

# Rescuing battery hens *Caroline Harcourt*

As cottage gardening is returning in some small way to its original purpose - providing food for its owners - hens are a good way to do this. Not, I hasten to add, for meat, but as providers of eggs. Most satisfying is the rescue of battery chickens. Bedraggled, scared creatures with long claws and few feathers are, amazingly, soon transformed into delightful clucking birds that know instinctively where to find food once they are released into the 'wild'.

My first hens, six of them, came from Oswestry, obtained through the British Hen Welfare Trust ([www.bhwt.org.uk](http://www.bhwt.org.uk)). This organisation rescues around 60,000 hens each year. Once the hens are no longer laying an egg every single day, which is when they are between 12-18 months old, the egg producing farmers send them off for slaughter. Of course, by this time, they are no good as table birds - the chickens we eat are generally a mere five to seven weeks old - instead, they go off to be processed into pet food, soups, stock cubes and the like. Being prepared to look after these hens saves them from such a fate. They will often continue to lay for at least another year, though it is rare for them to survive for more than another two or three years because it is so exhausting to produce an egg almost every day of the year. Other breeds of chickens often have a rest period over winter and can live much longer - the oldest recorded hen was 16 years of age when it died and seven to eight is not at all uncommon.

Since those first chickens, rescued in 2009, I have had others from a nearby 'battery' farm, simply because it is closer to home. Of course battery farming is no longer allowed, the hens are kept in 'They come when called, trained to do so with food, and indeed come running as soon as they hear the front door open'.

enriched caging, but I fear the conditions are still far from producing happy hens. Last time I collected four, the workers said goodbye to the chickens as if they were about to face execution! Far from it, they are now thoroughly spoiled, allowed out of their huge run on a daily basis to have free range of my garden. They come when called, trained to do so with food, and indeed come running as soon as they hear the front door open. They love it when I am out digging in the garden, risking losing their heads as they grab every worm from under my spade. It really is amazing how they know what natural food is when they have spent all their working lives penned up in a cage, being fed on layers' pellets. Their tastes are pretty eclectic, spaghetti is a favourite, as is potato, bread and bacon, or any other meat. It's not safe to leave my house doors open - they are inside in a jiffy, stealing my cats' food from saucers in the kitchen - they eat both the dried and tinned type! Yes, they can make a mess of parts of the garden, some chickens I have had scratch around a lot, others barely do so at all, but I'd not trust them near where seedlings are planted. Overall, though, they are a delightful addition to my life and to the garden.

*Caroline is our Chair and gardens in Flintshire.*

