

Newsletter April 2009

Announcing the NEW Buckingham Poultry Centre



We are pleased to announce the imminent opening of a new Poultry Centre. All being well this should be functioning by the beginning of May. We will be stocking a variety of laying hybrid hens, poultry feed, accessories and a wide range of sundry products, from tonics to wormers.



With the increased interest in the Grow Your Own revolution, keeping garden chickens is a logical next step. Once you have tasted eggs laid by your own hens and seen the difference in the colour of the yolk and the firmness of the white you will probably never buy a supermarket egg again.

Most gardens are large enough to accommodate a few hens and raising them yourself gives you 100% control of their diet, as you can choose to feed your hens organically or conventionally, but they will always appreciate you recycling kitchen scraps as a tasty supplement!

Keeping chickens is a delight for adults and children alike, and it is wonderfully educational for children to look after hens and understand where their food comes from. It is also surprising how many adults also get very excited by the prospect of keeping hens and taking a step toward a more sustainable lifestyle.

Here are just a few of most frequently asked questions I have been asked about keeping hens. I hope after reading these you will come to the conclusion that keeping your own hens is really quite an easy step onto the Grow your Own ladder.

F.A.Qs - Keeping Chickens

Are Chickens easy to keep?

Yes is the simple answer. Chickens require minimal time from you. Like most pets they require fresh food, water and an enriching environment. Their living space will need to be skipped out (roughly cleaned out) on a weekly basis. A thorough cleaning out should be done every month.

How much space do you need to keep Chickens?

I always say give your chickens as much space as you can. If you are in doubt then start with two hens and then maybe add more to your flock in the future. Hens must always be kept in groups of two or more as they are very social creatures. Chickens can live quite happily in an enclosed run or ark system for the

majority of the week and when you and the family are around you can let them roam your garden or part of it. When chickens are enclosed in an area make the environment as stimulating as possible.

What do chickens need to eat?

Chickens require a balanced diet with all the right vitamins and minerals to lay eggs and form good hard shells. Layers pellets or mash are a compound feed with the correct balanced nutrition to feed a laying bird. They also require access to two different types of grit, oyster shell and flint grit. As hens have no teeth they use flint grit that they ingest and hold in their crop to grind up their food. Oyster shell is a soluble grit to add the extra calcium to their diet; hens need this if they are going to be able to form the shells for the eggs they lay.

How much do chickens cost to buy?

Hybrid laying chickens at POL (point of lay, this being 15-18 weeks of age) should cost you around £15 per bird. These chickens usually lay between 250 and 330 eggs in their first laying year. The amount of eggs can depend on the variety of hen that you choose.

How much does it cost to feed them?

A bag of good quality natural layers pellets should cost you around £8-£9 for a 20kg bag and this size bag should feed a couple of hens for 3-4 months. If you supplement their diet with other foodstuffs such as mixed corn and vegetarian kitchen scraps this will reduce the amount of compound food consumed by the birds. Layers pellets as well as mixed poultry corn can be found as organic rations but they will, as you would expect, cost a little bit more, probably around £12-£13 for a 20kg bag.

How many eggs can I expect from my hens?

Chickens lay varying numbers of eggs depending on breed and age. Rhode Island Red hybrid hens usually lay 300 + eggs in their first year of life. Other hybrid hens lay between 240 and 300 eggs in their first year. Hens will lay less after their first year as this year is always the most productive, although the eggs will be larger as they get older. Pure breed hens will lay fewer eggs than hybrid hens that have been specifically bred for laying.

What is a hybrid hen?

A hybrid hen is a straight cross of two pure breed parents of different breeds. These crosses have been developed over decades to produce birds with the qualities of both parents combining these in their offspring.

How long is the lifespan of a laying hybrid hen?

Hybrid laying birds don't live as long as their pure breed parents but you can expect a hen to live about 4-5 years.

What does the term POL or point of lay mean?

A hen at point of lay is between 17 to 20 weeks of age. It also refers to a bird that has yet to lay an egg so it is described as being on the point of lay. Pullet is a term given for a hen in her first year but may have already started laying eggs.

