

CORONA-YOUR-OWN

Helping you to get organic growing despite the disruption
e-Newsletter 20 5 December 2020

Welcome

20th Corona-your-own newsletter of 2020!

Goings-on in the henhouse, summer/autumn 2020 from Julia

As summer moved towards autumn, change was stirring in the henhouse. No longer were we collecting 3 - 4 eggs every day, but 2-3, followed a few days later by a regular 2 eggs each day. In the orchard there was the noticeable absence of a quorum of hens scratching around and moving as a peloton. Broodiness had arrived. Edna (buff) had taken to the nest box followed a couple of days later by Lexi (pewter). They were not laying eggs, they could not be coaxed out of their nest box, and they grumbled loudly if I gently tried to lift them off the nests. My research revealed that broodiness may last 6-8 weeks. So what to do about it? Or does it just run its course?



The instinct of the hens to incubate eggs means that as their metabolism shuts down they don't move very much from the nest so I should make sure that there is food and water available. There is a strong risk they will lose weight and condition. They will lose weight as they need to be lighter so as not to risk cracking the eggs. Rarely do they lose too much weight.

We noticed that the brooding hens would make way for the laying hens in the nest box. Once a laying hen had laid her egg the brooding hens would then move into position to keep the egg warm. Sometimes a laying hen would lay an egg in front of the 2 nests. Using her beak one of the brooding hens would nudge the egg into the nest, then settle down to keep it warm. Since we don't have a cockerel none of our eggs are fertile, so we had to think how to bring the hens out of their broody mood/habit. The laying hens Rosie (white) and Speckledy did not show the same signs of broodiness nor any loss of condition and carried on, each laying 1 egg each day. At the same time there was no sign of the broody hens moving off the nests.



We turned to poultry guru Daphne Ellis, long standing friend, originally of the Countryside Centre in Ullenhall. Daphne, a farmer herself, comes from generations of poultry farmers and whose father was an award-winning breeder of Rhode Island Reds at Balsall Common in the 40s and 50s. She has extensive knowledge and experience of hen varieties, both hybrid and rare, and of their behaviour when allowed to express it freely. Her advice was spot-on and we're very grateful.

1. At night: very gently lift the brooding hens out of the nest boxes, lifting them quietly onto the perches. In order not to wake them from their dozing ensure their wings are gently folded and when

placing them on the perches it is very important that their feet feel the perch. They will settle calmly and quietly.

2. In the morning the broodies will probably be back on the nests. Gently lift them off the nests and into the outer fenced area (the orchard, in this case). Roaming around begins to cool the broody hens waking up their metabolism. At this time of the morning leave the laying hens in the main henhouse until they have laid their eggs.

3. With eggs laid, allow the laying hens into the fenced area (orchard) and close off access to the nests to prevent the broodies returning to them.

4. Harden your heart if the weather is inclement, it will help put them off their broodiness. It will take time but it will work. This was portentous; storm Francis arrived the next day . . .



It worked and the expected moult ensued. Daphne reassured us that as autumn nights become cooler the hens will soon feather up to keep warm and be ready for winter. The broodies have had an egg-laying holiday at the right time of year. We expect fewer eggs as the days shorten but at the moment we are being gifted 3 - 4 eggs a day.

Harvest update from Ross

I love late autumn Sunday afternoons - a late trip to the plot to check everything is OK and pick veg for the week. The ground is so wet there is not much you can do, but there's no need to feel guilty if all you do is pick and run! Our first no-dig year has been really productive with the only downside a slightly lower yield of potatoes (those we have though are serving us well, foraged after dark from their sacks in the garage). Today was typical for the time of year - root veg and leaves. We pulled up a massive parsnip together with salsify, mooli and beetroot. For greens we put swiss chard, kale and broccoli in the bag. For salad we picked lettuce, land-cress, mustard and rocket. We also pulled a couple of young leeks and left the radicchio as we haven't eaten through last week's haul.



Stuart called to deliver our honey order and kindly gifted us a Crown Prince pumpkin which he says will store well so we are prioritising our own squashes in the kitchen - spaghetti squash tonight. Think roasts, soups, stir-fries, ragout, salads - I'm going to eat well this week aren't I?

News from Allotment 39 Sutton Coldfield from Mike and Maggie

We have had a very strange year indeed. Before and after the first lockdown the jobs around the garden and allotment were no different to any other year. Soil preparation, sowing and planting followed the same routine as before, the one difference is that Mike came to the allotment each week to help me and for somewhere different to go. The allotments have a lovely atmosphere with people working on their plots (well away from each other) and the occasional conversation. The weather was very good which made a big difference. Mike and I managed to get more work done each week plus extra jobs too, like clearing an overgrown area not touched for 2/3 years and new boards for my compost bins.

Before Lockdown we had our 4 year old grand-daughter for 2 days a week, so we could continue seeing her. Katie brought her to the allotment to help and have a picnic; in the end they took over the area Mike had cleared. Rosa really enjoyed helping to sow and plant, and a visit to the bee hives as well. We hope this continues, but visits will have to be at weekends or holidays because Rosa started school in September.

Like all years there are things that don't do well. This year my swede seed failed to germinate and my pumpkin crop was not very good. I grow a variety called Potimarron and this usually covers large areas having 2/3 fruits or more, but this year they hardly grew at all, maybe the weather was not quite right.

My runner beans were interesting. For the last few years, I have grown a variety called Czar, chosen because when the pods ripen there are white beans inside which can be dried and eaten later as butter beans so giving me a second crop. Growing in the middle of my row were some plants with red flowers instead of white, when I eventually picked the dried seed pods there were black beans inside, I have put some of these in a paper bag ready to grow next year, in my garden so they don't cross pollinate with my other variety.

In my greenhouse I tried growing my tomatoes in a mix of my compost and leaf mould (I use sieved leaf mould to sow the tomato seeds in) and I was pleased with the result - good plants and a reasonable crop, so I will do this again next year.

Considering what we have had to put up with this year having a garden and allotment has been really beneficial, being outside and watching nature all around is wonderful. I have ordered my seeds for next year and I am already planning what I am going to do. May 2021 be a better year for everyone.

Happy gardening everyone

Winter Squash questions from Susie

- What varieties would you recommend for tasty winter squash seeds that store well?
- When and how do you start the seeds off?
- When do you plant them out into the garden or allotment and what are their growing requirements for optimum production?
- Finally, when do you harvest and how do you store at the season's end.

NB. My "normal" squash did really badly this year, Monty Don's didn't look that good, and many long time gardeners I have spoken to this year have not done at all well with squash, so any tips/thoughts would be welcome. *GMcG*

COOK-YOUR-OWN

Wonderful apple cake from Julia

This is an exceptionally good seasonal Mary Berry recipe, which I have cooked every autumn and winter for nearly 30 years. The result is greater than the sum of its parts. This cake can be made earlier in the year with plums or rhubarb with delicious results. Mary Berry suggests serving with a dusting of icing sugar, warm or cold and vanilla ice-cream or crème fraîche. My preference is to serve it with real custard (crème anglaise) Recipe on <https://rps.gn.apc.org/organic/resources.htm>

POSTSCRIPT

Feedback from our readers is important, so if you have ideas, news or tips you would like to share, please let us know.

If you have any questions related to organic growing which you think our members might be able to answer, let us know and we will try to include the questions and replies in our newsletters.

You can contact us at enews@heog.org.uk.

Gillian McGivern