

The Alternative Kitchen Garden

Episode 62 transcript



Hello and welcome to episode 62 of The Alternative Kitchen Garden. I'm Emma, it's bright and early Monday morning and I'm sitting in the Grow Dome. Not because I'm planning on really talking about what's going on in the Grow Dome today, but merely because the weather is nice and it's a nice place to be. You may be able to hear the birds tweeting in the background, and the chickens – who are making a bit of a racket at the moment because I'm ignoring them.

But today we're going to be talking about the chickens, so we might go and say hello to them in a minute. But usually once I put a recording device in front of them they go all shy, so we'll have to see.

As those of you who have been looking around my blog will know, Pete and I have two chickens, and we've had them for just over two years now. And they're called Princess Layer and Hen Solo. And they are both hybrid chickens, they're bred to be laying birds. Hen Solo is black, and she's a Miss Pepperpot; Princess Layer is brown and she's a Gingernut Ranger. They lay slightly different coloured eggs, but they're both in the tan family in the egg department – we haven't got any funny colours of eggs. And they lay eggs most days. Certainly during the spring, summer and autumn (when the days are nice and long) they will lay an egg each most days. Laying production slows down a bit over the winter, when the days are shorter.

Our two chickens are spoiled rotten, and they live in 5-star chicken accommodation, because we've got an eglu. If you haven't seen an eglu, they're made by Omlet and they are very funky plastic chicken houses. They also do homes for bunny rabbits. Ours is green. The nice thing about an eglu, certainly for novice chicken owners (which we were when we bought it) is that it's very easy to keep clean – you can pressure wash the whole thing. And it makes a lovely home for two or three chickens, or a few more if you've got small bantams. It comes with an integral run, which is virtually fox proof and keeps the chickens nice and safe. And our chickens also have

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



an open air run which we let them out into, which is also my orchard – it has my four Minarette fruit trees in it. The chickens don't do too much damage to the trees, they peck off a few of the lower leaves, but their chicken manure will fertilize the trees for me and they keep down the weeds. They live on bark chips rather than grass. It gives them a lot more space to run around and keeps them a bit happier. But when we're out, or the weather's nasty, we shut them back in their run so that they're nice and safe and they're covered over and it keeps them drier.

If you want to have chickens of your own then they will need a dry space to roost in at night, so a hen house of some description. You can buy ready made ones. They don't all come in as expensive as the eglu, you can get some lovely wooden ones as well, that are cheaper. Or you can make your own if you're DIY capable, or convert a shed or an old children's play house or something like that. The chickens won't be too fussy about it. It needs to be dry and safe, they need to be kept dry and away from the wet weather. And it needs to have a nest box. If you can encourage them to lay in the nest box it means that you won't be running around the garden trying to find your eggs. And they like having somewhere to perch. Some of them will sit on the ground, quite happily, but chickens like to perch.

The run itself will need to have a certain amount of fox protection. We're very lucky here, in that we're quite urban and we have some fairly hefty fencing around the garden, and we've never seen a fox. But there are foxes in most places and you will find that if there is a fox in your area it will come and find your chickens fairly rapidly and will try and get in at them. So you need to be able to keep the fox out. You need quite high fencing for a fox, and also a certain amount going down into the ground or along the ground, so that they can't just dig under the run. And a secure hen house to keep them in at night, which is when the fox is most likely to attack.

If you want your chickens to lay eggs regularly then you need to feed them properly. Ours have layers pellets, which is specially mixed food for them that comes in little chunks. And you can also get layers mash, which is the same contents but in a different format so it takes them longer to eat it. And if your chickens are getting bored, and pecking at each other because they're bored, then layers mash might be an option because they literally spend more of their time eating.

We also give ours a mixed corn, poultry corn, partly as a treat and partly as a bribe if we want to get them back into the run – they'll follow us if you shake the tin. You can train them to react to noises, which is fairly useful, especially if you're going to be going away and letting someone else look after your chickens. If you can train them to respond to a specific noise it makes it much easier for someone else to look after them. They will come to people for food, they recognise people as the bringers of food, so if you want to get them back in the run or something then train them to a noise. It doesn't have to be the rattling of the food tin, it can be a squeaky toy or something like that, but they will come to associate that with being in the run and go back. That's the theory, anyway. Ours are pretty good most of the time.