Can chickens fly?

Chickens can't fly as other bird species can. A chicken can jump with the help of her wings for extra propulsion. This means that the enclosure or garden that they will be living



in has to have fences over 4ft tall to prevent them escaping. A chicken's wing can be clipped so that this is not so much of a problem. This involves cutting the flight feathers of just one wing so that when a chicken attempts to take off it is unbalanced and can't get very high. Be aware this is not a failsafe option as a determined chicken will attempt to escape, wing-clipped or not.

Do chickens get many illnesses?

If you buy fully vaccinated hybrid hens from a reputable producer/retailer they will have already been vaccinated against most of the fatal diseases to affect poultry. If this is the case, all that you need to be vigilant about are internal parasites such as worms which are picked up from the birds eating an insect or invertebrate which has already been parasitised by a worm. Chickens need to be wormed every six to eight weeks with either Verm-X or Flubenvet. Chickens can also become the bearers of external parasites such as mites and lice which are transferred from wild birds. Red mite is the most common and both the hen-house and birds need to be treated on a regular basis. The birds are dusted with red mite powder at eight week intervals and the hen-house sprayed with a product such as Poultry Shield every eight to ten weeks or more often in warm wet weather.

Can I introduce new chickens to my existing flock?

This can be tricky to do without previous experience. A good rule is to introduce a number of birds to the flock at once. If you only have a couple of birds to start with then introducing two new birds should be relatively problem free providing they have enough space to get away from any bullying by the existing birds. If you already have a larger flock of say six to eight established birds then you will need to introduce approximately two thirds of your existing flock size to avoid any one bird being picked on too much. If you have the space you can also, instead of putting the birds together straight away, make a temporary run for the new birds in or next to the main coop. This way the birds can see and smell each other while getting used to the new members with no risk of physical squabbles. The best time of day to introduce new birds is at night when the resident birds have gone to roost for the night. Once they are settled, place the new birds in the hen-house with the other chickens on the perch. The older birds will have shut down for the night and will leave the newcomers alone. You will never avoid minor tiffs but this is just a chicken's way of establishing their place in the hierarchy.

What bedding is suitable for chickens?

Inside the house the best bedding to use is wood shavings. This type of bedding is warm, dust free and absorbent. This, along with once weekly cleaning under the perches, will keep the hen house clean and dry. Try to avoid using straw

If this has whetted your appetite for keeping some chickens yourself, come and have a look at our birds which we are sure you will find healthy and in excellent condition. If you have any questions I would be delighted to talk to you.

I hope you are all as excited as we are about the new Buckingham Poultry Centre. If you have any suggestions about different breeds or products that you would like us to stock here please let me know or leave the details at our Customer Service Desk.
Laura Donovan, Manager of Buckingham Poultry Centre

and hay in the hen house or nest box as this can harbour parasites such as red mite and can be harmful to the chickens if ingested in large quantities.

Can I use my chickens' waste as fertiliser?

You can, but you need to be careful not to get it directly onto plants as it is so rich in nitrogen it can burn the plants. It can be prepared to use as fertiliser by composting it for about six weeks or steeping the waste in a bucket of water with the lid on to make a high nitrogen liquid plant feed. Alternatively, use it sparingly as a compost activator.

Do hens require the company of a cockerel to lay eggs?

No. A cockerel is only required if you want fertile eggs to breed your own chickens. A hen will carry on ovulating if there is a cockerel present or not.

What are the signs of a healthy chicken?

A young 17-20 week old POL hen will not have developed her comb and wattles yet but these are a good indicator of a chicken's health. They should be bright red and the comb should stand up proud from the head. The bird should have no discharge from the eyes, nostrils or beak. The feathers should be glossy and lay flat to the body. The vent (a chicken's all purpose exit hole) should be clean and no sign of parasites such as mites or lice as this is where they like to live on the bird. Overall, the bird should look active and interested in its environment, scratching and dust bathing are all good signs.



