



A chicken run of your own

Ever thought of keeping chickens? Well, Dot Moran has and a course run by experts has convinced her it is an excellent idea

ABOVE FROM LEFT: Owners of Forsham Cottage Arks Robert and Cindy Pellet; Happy free-range chickens; One of Forsham's chicken arks
BELOW: Vic Moran learns how to tell when a hen is ready for laying

I have always wanted to keep chickens. Perhaps it symbolises the 'good life' that I would love to lead, but have always been too busy doing other things to pursue.

Now that I am at the stage in my life where I'm ready to actually get on and do things rather than just plan for them to happen, I decided to take a course on keeping chickens, mainly with the aim of finding out if it was a practical option or just another pipe dream.

So off I went, with my husband Vic, to Forsham Cottage Arks who offer help to 'folk with a hankering to keep a few chickens in their back garden', which seemed to describe my situation.

During the morning we learned about the needs of an average chicken. What type of accommodation and shelter it requires, how best to keep it happy, well fed and watered and free of pests and disease. The sums are simple enough - keep everything right and each chicken you keep will cheerfully produce one egg per day for about 11 months of the year.

We were given a complete understanding of

the day-to-day responsibilities of chicken ownership along with practical details of the best practices and standards. Questions were encouraged at all times, which was good, as everyone had their own circumstances.

Egg facts

Are dirty eggs a sign of lovely free-range eggs? No, as an eggshell is porous, any poo on the outside can affect the egg inside. So keep a clean nestbox and you will get nice clean eggs.

Egg facts

Should you keep newly-laid eggs for a day or two before eating them? No - they can be eaten just as soon as they have been laid.

We were then introduced to Carol, a previous course attendee, who now has four chickens living in an ark in her garden. And yes, she gets 28 eggs a week. Her springer spaniels use the ark as an activity centre and the chickens don't mind a bit, as they are smart enough to realise they are safe from the dogs as well as any predators that might visit the garden.

The guest speaker at our course was Fred Hams, who is well known in the poultry world and the author of many books on the subject of poultry keeping and rare breeds. He is a highly respected judge at shows around the UK. He demonstrated how to handle the chickens, and it really was quite easy as he guided us all through it in turn.

The birds on the course were happy to be handled and were not

bothered by all the attention they were getting. It is so much easier to learn that sort of thing from a hands-on demonstration with an expert guide standing by, and one of the many reasons for attending a course rather than just reading up on a subject.

Fred also talked us through the mechanics of egg production from a hybrid - a cross-breed of chicken - which was fascinating and useful too, as it helped me to understand why they need a high quality proprietary foodstuff, rather than scraps from the kitchen and how the grit in their diet helps them to grind up their food.

One of the great benefits of keeping your own chickens, as Fred explained to me over lunch, is that you end up with a premium product that you can rely on. You also get the benefit of having something you can share with neighbours and friends when production exceeds demand, and because of that, you also, apparently, end up with neighbours who are very willing to care for your birds, in return for the eggs, when you are on holiday. Children also love helping with egg collection and will enjoy watching and learning about the birds.

The chickens supplied by Forsham Cottage Arks are all hybrids that are bred to produce eggs only. At the end of their egg producing life, they can either be retired or dispatched, but are not suitable for eating. This was a relief for me as I would be able to give them names and look them in the

ABOVE FROM LEFT: Poultry expert Fred Hams; Hens in one of the arks; Free range chickens at Forsham Cottage Arks

Egg facts

Chicken keeping courses cost £85 per person and include lunch, a discount voucher and a free trug full of goodies to take away. See website for details.

eye when I gathered their eggs in the mornings. It also means that they require a regular intensive food intake that is not disturbed by other foodstuffs and will benefit from routine and cleanliness.

The subject of rare breeds was also discussed, but they need a bit more space than the average back garden, so were not a consideration for me.

Everything seemed to be covered during the day, from bio-security through to composting chicken poo with your grass cuttings, right down to how best to store and use your eggs. Did you know that you should use your freshest eggs to make a superb sponge but you get better meringues from older eggs?

We finished the day in high spirits, with all our chicken-keeping questions answered. One person on the course had pre-ordered their ark and chickens and we all watched jealously as he loaded up his car.

I now feel comfortable that I am going to make a decision based on knowledge passed on by experts, and while I might buy a book (probably one written by Fred) to keep me right, I now have expert chicken-keeping friends that I can turn to for advice in the future.

And yes, I will be getting some chickens to keep in my back garden; I can't wait for them to arrive! ✂

Further information

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PICTURES: ALAMY; DOT MORAN

