coloured egg.

The downside to most layers is that they can't really be let out to strut round the garden as they make too much of a mess, so need a run to live in behind chicken wire. They tend to destroy a veg or flower garden, so are not for you unless you want a garden full of hen-resistant plants such as roses, woody herbs, euphorbias etc.

Hens as pets

Keeping hens as companions is Arthur's specialist subject. His current favourite pair are Lyndon and Claudia (named after his brother and Claudia Winkleman?, one of Arthur's heroines) they are pekin bantams, a true bantam breed. They need their feathers washing and then occasionally blow-drying in wet weather over the winter months!

In this category, the best are the small bantams, which have smaller feet, shorter legs and their feet are feathered, so there is much less scratching and garden damage.

Many were bred for ornamental purposes in China and Asia. Some of the large feather legged breeds such as Cochins, proved to be exotic sensations when they first arrived into Victorian Britain.

Examples of breeds that make good pets include:

- Pekin Bantams like people and rumour has it these were bred to just sit in the Emperor's robes. They are round and walk very close to the ground, giving the shape of a cup and saucer.
- Silkies (also from China) are popular as they look like they have fluffy fur rather than feathers. They get very tame and are famed for their will to sit on eggs, having been known to even brood wind-fallen apples when kept in orchards!

Orpington's are popular fancy hens which are very large, fluffy and heavy and refuse to climb ladders. These are not big layers – only a few dozen are laid between weeks of either resting or determined broodiness, but they are ideal for paved yards and are neat and tidy for a garden.

- Poland hens would be Arthur's top recommendation for good-lookers which lay too. They look bonkers, with a whole globe of feathers on their heads, so you can't see their eyes, just their beak poking out. They are good layers, don't go broody and they don't have feathered legs, so are easy to look after. They are very good for children as they get very tame. They do need a run with a roof because their head feathers can't get wet or they get pneumonia. They also need to be checked for lice and sprayed against them each month. We have a Gold Poland cockerel at Perch Hill and he's a neat, hardy little thing and not aggressive at all (which some cockerels can be).

Arthur's top Tip for Home hens

Getting started

Start off with 3 hens, as if one dies the other won't be left on her own. Hens live in a strict pecking order – that's how they live in harmony, so it's better to start with the number you want for the number of eggs required weekly, right from the start.

Buy hens from the same fancier that are all the same age, so that the pecking order is clear from the word go and they don't have to adjust to new introductions which can result in very harsh bullying. New hens tend to be picked on, so it's best to avoid it altogether, or you have to introduce the new ones slowly with a smaller hen run within the original hen run. Buy hens at the age of point of lay when they are between 18 and 25 weeks old, younger birds are more delicate and often still need a heat lamp.

Put new birds in their hen house when you get them home and let them out the following morning, this way they'll automatically know where their new home is and they'll take themselves back to roost.

New birds take time to settle and get used to you. Talk to them at dusk, hens are very calm at this time of day. Gently stroke their breast feathers and progress to lifting the hen gently from its perch, letting your arm take the weight of her body while your hand firmly but again gently holds

both legs. Hens that are smothered against a person's body will flap and stress easily. They soon recognise their keeper and can tell strangers and familiar human faces apart very easily.

The perfect run

All-in-one hen houses and runs are ideal. Ones that have a raised hen house and a covered run are best. If the house is on wheels, then so much the better as then the birds can be moved around the place to fresh ground.

All hen houses are best if they are raised off the floor, at roughly 2-3ft, so you don't get rats underneath and also hens can go under the run to keep dry if it's raining. Provide the birds with a wide and sturdy ladder with grip for their claws as they come and go. Make nesting boxes cosy, have them low to the hen house floor, placing them lower than the perches to prevent roosting in them and ensure that they are in the darkest place. A little curtain, using old fabric, hung across the front of the nesting box will be appreciated.

You don't need a cockerel for hens to lay eggs and they are usually tamer without one. Young birds coming into lay can be encouraged to lay in nesting boxes by using fake, crock eggs.

Clean the hen house out regularly or you'll get red mite, and dust the perch and walls regularly with Diatomaceous Earth, a natural fossil compound.

Use a rat-proof chicken feeder rather than an open, filled to the brim traditional hopper, which is a rat-magnet. Sarah has a rat-proof chicken-feeder and it's worked brilliantly.

FOXES make keeping hens very tricky, especially in cities. Certainly, in London, you'll see foxes very commonly. Be aware how many foxes live in your area. If you're not sure, ask around and you'll soon find out. Consider perimeter fencing your garden's boundary if you really want to be fox-proof and a wire skirt going out from the bottom edge of the hen run by about a foot, is helpful against foxes digging down and in. Invest in an automatic pop hole opener and closer, known as a chicken guard; this senses dawn and dusk and is invaluable if you work away from home and have weekends away.