And you can get layers pellets and poultry corn in organic varieties, or you can get GMO-free varieties, or you can just get standard varieties, depending on what your

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



principles are and how much you are willing to pay. Chicken food isn't that expensive, they're quite cheap to keep as pets. However, it's probably more expensive than just going out and buying your own eggs, but the eggs are much nicer. If you feed your chickens a good diet you will get much tastier eggs and the yolks will be very yellow. And what makes them yellow is not really the corn, but it's access to fresh green vegetables. If you've got a lawn then your chickens will decimate it, because they absolutely love eating grass. We don't have a lawn. We have a few grass weeds, and the chickens eat those, and so we keep them on bark chips which keeps the area quite nice and clean but it means that we need to give them access to fresh vegetables. So ours eat a lot of chard and leaf beet, and we occasionally buy them lettuce and cabbage. And pretty much anything that's growing green in the garden, if we're not going to eat it, they get it, so they have quite a lot of salad. At the beginning of the year they were eating some of my Oriental vegetables, so they really are quite spoiled.

You can, of course, feed your chickens scraps and leftovers. You have to be careful with that, that you're not feeding them too much stuff that will prevent them getting the balanced diet they need to make good eggs. My chickens, their favourites are porridge – in the winter I give them porridge when it's warm, not hot, so they don't burn their beaks, but it keeps them going. They absolutely love that, although it's very messy eating porridge. I don't put any salt or sugar in it for them, it's just plain porridge made with water. As I said, they love leafy vegetables so they eat the leaf beet and lettuce I grow specially for them. We also get mealworms, dried mealworms, which are a special treat for the chickens. They absolutely love those, they go mental. They're quite crispy, so eating them tend to break them up a lot, so it takes them a while to scratch those around. And if we're feeling very generous then we open a tin of sweetcorn for them, again without salt or sugar. They love sweetcorn, they recognise it from about a mile off. If you've never seen a chicken run, then get your own and open a tin of sweetcorn and see how fast they make it to you!

You will also need to give them access to grit. Grit helps them with their digestive process, and they'll need a source of calcium. They get some from their food but if there's a problem with weak eggshells then they need extra calcium. Which they might get from their leafy vegetables, but you can also give them broken up eggshells. Which sounds a bit icky, but we collect ours and we dry them out a bit in the oven, crush them all up so that the chickens don't really recognise them, and that's a perfect source of calcium for them. They'll be very happy to eat those.

Try not to give them whole eggshells, or recognisable bits of egg, because that might encourage them to eat their own eggs. Which they will do, if they get a weak-shelled one, or one gets broken accidentally in the run, they will eat it. It makes a bit of a mess, but it's perfectly natural behaviour for them, so although it seems a bit icky to us that's one of the things that they do. So if you collect your eggs regularly, and deal with any issues of weak eggshells as and when they arise, then you can stop them doing that too often. They can get into a habit of it, and start pecking at their own eggs. Ours haven't done that, so we're doing all right there.

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



When we bought our egglu from Omlet we bought our chickens from them as well. One of the reasons that we did that was a) because they delivered and b) because Omlet chickens are all vaccinated against the worst of the chicken diseases that they can get. Chickens can get some quite nasty diseases, but they can be vaccinated against them and it stops being a problem. They've also been vaccinated against salmonella, which means that they won't be passing along salmonella in their eggs. So if you like runny eggs, then having your chickens vaccinated against salmonella is a good idea.

So ours are all very healthy stock, but we have had to take each of them to the vet. Shortly after we got them a couple of years ago, Hen Solo got a bit of a cold. And it's quite a disgusting process in chickens, because they get snotty beaks. Whenever they get anything on their beak that they don't like, so slug slime or porridge, or anything wet like snot, they either wipe their beak on the ground (which is hilarious) or they shake their head from side to side to fling it off. So having a chicken with a cold is not the loveliest thing in the world, and it's something that does need treating, so we took her along to the vet. You may have a little bit of difficulty finding a vet that treats chickens in your area, but there should be one if you hunt around. Might be something to think about before the chicken becomes ill. Luckily we have a vet in our town centre that deals with chickens with no problem. And he gave her some antibiotics. And in actual fact, because it was a cold and fairly infectious we just had to add antibiotics into the water for both of them for a couple of weeks. Hen Solo got better very quickly and Princess Layer never got ill. That was quite simple, and a trip to the vet of that ilk costs around £30 – so quite expensive if you're thinking in terms of owning chickens for the eggs, but we think of ours as pets so it was well worthwhile.

