



MY PLOT

Cluck and collect

SHARING HER GARDEN WITH RESCUE HENS PROVIDES RACHEL BARCLAY WITH DAILY EGGS BUT, MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE CHICKENS ALSO BRING HAPPINESS

Words and photography: RACHEL BARCLAY

Rachel Barclay always wanted to keep chickens. So when the part-time teacher moved to a Surrey village with her husband, she designed their long, narrow back garden with that in mind. The family – Rachel has two small boys, and a sappy spaniel called Dylan – currently share their garden with five hens, who provide them with eggs, companionship and even cuddles. You can follow her on Instagram @thegoodlifeainteasy.



The story so far

As a child, I saw commercial hens in cages and the image stayed with me – it became my goal to rescue hens. So, when my husband and I moved to Surrey seven years ago, we sectioned off an area of our garden for our first three chickens.

Featherless, scrappy and charming, it was a joy watching them experience grass for the first time, take their first dust bath and eat their first worm. I started to document their adventures on Instagram. I became fascinated with chicken health and shared what I learnt with others.

Our first 'girls' were from the British Hen Welfare Trust, which rehomes hens. We currently have five chickens – two

rescues called Cinnamon and Saffron and three 'posh' hens: Willow (a Dark Sussex), Miss Honey (a Bluebell) and Matilda (a Cheshire Blue). It's lovely to have varied breeds for different coloured eggs.

Hens have wonderful personalities and some are fearless – I'll always remember discovering Willow tucked up snoring happily beside our sleeping spaniel.

Chicken run

While I love their company, the hens can eat my seedlings and destroy a flowerbed in record speed. We put in a fence with a gate so when they came into the garden, it's on our terms, not theirs. We generally let them into the garden when the borders are »

Rachel's 'girls' have a cracking life and are given free rein to roam about and eggs-plore their surroundings. Green-fingered Rachel loves to grow, and nurtures as many chicken-friendly plants and veg as she can fit in. Miss Honey (left) is rocking the season's florals, while rescue hen, Saffron (above), is enjoying retirement with regular dust baths

Nobody here but us chickens! A not-so-fantastic visit from Mr Fox a few years ago prompted Rachel to build a more secure run for her hens



Keeping chickens has been great for Rachel's boys to grow up around. Meanwhile, a variety of breeds leads to a variety of eggs, with fights for the delicate blue 'Matilda' eggs. And if that wasn't reason enough to keep hens, along comes Willow (top right) with plenty of cuddles and affectionate purrs

established, and use netting to divide up areas of the lawn for them throughout the summer. Another barrier stops them reaching the children's play area and I use protective frames on delicate plants.

In the garden we grow greenhouse crops, such as tomatoes and cucumbers, and chard and kale in the flower borders – but veg are particularly delicious to hens, so most are grown at our allotment. The borders are full of roses and clematis, with structure from shrubs such as smoke bush and dogwood and interest from cosmos, zinnia and sweet peas. And as many alliums and dahlias as I can fit in!

Simple pleasures

Whenever my mind won't slow down, I take a cup of tea into the garden and watch the girls scratch around in the

flower beds. I often joke that chickens are cheaper than therapy!

Normally Willow will hop onto my lap for a cuddle. I don't think people realise how affectionate chickens can be – she's soppiier than the dog at times and purrs when you stroke her. I defy anyone not to smile upon hearing it.

I still get a thrill out of collecting fresh eggs, too. Our rescues lay every day as they've been bred to produce lots of eggs in a short space of time. Our posh hens lay five to six eggs a week from spring to autumn, then their bodies take a break over winter – it's why they're generally healthier hens. Matilda lays the most delicate pale blue eggs which have the biggest yolks (there's always a fight for a Matilda egg in our house). They're best poached and enjoyed with coffee on a Sunday morning.

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Planting for hens

Hens are foragers. Although some plants are toxic, in my experience, most chickens know not to eat them!

Hen-friendly:

- Lavender – an insect repellent with calming properties
- Nasturtium – great for chicken health with antiseptic properties
- Rosemary – smells lovely when your chickens dust bath nearby
- Sage – a good herb for general health and isn't eaten too quickly
- Oregano – being studied as a natural antibiotic for poultry (a superfood in the chicken world!)
- Fennel – attracts insects for hens to eat
- Sunflowers – dried seed heads make great boredom busters
- Thyme – good for chickens' respiratory health

To avoid:

- Bulbs – tulips and daffodils
- Foxgloves – all parts are toxic
- Green parts of the nightshade family – be careful growing potatoes around hens
- Rhubarb leaves – oxalic acid can cause liver damage
- Beans – raw beans are toxic, but cooked are fine
- Azaleas and rhododendron – can cause digestive problems
- Apricots – fruit and plant can cause respiratory problems and low blood pressure

My greatest success

Sadly, commercial hens can be prone to egg laying problems later in life. Rescue hens are retired at 72 weeks and can live another two months to two years, depending on the stresses on their body (a non-rescue can live five to eight years). The number of hens who're rescued is tiny compared to the number slaughtered when their egg production slows. I hope that by sharing these stories it raises awareness and that, as consumers, we can drive welfare changes on poultry farms. Cinnamon is going into her third year of freedom, which fills me with joy. Despite the challenges, watching rescue hens enjoy their retirement is one of the most enjoyable things you can do. When Cinnamon does fly the nest, I'll be sad, but also proud she got to enjoy normal chicken-y things.

What we've learnt

When we got our first hens, we had a smaller run and would let them out every day. A few years ago, we had our first fox attack and after that we built a bigger walk-in-run to keep them safe. We meshed underneath so unwelcome visitors (I'm looking at you, rats!) can't dig up into it.

My hen-keeping advice

Like any pets, chickens are a commitment. Sometimes they require just a few minutes of your day, but I'd recommend doing your research so you know what you're getting into. Speak to other keepers – there are lots of helpful online forums – and see if you can visit someone to see their set up. I've also written a beginner's guide on my blog: thegoodlifeainteasy.com. 