



Adopting Ex-Battery Hens

Hens make lovely pets for adults or children due to their outgoing, sociable nature. They will happily seek out your company, so please spend time sitting and talking with them. They will become very tame very quickly. Here are some guidelines for caring for your feathered friends:

SHELTER

The first thing you need to prepare is a sheltered house or coop for your hens. This should be roomy, with shavings on the floor, a horizontal branch or two for roosting, and a couple of boxes with straw for laying eggs in. It should provide full shelter from wind, rain and cold in winter. Outside the henhouse should be a fenced run with grass, so that they can go inside and outside freely while enclosed. The door to the run should be able to be closed and locked to keep the hens safe while you're away.

If you're going to let your hens free range in your yard, you should keep them in their pen or coop for at least a week first. That way they quickly learn that this is home, where they eat and sleep. Then, when you do start letting them out during the day, ONLY feed them inside their pen both morning and night. They'll quickly come to expect this, and will "put themselves to bed" every evening. You'll never have to chase them to get them in, because they'll go in before you, expecting their dinner. They love routine. Hens do need grass and greens, so if they're not going to be let out of the pen it needs to cover grassy areas, or you'll need to toss grass, silver beet, etc in for them regularly. Not lettuce, it gives them diarrhoea. NO avocado, it's poisonous to birds!!

LAYING

Be prepared for a lull in the hens egg laying when the first arrive. Often the girls will rest their bodies for a few months after being rescued...then they resume laying again at the pace that nature intended. Having said that, some don't stop at all. Please provide straw filled nesting boxes for them.

Rescued hens don't know how to roost on a horizontal branch at first, because they've been standing in cages 24 hours a day for many months. This may take a few lessons, others figure it out for themselves really quickly. When they are in their shelter at night, you can gently lift and hold them on the lower perches until they learn to do it themselves. If roosting is not a concern, they will happily sleep on a cosy ground covering or flat shelf.

FOOD

We feed our hens mash each morning. You can buy 10kg bags of mash in the pet food section of most supermarkets for around \$9.50. Place the dry mash onto a flat container with raised edges – we use plant pot bases. Pour a bit of water onto the dry mash, and mix it in thoroughly. The mash should be damp but not wet. Ideally sprinkle a handful of Chook Chow and a handful of oyster grit (from Bin Inn, very inexpensive) on top. The oyster grit helps them replenish the calcium they lose due to laying eggs, and also helps them to grind down the grains in their crop so that they get the most out of it. Chook

Chow (from farm centres) is truly excellent for them, but will give them loose bowels if that's all they are fed. Our hens free range during the day, then are enclosed for the night. We sprinkle pellets (such as Peck N Lay from Farm Centres, or you can buy 10 kg bags at the grocery store) on the ground inside their enclosure each evening. They also enjoy chopped fruits and vegetables (some people feed them kitchen scraps). If you have a garden, silver beet is absolutely wonderful for their health. Our hens free range for grass and bugs all day, but we still throw in bunches of silver beet at least once a week.

Always provide an abundance of clean water every day. We find a nice deep flat oval plastic bowl from the \$2 shop works best, as these are harder for them to tip over. We keep a dish scrub brush nearby to give the bowl a clean each morning, and then refill it with fresh water.

One of the best things you can do is keep a couple of logs around their area. Every once in a while, roll the log a half-turn and uncover all the bugs and worms that congregate underneath. My hens go crazy for this! They learn quickly, and crowd around excitedly waiting for me to roll a log. A week later I roll it back and they do it all again. (Just make sure you don't roll it onto their toes!) They're so much fun to watch.

As terrible as it is, the hens beaks have often been cut off by the factory farmer. If they are at least cut evenly the hens won't have too many problems. However, sometimes they've been cut unevenly. In these cases the hen will have difficulty picking up grain or pellets from the ground (it's like trying to eat with chopsticks when one of the sticks has been cut in half). These poor hens need to be fed separately from other chickens. A good trick is to have the food in a bowl, so that they are able to get their beaks right down into the deeper layer of food.

HEALTH

Often battery hens toenails have grown so long while in their battery cages that they are curling back into their feet and damaging them. However, we will trim all toenails when they first arrive, so you shouldn't have to worry about this. Once they're with you in their new home, normal scratching about will keep the toenails at the correct length.

When the hens are first rescued they have very few feathers and their skin is raw. We keep them here at The Sanctuary until their skin is healed and their new feathers are coming through. When you pick them up they may still have a few rough looking patches covered with dark, rough stubble. These are the new feathers emerging, and it won't be long until they are fully feathered and looking the picture of health again.

On rare occasions hens may get some external tiny mites. (We've only had this once in 6 years). We use a natural treatment, which can also be used for prevention by applying every 3 – 6 months. It is called food-grade Diatomaceous Earth, and is a fine talc-like organic product which we simply ruffle into the hens feathers. Contact us if you need help finding this product. Others may use chemical treatments available from your vet.

SAFETY

Their natural enemies are domesticated dogs and ferrets – both will kill them. A large hawk or a strong cat may take a smaller hen or a chick. Slug bait or other garden poisons will kill them. Locking them into their coop at night is a good practice to keep them safe.