Early last year, we had to take Princess Layer to the vet. We found her looking very sad one morning. You can tell when a chicken's not feeling very well, because they do look very depressed. They just huddle in a corner and look very miserable. And she could walk, but she wouldn't walk if she had any option about it. And we were quite worried about her because she'd laid a couple of soft-shelled eggs and we thought that might be the issue, but in the end when we took her to the vet and he gave her a good and thorough examination, he decided that she had a urinary tract infection and we had to give her oral antibiotics. And that was quite fun. The first day, when she was very, very ill all we had to do was syringe antibiotics down her throat, which wasn't too bad. On the second day, she was feeling much perkier and she would not let us do it, and so we had to squirt it onto sweetcorn for her and then try to keep them apart while she ate that and Hen Solo got antibiotics-free sweetcorn. But she got much better very quickly and they've both been alright since. When you feed your chickens antibiotics from the vet, you're not supposed to eat the eggs. You have to throw them away for a few days so that you're not ingesting any antibiotic by-products with your eggs.

Other than that, the key to keeping chickens healthy is really to just keep them nice and clean and give them a balanced diet and plenty of access to clean water and stuff like that.

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



People still worry about avian flu. At the moment, here in the UK, that's not much of an issue. If it becomes an issue then we will have to keep the chickens in a covered run, so that they don't have any access to ground that has been contaminated by wild birds. With the eglu, we can do that. The chickens won't like it, because they'll be confined all the time, but we can cover the eglu run over and keep them nice and clean in there. So hopefully that will never be an issue, but you have to bear that in mind. If you're going to get some chickens, you will need to think about what you would do in the event of an avian flu outbreak.

And occasionally people worry about chickens passing on diseases to them or their children or their other pets. But really, as long as you take the precautions that you would take with any other pet – once you've been playing with it you wash your hands thoroughly – then there's no real risk of disease being passed on. And certainly if you're handling chicken manure then you should probably think about gloves, because it's fairly icky, but give your hands a good wash afterwards and there's no problem.

And that, of course, is the other benefit of chickens. They make quite a lot of poo. Some of ours goes in the run, naturally, and is used to fertilize the fruit trees. And any poo that we get out of the eglu itself, where they've been pooing at night or in the nest box (which is one of their icky habits), we clean that out and put it on the compost heap where it adds a lot of nitrogen to the compost heap and acts as a compost activator. So we have very well-fed plants in our garden, because of the chickens.

As I said at the beginning, ours are hybrid chickens so they were bred specifically to be layers. You can get lots of different varieties of chickens. Some people like the old fancy varieties, or the heritage varieties of chicken that look – depending on how you feel about it – prettier. I love my two dearly and I think they're beautiful, but you can get some fancy chickens, all kinds of feather colours, different egg colours, those ones with the feathery legs which are quite cute. And you can get bantams, which are much smaller, and lay smaller eggs. But bantams do less damage to the garden. They're also quite hardy birds, and more likely to fly, so with bantams if you keep them out in the garden they're more likely to roost up in trees for the night rather than go back in the hen house.

So I briefly mentioned then that bantams don't do as much damage to the garden, which implies that big chickens can do a lot of damage to the garden. And that's why mine are fenced in most of the time, well it's partly for that and partly for their safety so that nothing happens to them when we're not watching them. I do let them out in the garden sometimes, with supervision, so that they can wander round and have a bit of a scratch around and peck and eat a few beasties for me – and they love that. But chickens can be a bit of a pain the garden. They will munch things, and they will munch what they want to munch rather than what you'd like them to munch, so I have a couple of my beds fenced off to try to keep them out and away. It's not so much the munching as the scratching. Chickens spend a lot of their time scratching and they've got very strong legs and very strong claws (like little dinosaur feet, actually) and so they scratch around a lot. Which is fine, but if you've got them in an onion bed then they will scratch up the onion bulbs, if you've just done a seedbed they will turn the

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



whole thing over. They're very good at clearing the remains of crops and pests out of beds that you are temporarily un-planting, but in beds that are newly planted or things that have got small plants in them they will do quite a lot of damage. Which is why you either have to fence the chickens in or fence them out of the garden.