Turning from the exciting new project of the Poultry Centre at the Garden Centre, here are some other things to think about.

Keeping Plants Watered

If you are needing new watering equipment we have taken back into stock the range of Gardena equipment which will give you a much wider choice than just the Hozelock range. The snap connectors of both systems interchange so if you have a Hozelock system and want to add some Gardena fittings this is possible. We also have the new Gardena soaker hose which is a very simple and effective way of watering newly planted hedges.

Do not forget to water those newly planted trees, shrubs and hedges. After so much rain last summer and winter it seems unbelievable that the ground is actually getting dry which could be disaster to newly planted plants. It is very important that they have plenty of moisture when the sap should be starting to rise. It is absolutely essential that they are thoroughly watered now, not just a small amount which will only penetrate the surface and not get down to where the roots are. Ideally one should apply about 2 gallons of water over a square metre at least once a week, and if the weather is very hot and dry the same quantity twice a week.

Life in a Garden Pond

On another watery note a professor of Iowa State University has found that constructed ponds and lakes on farmlands in the USA buried carbon at an average rate of two kilograms per square metre annually, which is 20 times faster than trees. They absorb carbon through algae and plants which are growing in them. This is really a fascinating discovery and one which should really make everyone who has the space to think seriously about constructing a pond not only for the carbon absorption but also for the benefits to wildlife. Frogs and newts will soon find a new pond and an area of water in the garden really will give hours of pleasure.

In February this year Alan Titchmarsh launched the 'Million Ponds Project' which very basically aims to restore the number of ponds in this country to the level they were back 100 years ago which was about one million. About half that number have been destroyed and of those remaining only eight percent are in good condition. This is a very ambitious project which will be funded by Natural England and the Countryside Council for Wales, so if you are interested in this, the regional project officers are available to provide training and to give on-site advice, and the Aquatic Coleoptera Conservation Trust will provide information about pond creation for rare species.

However, if you just want to create a pond in your garden and you are new to 'water gardening' just pop in to our Aquatics Department and any member of staff in there will be very happy to give advice to you. It would be an ideal time to start such a project as pond plants will be arriving soon giving you plenty of choice for either a formal or more natural looking pond.

Vegetables

Now is the time to really get to work in the vegetable growing area. The soil will be starting to warm up even though we can still expect the occasional frost at night. If you still have not purchased your seed potatoes please do come in post haste as supplies are getting very low and many varieties have already sold out. The seed potatoes should be laid out in a light frost free place to chit, ready for planting out as soon as conditions are right. If you prefer to sow crops like peas and beans inside to get them started we would recommend planting in Rootainers as these are manufactured in such a way that the roots will be 'trained' to grow straight down, so as soon as you can see them showing at the base of the trainer they can be opened up and the plant gently eased out without any damage to the roots. There are two depths of Rootainers and it is important to get the correct one for the vegetables you are growing. If you are not sure one of our plant team can always advise.

It is a good idea to be prepared for the onslaught of various garden pests which can cause havoc if conditions are favourable for them. Obviously one of the many advantages of growing your own vegetables is that you can control the conditions they grow in and keep them completely clear of chemicals. In order to do this biological control is important. We are agents for the Agralan range



of biological controls and these are for Aphids, Red Spider Mite, Whitefly, Vine Weevil, Slugs, Leatherjackets, Chafer Beetle, Mealy Bug and Ants. You can order these now for delivery at different times in the year.

Other real pests to vegetable and ornamental gardeners are rabbits, pigeons and deer and these are very common in this area at the moment. There are many products on the shelf which are supposed to deter these creatures and some do work but unfortunately sometimes the beasties get used to the deterrent. One which we have tested recently and found to be the most effective is Grazers. The active ingredients in this calcium chloride solution are calcium oxide and calcium, so it is non toxic, harmless to pets and wildlife and safe to use on fruit and vegetables. It is systemic, that is absorbed through the leaf, and is rainfast within an hour of application. We did some trials in a rabbit infested garden planting parsley, a favourite of rabbits. Some of the plants were treated with Grazers and some were not. The non-treated plants were eaten almost immediately by the rabbits but the treated plants were left untouched. An added advantage to the product is that it stimulates plant growth.

