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WELCOME



JULIE HARDING
EDITOR
07725 829575

COUNTY SHOWS played a major role in my early life. A day at one was exhilarating and it lingered long in the memory, no remembrance more potent than watching Olympic team gold medallist Bridget Parker parading at the Frome Show. Times change and today's shows are larger and more diverse, offering almost everything the small farmer could want in a one-stop shop format. Machinery, livestock, rosettes, ideas, knowledge. The county shows in 2020 are fun and fantastic and in this month's bumper issue we bring you a free listing of all the UK's major fixtures for spectators and competitors alike. Also with competing in mind, sheepdog trainer Dudley Edmunds explains how you can aim your canine superstar at trials, while for any smallholder with sheep, we have myriad articles to help you keep your flock in tip-top shape. Enjoy! ■



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IN THE NEWS

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African Swine Fever concerns continue to grow

CONCERNS THAT African Swine Fever (ASF) could wipe out the British pig industry continue to build. MEP Anthea McIntyre used her final speech in the European Parliament's agriculture committee to raise the concerns of farmers close to the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, where there is a large population of wild boar.

She said: "ASF can be brought into the country through contaminated meat, maybe in a sandwich, and then could be spread by wild boar. It is just not possible for every farmer to protect their farms from the encroachment of wild boar."

As a precaution, visitors to the Forest of Dean have been told not to feed the boar.

In June 2019, ASF was found in meat seized by port authorities in Northern Ireland before it entered the UK. This is

the first time the virus has been detected in the country.

Chief veterinary officer Christine Middlemiss said: "While there has never been an outbreak of ASF in the UK, we are in no way complacent and have robust measures in place to protect against it."

At the end of January, a joint simulated exercise to practise biosecurity measures in the event of an ASF outbreak was undertaken by UK and Australian officials in New South Wales.

However, there is a ray of light. A new ASF vaccine that appears to be far more effective than previous ones has been developed by the US government. A report in the *American Journal of Virology* states that in the study both low and high doses of the vaccine were 100% effective against the virus when the pigs were assessed 28 days post-inoculation.

Traditional coal and unseasoned log sales to be banned

SALES OF bags of traditional coal and unseasoned logs will become unlawful in England after February 2021 in a bid to cut particulate emissions, the government has announced. A ban on coal deliveries will follow in 2023.

The ban targets sales of traditional house coal, but doesn't affect smokeless fuels or anthracite coal. However, it could pave the way for a ban on all solid fuel stoves.

A spokesman for the Countryside Alliance said: "This will hit rural communities the hardest, particularly those off the gas grid network, potentially pushing people into fuel poverty."

The new regulations, however, don't affect Scotland or Wales, although the Scottish government is considering a ban on wood burning stoves and open fires in urban areas to reduce pollution. It comes after the Centre for Cities think tank produced its annual report on air quality.

The report claims three out of every 100 deaths in Scottish cities are due to air pollution.

The Stove Industry Alliance (SIA) refutes the need to ban stoves in order to improve air quality saying that a move away from open fires to SIA Ecodesign Ready stoves, which can produce 90% fewer emissions, will lead to further reductions in particulate emissions.

TV company seeks first-time smallholder pig farmers

LEEDS-BASED TV company Daisybeck Studios is looking for farmers who are adding pigs to their smallholding for the first time to feature in a series about springtime. The company is seeking small-scale farmers who will be receiving their pigs before 20 March 2020. If you think you fit the bill and would like to find out more about potentially taking part, email Emily Cadman, emily.cadman@daisybeckstudios.com

AHDB SEMINARS FOR SMALL-SCALE KEEPERS

THIS MONTH the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) will be hosting informative pig clubs for small-scale producers. These are:

Devon: Tuesday 10 March
(nutrition focus)

Surrey: Wednesday 11 March
(nutrition focus)

Yorkshire: Tuesday 17 March
(artificial insemination focus)

Lancashire: Wednesday 18 March
(farrowing focus)

Berkshire: Tuesday 24 March
(artificial insemination focus).

Additional details can be found by visiting www.ahdb.org.uk/small-scale-pig-keeping

Welsh farmers gain victory over fly-tipper

A GROUP of Welsh farmers has scored a victory over a fly-tipper who dumped rubbish on land where their sheep graze. Members of the Coity Wallia Commoners' Association engaged lawyers who looked through the bags of rubbish left on land at Bridgend, tracked down the fly-tipper and forced him to pay for the damage. Welsh government statistics show that reported fly-tipping offences in Wales fell to 35,076 in 2018/19, the lowest figure for four years. However, over the same period, the cost to English councils to clear-up fly-tipping incidents rose to between £12-15m, according to BBC figures.

