

Lottie Hens

An extract from 'Practical Poultry' by Mike Woolnough

If you're thinking about keeping a few hens on your local allotment, then Mike Woolnough's practical experiences are sure to help.

When you keep chickens in your garden, particularly if it's small, one of the biggest problems is disposing of old floor litter and chicken droppings.

Move your hens to an allotment, and this problem goes away as other gardeners ask you for them for their compost — but you'll have none to spare as you will be composting it yourselves to help raise your own tasty vegetables! Okay, it's only a minor benefit, but there are many more. You do, however, have to go into keeping allotment chooks with a completely different mental attitude than you'd have for birds kept at home.



The trend towards ethical food is leading to more and more people keeping a few hens on their allotments. They're so popular where we are that the whole place has a shanty town feel to it.

First things first though; you have to find an allotment field that has vacancies, and allows the keeping of chickens — not a particularly easy task in some areas these days. The growth of the 'green movement' brought about by the many television programmes regarding ethical food production, has caused a severe shortage of allotment space, and waiting lists are quite common.

Also of importance is a water supply on your chosen field; some don't have taps and this will make chicken rearing (as well as vegetable irrigation) much harder. Working away from your home facilities is difficult enough without adding to the problems.

The first step should be to ring your local council to ask about allotment vacancies, to confirm whether hens are allowed and to check the water supply situation. Then, once you have the contact details for the secretary of a likely field, my advice is to ask to see the vacant plots, explaining that you'd like to grow some vegetables. Don't mention the chickens at this stage. Many secretaries have a built-in antipathy towards poultry on their field, as they probably cause more problems for them than anything else!

However, don't go into this imagining that you can simply use the whole plot for one massive chicken run; it's likely that you'll be expected to use a certain percentage of your land for raising crops. Admittedly, this isn't the case on all fields but you should, at least, be prepared to get a backache and muddy boots from sowing seeds and weeding! All fields have a strict policy about uncultivated plots, and if you let yours grow wild, you'll receive a written warning or two and then be summarily evicted.

Another thing to bear in mind is that you are very unlikely to be permitted to keep cockerels. As far as I know, there are no councils that allow them, although many turn a blind eye if there are no complaints received from adjoining houses. On our field, the previous secretary ignored them unless they were a nuisance, but his successor is applying the rules and not allowing any new chicken keepers to have them. Luckily, he has chosen not to do anything about existing cockerels, which is a relief as ours are essential to our Sunday roast dinner production line! I was recently interviewed on the allotment by BBC Radio Suffolk, and one of my cockerels was crowing very ostentatiously in the background. I didn't even notice him but, listening to the broadcast set me praying that nobody from the council heard it!

One big advantage for 'lottie hens' is that they will, almost certainly, get more space than they would do at home, unless you have a large garden.



Appearances aren't important on an allotment; security is the crucial issue. My first hen run was built from new posts and chicken wire, and was very attractive. I quickly added corrugated sheeting, old shed sections and stout wire to protect the hens from wind, rain and predators.

Our first poultry run on our original plot (we have four plots now, totalling a quarter of an acre) was 15x10', with an 8x6' garden shed as housing.

Almost everybody who keeps poultry on an allotment uses old garden sheds for housing; there's just no point whatsoever in buying a fancy and expensive hen house. In a domestic setting, of course, you want the housing to be attractive and a feature of your garden, but on an allotment it's functionality and ruggedness that count.

Remember that anything attractive, and therefore expensive, is very likely to be stolen, or at least vandalised. I've even heard terrible tales of chicken houses, complete with their inhabitants, being burned down. I must stress that this is generally rare, but it's best to enquire about any past problems before you make your mind up and start building.

We've only suffered a couple of minor vandal attacks on our allotment hen sheds in three years but, seven years ago, there was a particularly nasty incident when a whole run-full of chickens were used for football practice. The answer is to make your house and run as secure as possible. Standard chicken wire is often OK in your garden, but solid chain link fencing is advisable out in the open. We now construct all our new runs using the big steel fencing sections that you see around building sites. They are fairly easy to obtain second-hand, and very quick to erect. Whichever you use, you need to stretch some half-inch chicken wire around the bottom to stop the birds from poking their heads out, or chicks from escaping, and also to help prevent entry by vermin.

Yes, I'm afraid that vermin are another problem, generally much more so than in your garden. The many old sheds and dilapidated structures that are common on allotments provide warm accommodation for colonies of mice that'll happily welcome the free food on offer in a new chicken run. Rats can also be a problem, of course. Any that are spotted around your runs are sure to generate complaints at the council offices, I'm afraid. So it's essential to keep all your feed sacks inside secure metal dustbins, as rats can gnaw through plastic ones with ease. If you scatter 'scratch' feed into your runs, then make sure that you only give a quantity that the birds will have eaten before nightfall. Also, suspend all feeders rather than stand them on the floor.

One advantage of using big sheds is that there's plenty of room for large feeders and drinkers which will keep your birds supplied for longer periods, and thus allow you to have a holiday. We've been away for a week at a time with no problems at all — although it's a good idea to get a neighbouring plot holder to collect the eggs or you may come home to find a very broody hen sitting atop a mountain of them!



Using a bowl of warm water to defrost a frozen drinker is the best method I've come across. Being impatient and trying to force a frozen unit open will typically cause the plastic to shatter.

You should be prepared to bring your own water supplies during spells of very icy weather. The lottie taps will almost certainly be turned off at the start of winter and, even if they're not, they'll freeze up solid at times. Your drinkers will also freeze, and we all know that these are difficult to unblock. The answer is a jerry can full of hot water and a washing up bowl. Stand the frozen drinker in the bowl and pour in some hot water. Go off and do your other jobs such as filling feeders and collecting eggs, and when you get back the drinker will be thawed out and ready for refilling.

I mentioned the need to make your housing and run secure against thieves and vandals, but I haven't so far mentioned the biggest thief of all — Mr Reynard. One chap on our field lost 17 hens in one night to a fox, and many have had constant losses. I've lost just one bird, so far...