New Seeds of Italy

The new range of Seeds of Italy have just arrived – it makes your mouth water just looking at the packets, and when you grow some of these varieties we are sure you will be delighted with the results. For those who have not purchased seeds from this company before you will be delighted with the quantity and quality of the seed in the packets. You will have plenty for yourself, some to give away to friends and if you reseal the packet and keep it dry and cool some for next year as well!

Prepare for your Big Lunch on 19th July!

As we are currently in the grips of Grow Your Own fever, you may well have heard recently about The Big Lunch. This was dreamed up by Tim Smit and friends one morning at the Eden Project in Cornwall. The vision is to encourage the country to unite for a summer street party called The Big Lunch with the idea that people will grow their own food and keen gardeners will share their skills (and their tools) with the less experienced in their street. The date for this event is Sunday 19th July 2009 and is being endorsed by the National Trust, Garden Organic and Land Share. For more details click on their website at www.thebiglunch.com

Bird Muck Remover

Creatures we welcome into our gardens are birds, but they can be a nuisance when they 'bomb' your car, the wall of the house or other objects as the droppings can be difficult to remove. A new product has come on the market which is excellent at removing the offending matter and resulting stains, this being called appropriately Bird Muck Remover. It is safe to use on sensitive surfaces such as cars and is equally effective on garden furniture, patios, decking, water features and buildings. As it is bio-degradable it can be rinsed off with water to the nearest drain. It comes in a 500ml spray bottle retailing at £5.99.



Free Rootgrow with Herbs

A product we have been recommending for years because again trials with it have proved it to be so good is Rootgrow, a product which contains mycorrhizal fungi which rapidly attach to the plant's root and form a secondary root system. This product works very well on plants such as herbs which one wants good strong growth early after planting to enable you to be able to harvest plenty of the aromatic leaves. We are offering a free 75g sachet of Rootgrow, worth £2.99, with all purchases of six herbs. The offer will be limited to the first 150 customers, so if you need to re-stock your herb garden this offer will be ideal for you.

Garden Furniture and Games

If you are thinking of replacing your garden furniture in the hope that the weather this year will be an improvement on last year, we have some Leisuregrow sets on special offer at the moment. These go from £399 for a round glass top table, with four recliner chairs, parasol and parasol base, to £599 for a large rectangular table, 6 chairs, parasol and base. Stocks are limited so do pop in and have a look. Apart from this there are some really beautiful new sets of conservatory and garden furniture, plus the traditional wooden sets and garden benches from Alexander Rose.



For the children there are some really good wooden garden toys which will give hours of fun. These include Garden Chess, Garden Dominoes and Croquet.

Being made of wood they are environmentally friendly and will last for years. One final new item in the gift section of the shop is 3D posters – they really are something very different with scenes for varying tastes – workers having lunch sitting high up on a girder, movie stars, pop stars etc.

New Shrub - Cornus Venus

A really superb new shrub has come into stock – Cornus 'Venus'TM. After almost 20 years of development, Cornus 'Venus'TM, which is a cross between Cornus nuttallii and Cornus kousa chinensis, has already gained the acclaim of European nurserymen after winning a prestigious trade award at IPM held in Essen in Germany last year.

This deciduous plant produces extremely large creamy-white bracts, often with a diameter of 15cm (6 inches), that almost cover the plant between mid to late May and last three weeks, and contrast dramatically with the large, glossy green leaves. 'Venus' is vigorous, reaching 3-4m high (12-16ft) with a spread of 2m (6ft), but can be controlled with pruning. The plant produces at a young age a superb display of unusual, knobby raspberry-like fruit buds after the flowers have faded and these last well into autumn. 'Venus' has amazing beautiful autumn colour in shades of yellow, orange and violet adding an extra season of interest. It needs neutral to acid moisture retentive soil and is available from the garden centre or through our web site for despatch through the UK.