Government opens door for 2024 grants

DEFRA IS encouraging all land managers to apply for a 2021 Countryside Stewardship agreement as a stepping-stone to the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes it plans to roll out by 2024. It claims that the scheme has been simplified and smallholders willing to undertake environmental work on their holdings can apply for a number of grants, including for planting trees, restoring walls and hedges and encouraging wildlife on their land. Farm advice events are scheduled across the country. Find out more at www.gov.uk

Farmers urged to join London rally

FARMERS FROM across the country are being urged to join a mass rally in Westminster to lobby the government not to allow cheap food imports into the UK as post-Brexit trade deals are brokered. The NFU expects hundreds of farmers to attend the event at the Queen Elizabeth II Centre in central London on 25 March. It will bring together animal welfare and food standards experts to impress upon the government the importance of British farming not being undermined by imported food produced to standards that would be illegal in the UK.

Livestock owners advised to take action as rustling crimes soar

SHEEP OWNERS are being advised not to graze their flocks in roadside fields and to consider using high-tech marking systems after figures showed that livestock worth £3m was stolen from UK farms last year.

Skilled thieves using sheepdogs can steal as many as 100 sheep in one raid and these large-scale thefts mean that the cost of livestock thefts has soared by 19.4% since 2017, according to the figures from NFU Mutual.

Rustling is now the most expensive crime for the UK's farming sector after agricultural vehicle and machinery theft.

Rebecca Davidson of NFU Mutual said: "Rustling has always been an aspect of farming, but 10 years ago we would rarely see claims of more than a dozen sheep taken in one go. We are now regularly getting reports of 50 to 100 sheep being taken in a single raid



and it is devastating for farmers who will have built up their flocks over many years."

An alarming trend, which has developed in recent years, is the illegal butchery of animals in the field. It is thought that the meat is then sold on the black market.

To deter livestock thieves, NFU Mutual advises farmers to ensure that their stock is clearly marked and their records

are up to date. When possible, livestock should graze in fields away from roads, and sheep and other animals should be checked regularly, with keepers varying the times they visit. (See Cattle Husbandry, page 14).

Shepherds can also use a high-tech marking system, such as TecTRACER, which puts thousands of coded microdot markers into a sheep's fleece.

NSA TO GATHER DATA ON SHEEP WORRYING

THE NATIONAL Sheep Association (NSA) has launched a survey to gather data on the number and severity of sheep worrying attacks in the UK.

New figures from NFU Mutual indicate that livestock worth more than £1m were attacked by dogs in 2019, with the average cost of each claim rising by 15% across England.

NSA policy officer Ellie Phipps said: "Dog worrying is an issue that affects so many sheep farmers across the UK and is extremely demoralising and frustrating for people. In order to reinvigorate our work, we think it's important to have up-to-date information and data from those who are being impacted."

The NSA works closely with a number of police forces and groups to

help tackle dog worrying, but there are still forces around the country which don't have dedicated rural crime officers, and these tend to be the areas where farmers are having poor experiences, she added.

"The more data we have to work with, the more we can add pressure to these areas to ensure that they treat worrying like the serious crime it is," Ms Phipps concluded.

The NSA is continuing to call on the Home

Office to make dog attacks on livestock a recordable crime and for the laws around worrying to be tightened to make prosecution easier (see *Country Smallholding*, July 2019).

The survey is available at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/2020-dog-worrying-survey





Time to join the Countryside Clean-up?

THE COUNTRYSIDE Alliance's annual Countryside Clean-up, a litter-picking initiative, will be held on 28-29 March across the UK. The organisation is calling on members and supporters to join in and register their commitment to help with the fightback against countryside littering that is bad for the environment and is potentially hazardous to livestock and other animals. For information, visit www.countryside-alliance.org/support-us/events-2/countryside-clean-up-28th-29th-march

Welsh farmers call for badger cull

WELSH FARMING groups want a badger cull in areas where bovine TB is endemic after figures showed a 28% rise in the number of infected cattle slaughtered in 2019. Defra figures, released last November, recorded 12,799 cattle had been slaughtered in Wales over the year to August, although there had been a 12% fall in new herd rates in the same period. The Farmers' Union of Wales and NFU Cymru said the loss of so many cattle is "unsustainable" and have called for a targeted badger cull.