As I said, you can keep them on grass and if you do you'll want to keep moving them around because they will decimate the grass. They will eat some of it, and scratch some of it, and they will make it quite dirty. If you keep moving them around their manure will regenerate the grass as and when it gets left, but if you keep them in one place the grass will rapidly disappear. Which is one of the reasons we've got ours on bark chips.

But they do eat a fair amount of pests. They love caterpillars, millipedes, centipedes. They also love earthworms, which of course aren't pests, but they don't eat that many of them. They will eat slugs, as long as they're not too big, and seeing them wipe the slime off their beaks is quite funny. They love snails, because of the calcium shell. Occasionally we stomp on snails for them to break up the shells of the bigger ones for them which are a bit tough and a bit large for them to eat all in one go. They absolutely love snails and we have a much reduced snail population in our garden. If they're fast enough they'll also catch flies and spiders and things like that. But they are omnivorous and they will appreciate the addition of some extra protein to their diet if you've got some bugs you'd like to get rid of. And they love ants too, ants and ant eggs. So if you find an ant hill, just let your chickens loose on it and they'll deal with that for you – no need for pesticides.

Of course, if you are going to let your chickens out in the garden and eat your bugs then you really, really, really do need to not use any pesticides in your garden. Because the chickens will accumulate them and then you'll be eating them in your eggs. So they won't be any good for the chickens and they won't be any good for you. So if you're going to have chickens, then garden organically.

The nice thing about having chickens is that they add a completely different dimension to the garden. Normally when you have a vegetable garden it's quite a passive thing. There are things going on, but it's all in the fine details and the changes in the seasons. But chickens will bring life to it on a day-to-day basis, and they can be quite funny and entertaining. A lot of people with chickens say that they prefer sitting out on the patio of an evening and watching the chickens scratch around for a couple of hours rather than sitting and watching the telly, because it's much more entertaining. And when they're happy, and if you let them out to scratch around in the garden, they will make the most adorable little clucking noises, when they're happy or when they've found something particularly yummy. And often one of them will find something particularly tasty and will then be chased around the garden by the rest of them, trying to win it off her. They are very entertaining.

One thing I need to mention is that you can't have one chicken. They are flock animals, it would be very cruel to keep one on her own, so the minimum is two chickens. And if one of them unfortunately dies you will have to replace her very quickly otherwise the other one will start to pine.

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>



Introducing new birds into a flock is something I haven't tried yet, but there will be some argy bargy as they re-establish a pecking order. There is always a chicken that is top of the pecking order and there is always a chicken that is the bottom of the pecking order, and although it looks like bullying behaviour to us it's perfectly natural to them. You just have to let them get on with it to a certain extent, although if one of them is getting bullied mercilessly then you can intervene to do something about that.

And the other thing that people sometimes worry about is having a cockerel. And there is no need to have a cockerel. These hybrid hens that are bred specifically for laying do not need a cockerel to produce eggs. They will lay an egg every day, and if they don't have a cockerel it will be unfertilized. So you don't need a cockerel, you don't need to worry about the noise in the morning and upsetting your neighbours – you can just have a whole flock of girls and no problems with that.

Well I think that's all I can think about to say about the chickens at the moment, so if you've got any chicken questions then by all means send me an email to akgpodcast@gmail.com, or leave a comment on the show home page (which is <http://coopette.com/akg>). Or drop by the Facebook group and take part in a discussion there. I will put a link on the show home page to some pictures of my lovely, lovely chickens.

I've spent the last couple of days on a course, I've been learning about how to be a Master Composter here in Oxfordshire – it's a new scheme to encourage home composting. So I might be telling you all about that in the not-too-distant future. In the meantime, enjoy the sunshine, and have a great week in your garden. Goodbye.

The Alternative Kitchen Garden, <http://coopette.com/akg>

