

A Better Life

The Better Life is the tales and observations of a London townie, who downshifted to Cornwall. A bit like the Good Life, but with the internet.

It all started one morning in the kitchen, when Anne asked, "How would you feel about keeping chickens?" I didn't answer right away. In the time we've been together I've learned the language of subtext. I finished my breakfast and replied, "When are we picking them up?"

I wasn't entirely averse to the idea of a little self-sufficiency. Who doesn't have fond memories of *The Good Life* - and especially Felicity Kendal? Plus it'd be a chance to shed my townie upbringing and dispel that grim story my dad used to tell - the one about dispatching a chicken for the first and only time, where the head came off in his hands and the headless chicken ran up the path.

Stage one in Operation Chickadee was researching coops and chicken feed and, well, chickens really. There's a lot to learn about chicken behaviour, the different breeds and their foibles. Having taken advice, we decided on hybrids, as they're more reliable for eggs and point-of-lay birds for immediate production.

We went upmarket with the coop, choosing an easy care metal and plastic affair from Omlet (yes, really!). Now all we needed to do was find the right chickens - and Anne was already on the case.

The day after the chicken coop and run were installed in the front garden, we entered the mysterious world of farm

supplies. Layers pellets, grit (for strong shells), straw and worming treatment - check. However, my suggestion that we buy jodhpurs as well fell on stony ground.

Having located a poultry supplier, we headed out with an empty cat box and a pile of newspaper. The farmer led us to a densely populated barn and said, "Take your pick." I don't know exactly how Anne chose the chickens - which the farmer insisted were hens - but we went home with Sweet Pea (a Plymouth Rock / Maran) and Pepperami (a Plymouth Rock / Rhode Island).

The chickens were confined to barracks for a few days, to allow them to settle in and retrain the cat. Once they emerged, we noted the following:

1. At least an egg a day!
2. A huge reduction in the snail population.
3. Sweet Pea failed to live up to her name, went broody and took it out on the cat (luckily it's a very fast cat).
4. The garden quickly came to resemble *The Somme*.

Something had to be done because, unlike me, Anne is a passionate gardener. Plus, the round up in the evenings was time consuming.

We fenced off one half of the garden and, after a few 'great escapes', augmented the fencing with extra bamboo canes in leaf, whereupon the chickens looked as if they



were staring in their own episode of *Tenko*.

Sweet Pea and Pepperami were both restful to watch and very entertaining. They performed chicken yoga wing stretching exercises. They played tug-of-war with snails and 'I'll have what she's having' tussles over worms, morning porridge and, on one unfortunate occasion, a wood mouse.

Our neighbours relish the availability of fresh, local eggs and they enjoy the egg-laying serenade every morning. And the poultry poop makes great compost.

No chickens were harmed in the making of this feature. My dad would be proud.

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