Eustice welcomed

THE APPOINTMENT of George Eustice as Environment Secretary has been greeted with approval by the farming industry. Mr Eustice's family runs a fruit farm and farm shop in Cornwall, where they have a herd of South Devon cattle and the country's oldest herd of the rare breed British Lop pig. He has been part of the Defra team since 2013, resigning for a short period over Brexit issues.

Government boosts pool of seasonal workers

SMALLHOLDERS WHO employ seasonal labour to harvest produce and crops will be buoyed by the government's announcement that it is quadrupling the number of workers farms can recruit on a temporary basis from outside the EU this year.

Environment Secretary George Eustice confirmed the expansion of the Seasonal Workers Pilot, which opened in 2019, to allow farmers to hire up to 10,000 workers in 2020 – an increase from the previous 2,500. This will help to support the UK's vital horticulture sector and give fruit and vegetable growers access to a bigger pool to help pick and gather British produce.

With soft fruit production in the UK continuing to skyrocket – growing by 185% between 1998 and 2018 – the expansion will support these farmers over this



year's busy summer harvest, while allowing the government to test the pilot further.

Mr Eustice said: "The farmers and growers I've spoken to have made a powerful case for needing more workers during the coming busy months. Expanding our Seasonal Workers Pilot will help our farms with the labour they need for this summer's harvest, while allowing us to test our future approach further."

Responding to the announcement,

CLA president Mark Bridgeman said: "This announcement shows that government is listening. Quadrupling of the scheme for seasonal workers in agriculture will go some way to giving us the flexibility we need to produce food for British and international consumers. We now need to develop a framework to guarantee labour supply over the long term while continuing to provide skilled opportunities for the local workforce."

NEW RUMINANT GROUP SET UP TO 'SPEED UP PROGRESS AGAINST DISEASES'

A NEW cattle and sheep industry group, the Ruminant Health and Welfare Group (RHWG), has been set up to fight "reputational challenges" and "speed up progress against endemic diseases" in the livestock industry.

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) claims that these two issues have combined to cost the UK cattle and sheep sectors at least £500m per year.

Work to control conditions such as liver fluke, mastitis and lameness have been highlighted as areas of immediate concern for the new group, which comes into being on 1 April.

Rebecca Geraghty, AHDB chief technical officer, said: "The case for change is compelling. Despite worthwhile initiatives and significant progress in some areas to date, endemic diseases in ruminants continue to have a major impact on our industry's performance and profitability.

"Due to Brexit and potential changes to both our operating environment and consumer preferences, we face challenges and opportunities which can be better managed by a robust ruminant industry with world-leading health and welfare."



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Trade body issues guide to tackling rats

A NATIONAL trade body has warned smallholders to be on their guard as milder winters drive a rise in rats. Cold winters create a 'natural cull' of the pest's population, but warmer weather in recent years has seen numbers increase.

Now the British Pest Control Association (BPCA) has published an online guide to help businesses prevent problems with rats. The guide delves into the lifecycle and habits of rats, as well as giving tips on avoiding infestation and sign-posting smallholders to professional pest control.

Dee Ward-Thompson, BPCA technical manager, said: "In the past, harsh winters were a natural method of culling rat numbers. Milder winters in recent years have helped rat populations to thrive, which is where professional pest control comes in. Cinder block, wood, glass, metal –

rats' teeth will take on pretty much any challenge, which is why they can cause untold damage to both homes and businesses."

Property owners have a legal obligation under the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 to keep premises rodent free, or, if rodents pose a threat to health or property, to report infestations to the local authority. Environmental health officers can issue enforcement notices to business owners who don't have adequate pest management procedures in place. And businesses found to have a pest problem can also face fines, with repeat offenders in danger of facing legal action.

For more advice about preventing or dealing with rats, the new online guide and video are available at bpca.org.uk/rats



'Managing not planting trees' is key to unlocking climate change benefits

RECENT CALLS to plant millions of trees are missing a raft of opportunities to maximise impact on climate change, the Royal Forestry Society (RFS) has warned. The charity fears that the planting of millions of trees risks being a short-term indulgence if we don't then commit to long-term sustainable management. And it says that this must start with recognising timber as a carbon store.

