

Eggs-cellent pets

If you have a garden, like to keep animals and love the idea of taking a small step towards self-sufficiency, then why not consider getting chickens?

HEN KEEPING is becoming more and more popular and it isn't hard to see why. Looking after the birds isn't expensive or time consuming, they provide you with some healthy, daily food, and can be lovely to have around.

The British Hen Welfare Trust saves around 50,000 commercial laying hens a year from being killed at the end of their working lives and finds them homes for their retirement through a network of regional pop up rehoming centres – one of which is in King's Lynn.

The charity says that its ex-commercial hens are the ideal starting point for novice keepers.

"Looking after them is relatively easy once their initial needs are catered for," says Francesca Taffs of the BHWT

"Firstly, hens will need their own coop. This can be a purpose-built house or a converted shed, outbuilding or even a child's Wendy house. However the coop must contain nest box facilities, perching provision and a pop-hole as essentials. Both wooden and plastic coop houses make perfect homes, though the latter is often easier to clean.

"Every coop needs a run, whether a large enclosure with fencing or an aviary-style boundary. Generally speaking, the more there is for the hens to see and do, the happier they will be. A storm shelter or covered area should be provided for wet and windy days. It can also be used for feeding outside in wet weather and doubles up as a sunshade and/or dust bath for the birds.

"Minimal cleaning-out is required on a daily basis – just don some rubber gloves and remove droppings and any wet patches. A more thorough clean can be carried out once every two weeks, sweeping out bedding, using a paint scraper to remove debris and putting down a fresh layer of bedding."

She says that while it can be tempting to feed your hens kitchen scraps, this should never be done unless from a vegan kitchen, but veg fresh from the garden and nutritional treats



specifically designed for hens help create a well-balanced diet alongside their daily feed.

"Feed and water can be fed ad lib; generally birds will eat 100-120g daily, and using a sturdy feeder will prevent it being knocked over. Food should not be allowed to go stale or damp.

"Other than that, chickens really do look after themselves – yes it takes a certain amount of commitment, but the rewards far outweigh any inconvenience. Ask anyone who has enjoyed a simple omelette made with fresh-from-the-garden eggs."

As well as rehoming hens, the charity promotes hen wellbeing, encourages the use of free-range eggs by major brands and lobbies MPs and MEPs to support British farmers. ♦

If you are interested in adopting hens and want to find out more, see www.bhwt.org.uk.

Photos: British Hen Welfare Trust

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