Summer Trip to Barnsdale Gardens

Looking forward to the summer we are arranging a visit to Barnsdale Gardens on Wednesday 17th June. Barnsdale Gardens were designed by Geoff Hamilton in the 5 acres of pastureland around a Victorian farmhouse he found in 1984. There are a staggering 37 gardens including a rose garden, Japanese garden, rock garden, knot garden, kitchen garden, bog garden and orchard. As well as enjoying the gardens there is an extensive collection of Hemerocallis and Penstemon plus many trees, shrubs and perennials. No picnics are allowed but to sustain visitors there are tea rooms serving a good selection of foods and drinks. To complete the visit we have arranged a presentation by Nick Hamilton, Geoff's son, who with his wife Sue, continue to develop the garden within the parameters of Geoff's vision. The approximate timing for the day will be:

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| 9.15 | Assemble at Buckingham Garden Centre Car Park. |
| 9.30 | Leave for Barnsdale on Motts Travel Coach. |
| 11.00 | Arrive at Barnsdale Gardens. |
| 16.00 | Garden Talk: 'Barnsdale The Television Years'. |
| 16.45 | Depart Barnsdale. |
| 18.30 | Arrive back at Buckingham Garden Centre for homeward journey. |

The cost of the day is £20 (inclusive of coach travel, admission and talk). We still have some vacancies so if you would like to join us please either apply at the Customer Service Desk or telephone us on (01280) 822133.

10 tasks for mid spring (late April & May)

WATCH out for pest and diseases, as they increase as the weather warms up. Preventative treatment is usually the best course of action, especially for likes of blackspot, mildew and botrytis.

GET sowing the likes of half-hardy annuals, perennials and vegetables including French, broad and runner beans, outdoor tomatoes, root crops, broccoli, salads (lettuce, radish, spring onions), spinach, sweetcorn and kale.

PLAN your pots and baskets for this season. We offer plenty of inspirational planting ideas and mixes at The Potting Bench, and check out the colour-themed packs of 15 plants for £6.99 per pack, which are great value for money.

DEADHEAD daffodils, tulips and other spring bulbs and allow their leaves to dieback naturally. Give them a boost for next season with some Blood, Fish & Bone fertiliser.

TRIM your Leylandii hedge, as well as other evergreen hedges to help encourage thick robust growth and to help rejuvenate tired patches hit by the February snow. Always balance the pruning with a generous feed around the root zone using a granular feed such as Vitax Q4.

SOW new lawn areas before the weather turns too dry. Try and complete all Feed 'n' Weed lawn treatments as well; making sure the lawn is sufficiently aerated and decompacted before applying the granular feeds.

KEEP on top of the weeds. Weed your beds and borders, early weed removal will save you excessive weeding in months to come. Lay landscape fabric down to suppress weeds and then cover this with bark or gravel.

KEEP earthing up potatoes, except for the salad varieties 'Ratte' and 'Pink Fir Apple'. These delicious varieties have long tubers near the surface, which can be uncovered when earthing up. For all other varieties, it protects the tubers from greening on exposure to light, and helps to prevent the foliage (haulm) becoming damaged by frost.

STOP pulling rhubarb at the end of May to allow the plant to build up energy for cropping next year. Spread the leaves from the stems which have been pulled on the ground around the rhubarb to conserve moisture and keep down weeds.

CHECK the weather forecast daily, and if frost is forecast make sure that fruit blossom on apricots, peaches and nectarines etc is protected and tender plants are covered. This is most easily done with soft horticultural fleece or old net curtains. At the Garden Centre we use Metcheck for our decision making, re: fleecing and covering of stock. Check out their website at www.metcheck.com

BUCKINGHAM NURSERIES AND GARDEN CENTRE

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SUMMER OPENING HOURS

Monday-Saturday: 8:30am to 6.00pm,

Sunday: 10:00am to 4:00pm (open 9:45am for viewing)