As the RFS publishes its Forestry and Climate Change policy, RFS chief executive Simon Lloyd said: "Climate change is now a national priority and should rightly be at the core of governments' forestry policies. Such a policy focus will drive real change while delivering multiple environmental benefits of trees, woods and forests. But to be truly successful, climate change policies for forestry mustn't overlook the enormous carbon capture potential in developing markets, such as switching to more timber-based construction.

"Planting millions of trees risks being a short-term indulgence if we don't then commit to long-term sustainable management. For many land managers, the costs of planting and maintaining trees and woodland will generate income from timber and woodfuel in 50 or 100 years' time to re-invest in more trees. We need to be developing markets geared to this growth in home-grown production."

Read the full Forestry and Climate Change policy at www.rfs.org.uk/media/656917/forestry-and-climate-change.pdf

RIDING CENTRE EMPLOYS TRADITIONAL HORSEPOWER

A GLOUCESTERSHIRE riding stables has invested in a rare breed Belgian Draft horse to bring traditional methods of working the land back to the Cotswolds. Bourton Vale Equestrian Centre (BVEC), located just outside Bourton-on-the-Water, has taken

on Belle, a striking Belgian mare, in the hope that she can harrow the land and transport heavy loads across the fields. One of the strongest breeds in the world, Belle weighs 900kg (the same as a small family car) and stands at 16hh.



The centre is re-introducing this traditional method of agriculture to support the breed, which has dwindled in numbers since World War II, educate about its uses as a farm horse, and give locals and tourists the opportunity to see Belle at work.

Leanne Launchbury, who owns the centre with her husband, said: "The idea came last year when, after a few weeks of heavy rain, we weren't able to transport hay out to the horses in the fields using the tractor as the wheels got stuck in the mud."

The Belgian Draft is descended from the war horse of the Middle Ages, but is now a rare breed.

The centre is giving local businesses the opportunity to sponsor Belle. For more information, visit www.bourtonvaleequestrian.co.uk/sponsors

Farmers warned not to 'underestimate the dangers of quad bike use'

A RURAL insurance specialist is warning farmers not to underestimate the dangers of quad bike use, as Health and Safety Executive figures reveal 26 all-terrain vehicle (ATV)-related deaths since 2010.

Matt McWhirter of Farmers and Mercantile Insurance Brokers (FMIB) is urging farmers to avoid "subconscious thinking" and to take extra care to ensure safe ATV use – or risk serious legal and financial repercussions.

"While use of ATVs will invariably take place without incident, hundreds of accidents occur every year. Our brains are good at switching to autopilot, but the short, narrow wheelbase of ATVs can make them susceptible to rolling and calls for a focussed mind at all times," Mr McWhirter explained.

"It is a legal requirement for employers to provide adequate training for employees who use ATVs. This should

extend to family members, including children over the age of 13, who, anecdotal evidence suggests, are regular ATV users and who are all too frequently forgotten about when it comes to health and safety compliance."

No child under 13 is legally permitted to drive an ATV for work. They are also prohibited to ride as passengers.

"Farmers should make sure that their ATVs are fully insured under their agricultural vehicle policies, that they are appropriately covered and, if unsure, they should check with their insurance adviser," said Mr McWhirter.

Although wearing a helmet while riding a quad bike is not a legal requirement in England, Scotland and Wales, it is highly recommended and the Health and Safety Executive has pointed out that head injuries are the most common cause of fatalities related to quad bike accidents.

Countrymen UK Clubs formed to combat rural 'suffering'

ARE YOU, or do you know, a former smallholder, farmer or horticulturist who longs to get back to the land but is unable to do so due to poor mental or physical health? If so, becoming a member of the newly formed Countrymen UK Clubs could be the answer.

Thanks to a National Lottery grant, more than a dozen care farms and gardens across the UK have signed up to the scheme and men with a rural background – be that working outdoors or being keen country sportsmen – are invited to come along.

Countrymen UK wants to help men overcome the life changes caused by rural isolation and ageing, from dementia, Parkinson's and other long-term illnesses, to mental illness and depression.

Countrymen UK founder Julie Plumley said: "Our belief is that getting back to farm and countryside environments and into green spaces overcomes isolation and has a positive impact on physical health and mental wellbeing."