You can make a hen run look good with a hen-resistant grass mix, but also have Narcissus e.g. 'Cragford' (that's the one we have at Perch Hill), and alliums. Hens don't seem to eat these. Grass helps keep hens occupied, so they don't get bored and peck each other.

Chicken droppings are very acidic, which kills normal grass, so you need to get a specific grass species. Mow grass in a hen run as hens like to daintily peck the blades, don't let it get too overgrown and messy. Don't feed hens grass clippings as this can lead to impacted crop and a digestive upset that will require the vet. Roses are hen resistant and will thrive on mulches of rotted hen manure.

You ideally need a run with a solid roof and enclosed with wire. That way you'll be fine if we have an outbreak of Bird Flu again, as wild birds landing within it, could potentially be bringing in disease. Remember, hens like shelter and cosiness. They're originally from the Indonesian jungle.

In the winter, consider moving the hen house and run onto a solid area of concrete and keeping the birds on a bed of chopped straw on top of this hardstanding, known as deep litter. The birds will be happier out of the wet and mud and the run's grass gets an essential rest (you can resow grass seed during this time too). This also stops any rat activity occurring during the cold months.

Give hens a dust bath – we use wood ash from our wood burner for ours, or dig or buy some dry soil and put it under something with a roof so it stays dry. It's like a spa for hens, keeping them pristine and healthy.

Feeding

A daily diet of layers pellets plus SOME kitchen scraps and mixed corn as a treat during the winter is ideal. Ensure the feed you buy is soya free and don't scrimp on chicken feed, the better quality the feed, the healthier and more productive the birds will be.

Hens do not like potatoes or citrus. And not mouldy things (anything we wouldn't want to eat even if we're drunk). Cook sliced broccoli or cauliflower stems and they'll love that. And don't forget grit and oyster shell, even if hens are free range. You don't want soft shells which can tempt them into eating each other's eggs. You will get no shell eggs with old hens (which we have at Perch Hill because we're fond of them), so keep an eye on hens dropping these and remove.

Store your feed in a metal feed bin – so it's safe from rats and squirrels.

Moulting

The annual moult tends to be in late summer/autumn. They can go almost bald and it's pretty alarming the first time it happens! They'll stop laying and shed lots of their feathers. Give them corn mixed with cod liver oil and they'll recover. They can live to a good old age, so make fantastic pets as well as egg providers.

Broodiness

Some breeds tend to go broody a lot which can be a real bore if sitting is not required. To deter them if they are sitting for long periods, take them out of their nesting boxes several times a day. They will otherwise sit on nothing, becoming grumpy, thin and anaemic. You can even move them into an metal dog crate (we call this 'the sin bin') to cool them down and bring them back to normal.

Hen equipment suppliers

Attractive and practical wooden, mobile garden housing - domesticfowltrust.co.uk

Attractive recycled plastic garden hen houses - hamstreethens.com

Mail order sundries – feed and health products, mite powders, sundries.

Sprcentre.com

Newlandpoultry.com

-bhwt.org.uk

Rat proof feeder – Roamwild PestOff hanging chicken feeder

Homage.com

Automatic pop hole opener and closer – chickenguard.co.uk

Pure and hybrid hen fanciers point of lay hens –

- Plaspoultry.co.uk – Brecon Beacons
- Featherandegg.co.uk – Berkshire
- Bevererarebreedchickens.co.uk -Worcestershire

- Manor-poultry.com – Hertfordshire
- Newlandpoultry.com – Worcestershire
- Hensonoxney.co.uk – Kent
- Hamstreethens.com – Somerset
- Legbarsofbroadway.co.uk – Gloucestershire
- Burygreenpoultry.co.uk -Hertfordshire
- Chatsworth.org – Derbyshire (farmyard)

The British Hen Welfare Trust – rehomes ex-battery and ex-commercial hens across the country
 – bhwt.org.uk

Victoria Roberts, Arthur's trusted poultry vet, online consultations available – Vicvet.com

Arthur's Victoria Sponge

Inspired by Calendar Girls and Helen Mirren (who wins top cake prize when she buys it from M&S). Use the best possible eggs from chickens that have been raised on grass or mashed carrot as this gives the cake the most fantastic yellow colour.

Need 2 circular 24cm cake tins

Wooden spoon and bowl

For 6-8

- 215g softened butter, (Arthur uses Lurpak unsalted) taken out from fridge the night before (not the usual 160g for each of the 3 ingredients below)
- 215g plain flour
- 215g caster sugar
- 4 eggs – the fresher the better
- 1 tbsp baking powder

With an electric whisk beat until all fluffy and light

Butter the cake tin, sides and base

If loose-bottomed tin, cut baking parchment circles for the base.

190C in fan oven for 20 minutes. Don't open the oven until you can see the cake is moving away from the sides of the tin.

Take them out, let them rest and cook.

Once cool, add double whipped cream and high-quality strawberry jam. You can also add lots of fresh strawberries squashed and mixed into the jam for fresh flavour.

Lightly sandwich the two together and dust with icing sugar.