For more information, visit www.countrymenuk.org

GREY SQUIRREL FERTILITY CONTROL PROJECT AIMS TO SAVE UK TREES



COULD AN oral contraceptive prove to be the key to protecting the UK's broadleaf trees for the future? The UK Squirrel Accord (UKSA) hopes so and it needs your help. Grey squirrels are responsible for the near extinction of the native red squirrel in the UK and for damage to trees through bark stripping, amounting to costs of £40m a year, according to the European Squirrel Initiative.

The UKSA is funding a fertility control project at the Animal and Plant Health Agency to find a suitable oral contraceptive and hopper delivery method to decrease the UK's grey squirrel population, and after three years of the five-year project hopes are high.

Now the UKSA needs help to raise the final £250,000 needed to complete the project. To donate online, visit <https://squirrelaccord.uk/>

Entries open for British Cheese Awards

THE BRITISH Cheese Awards are now open for entries from across the UK, including from smallholders. The 2020 Awards, which will be held at on 28 May at The Royal Bath & West Show, Somerset, is inviting entries from farmhouse and artisan cheesemakers through to large-scale producers. The deadline is 10 April 2020. For more information, visit www.britishcheeseawards.com

SAY IT WITH WOOD SPREADING WORD ABOUT BENEFITS OF BIOCHAR

SAY IT with Wood (SIWW) will be holding a biochar information event on 25 April. Biochar is biomass heated in the absence of oxygen to make charcoal. The day will include:

- An introduction to biochar and its benefits to society, the environment, and the importance of soil carbon;
- A demonstration of different methods of making biochar;
- Demonstrations and talks on

different uses of biochar for agricultural, horticultural and domestic situations.

The cost is £20. To book, email info@sayitwithwood.co.uk; or tel: 07958 345833.

Organic boom time

THE UK organic market has continued its boom time of the last eight years, growing 4.5% in 2019 to reach a record £2.45bn. Every month £200m is spent on organic food and drink, confirming the rise of the 'conscious consumer'. Organic poultry and egg sales climbed more than 12%.

POULTRY NEWS

SEND YOUR POULTRY NEWS TO: editorial.csh@archant.co.uk

Study finds that ranging behaviours impact on problem-solving in chickens



CHICKENS HAVE different personalities, a new study has suggested. This finding, which will hardly come as a surprise to most keepers, was published in *Biology Letters* in what the researchers believe to be the first study of its kind.

In the experiment, researchers focused on how different ranging behaviours in free-range chickens impact their ability to solve problems. There are two ranging behaviours – high ranging and low ranging – and those classifications simply describe how far a chicken ventures from the coop.

Classifications in place, the researchers wanted to see whether this difference in ranging behaviour had an effect on a

bird's motor self-regulation performance. A cylinder full of food was set up in the coop which required the birds to curb their natural instinct to feed from the centre of the cylinder and instead eat from the side openings. Overall most of the birds didn't succeed at the task, but researchers discovered that high rangers had a significantly poorer performance than low rangers which improved with each repetition of the experiment.

This finding suggests that individual behavioural traits do have an impact on the ability to complete cognitive tasks – and that perhaps a bird with a more fearful and vigilant personality is more adaptive to its surroundings.



Scientists use gene editing to create ALV-immune chickens

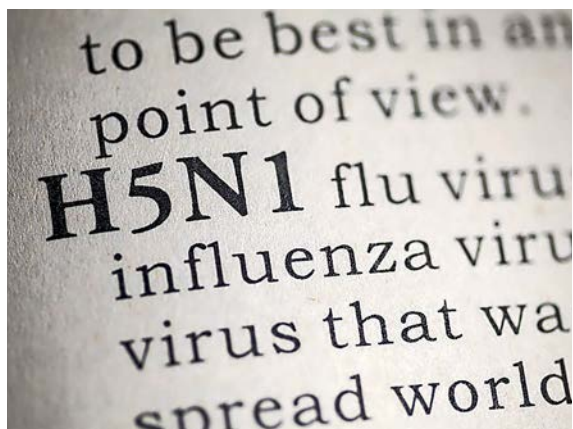
GENOME EDITING has been used to make chickens that are immune to avian leukosis virus (ALV), according to *New Scientist*.

ALV causes loss of appetite, weakness, dehydration and depression and can also lead to tumours developing in birds. It is not highly contagious, but it has caused huge problems in the commercial sector around the world.

Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR) is gene-editing technology that enables scientists to cut and paste genes into DNA much more rapidly. Scientists used the technology to insert edited germ cells into sterilised cockerels to restore semen production, resulting in birds with sperm without chNHE-1, the gene susceptible to ALV.

By crossing the offspring of these cockerels, scientists have produced a flock of chickens without the gene, which therefore proved immune to ALV, even when exposed to high doses of the virus.

'Scientists have produced a flock of chickens without the gene, which proved immune to ALV, even when exposed to high doses of the virus'



CHINA FACES MORE STRIFE WITH BIRD FLU OUTBREAK

AS IF the coronavirus outbreak hasn't been enough of a crisis to contend with, China is now facing an outbreak of bird flu, according to the *South China Morning Post*. The outbreak of the H5N1 bird flu in Hunan province is on the southern border of Hubei province, the epicentre of the

coronavirus outbreak. A local farm of 7,850 chickens reported 4,500 infected, and local authorities have culled 17,828 to control the spread of the disease. The outbreak couldn't come at a worse time, as the country's resources are already heavily strained managing the continuing rapid spread of coronavirus cases.



NORFOLK'S FERAL CHICKENS BRING FINE WARNINGS

SOUTH NORFOLK Council has warned residents of a Diss council estate beset by feral chickens that feeding the birds could result in a fine, according to the *Eastern Daily Press*. The area of Diss has made the headlines before for its chicken problem, with the population once thought to have numbered around 200 birds. These days, it

isn't thought to exceed 40 chickens, but the presence of noisy cockerels among the flock has reignited tensions on the estate. What to do about the chickens has long been a point of discussion, with some residents welcoming the fine, while others told the *EDP* they will simply continue to feed the birds from their gardens.

PICTURES: GETTY

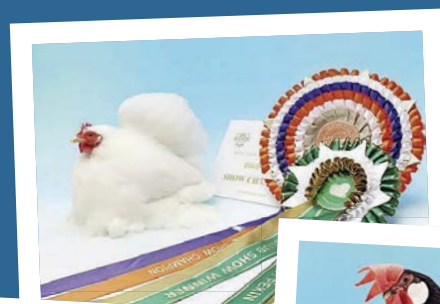
FROM THE SHOWS

PICTURES BY JOSHUA KITTLE



Scottish National Poultry Show

Clockwise: Supreme Champion — Ewan Jones and Allison Yates' White Crested Black Poland female; Reserve Supreme Champion — Robert Ramwell's trio of Barred Rock bantams; Champion True Bantam — Simon York's Gold Dutch bantam male



Ulster Poultry Federation

Clockwise: Supreme Champion — Richard Bett, Stuart Kay and Dean Kay's White Pekin bantam female; Champion Light Breed Bantam — Jimmy Corken's Black Leghorn female; Reserve Supreme Champion — Mark McCollough's Duckwing Modern Game female



Turf wars

#PeatFreeApril is a new month-long, industry-wide campaign that has been launched to get smallholders and gardeners to go peat free. **Sally Morgan** reports

Every year Britain's smallholders and gardeners buy billions of litres of peat-based compost despite clear evidence that peat bogs play a crucial role in the battle against climate change. Why is it still being dug up and used in ready-made composts? Why are we still buying it? Switching away from peat is one of the easiest things we can do to reduce our carbon footprint and help to tackle the climate emergency.

WHY IS PEAT VITAL?

A pristine peatbog sucks up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and locks up the carbon, helping to counter the over production of carbon dioxide elsewhere. Globally, peatlands store twice as much carbon as all of the earth's standing forests, hence their vital role in climate change. And it's not just carbon sequestration that's important. The UK's peat bogs are among the country's rarest and most fragile wildlife

habitats, home to golden plovers, dragonflies, sundews and more. The peat holds water and releases it gradually, helping to reduce the impact of flooding downstream. But, after years of damage, only 20% of the UK's peatlands are in good condition and, instead of storing carbon, the degraded ones are actually releasing greenhouse gases while water companies are spending millions on removing peat from drinking water.

Peat formation is a slow process, barely a millimetre a year, so a thick layer of peat represents thousands of years of stored carbon. It is, therefore, horrifying to learn that UK gardeners use 3bn litres of peat every year – the equivalent to millennia worth of growth.

The use of peat in horticulture is relatively recent. In the 1960s horticulturalists started to mix it with loam and sand to create a ready-made compost that could be bagged and sold to gardeners. And now, because most of our own peatlands have

ABOVE:
Peat-free compost – many work as effectively, or even better, than those that do contain peat

been dug up, more than half of the peat used by UK gardeners is imported from Ireland and the Baltic states. So, not only are gardeners contributing to the loss of important habitats across Europe, there is the added carbon impact of long-distance haulage.

We have long known about the role of peat in carbon sequestration, so there is no excuse for its continued use in horticulture. Leading gardeners, such as the late Geoff Hamilton, raised the issue of peat and its lack of sustainability in the 1990s, but it is still in use. Monty Don and others have followed Geoff's lead, as have Kew Gardens and the National Trust, while Garden Organic urges its gardeners to go peat free. Its head of horticulture, Chris Collins, says: "It's time that every gardener... think very carefully about using peat and address the fact that we are guests and joint tenants on this planet and we should treat it with the respect it deserves."

MAIN PICTURE: ALICE WHITEHEAD

The production of peat-free composts and soil conditioners offers new business opportunities, as Dr Emma Goodyer, manager of the IUCN UK Peatland Programme, explains: “Cheap, usually imported, bags of peat don’t reflect the environmental costs to society caused by peat mining and are undercutting the production and supply of peat-free materials. Advances in the development of peat-free horticultural products means that the UK could establish its own long-term viable industry providing sustainable soil conditioners and growing materials for amateur and professional gardeners. Many peat-free composts work as effectively, or even better, than peat. Much of the material used for peat replacement contributes to recycling, such as green compost, or uses by-products, including wood brash and other forestry waste.”

NO REPLACEMENT?

Some horticulturalists claim that there is simply no replacement for peat; that the alternative peat-free options are not as good. That’s just not true. It’s been proven in multiple trials that there are plenty of excellent peat-free products that do the job, and that includes carnivorous plants.

‘Garden centres and smallholder suppliers continue to sell cheap compost and you have to look hard to see the words “contains peat”’

This sad state of affairs is not surprising when garden centres, smallholder suppliers and supermarkets continue to sell cheap bags of composts and you have to look hard to see the words ‘contains peat’. Peat-free composts only represent about 17% of the market, with few peat-free alternatives being available through retail outlets, and those that are stocked are more expensive than the peat-based composts. The retailers claim that there is no demand for these composts, which many find difficult to believe. In addition, the brands behind peat composts claim that if they didn’t have a peat-based compost on offer, customers would turn to their competitors and they would lose sales. Sadly, there is no getting around the fact that peat is dirt cheap and gardeners find it difficult to resist.

FAILED TARGET

It is almost 10 years since the government set targets to phase out the use of peat by amateur gardeners by 2020, and clearly this will not be achieved. Fed up by the lack of action by the horticultural trade, a group of concerned gardeners and writers got together to run a #PeatFreeApril campaign. The buying choices of gardeners can make a real difference, so, during April 2020, the campaign will

alert consumers to the problems of peat and encourage them to make that all-important switch to peat free. The campaign will look at labelling, too, as many consumers don’t know that there is peat in the garden composts they buy. Countless potted plants and plug plants are raised in peat-based composts, but buyers are frequently unaware.

During April #PeatFreeApril will be promoted through media outlets and social media. There will be open days at peat-free gardens and opportunities for people to visit peatland restoration sites to see how small changes can benefit wildlife.

The buying choices of smallholders and gardeners can make a real difference. Make the #PeatFreeApril pledge to go peat free forever. ■

Sally Morgan is a coordinator of the #PeatFreeApril campaign. She runs smallholder courses from her organic Somerset farm.

BELOW:

Only 20% of the UK’s peatlands are in good condition and, instead of storing carbon, the degraded ones are actually releasing greenhouse gases



WHY SMALLHOLDERS CAN AND MUST MAKE THE SWITCH

1. Don’t buy any ready-made compost that contains peat. If it doesn’t say it’s peat-free, assume that it contains peat. If you can’t see a peat-free option, ask the manager. Don’t shrug your shoulders and buy peat. Every bag matters.

2. Peat is commonly used to raise potted plants and plug plants as it’s the cheapest option for nurseries. Ask the

retailer if they have been raised in a peat compost. There are a growing number of peat-free nurseries that raise all their plants in peat-free media. This includes the vegetable seed and plug plant supplier Suttons (which includes Dobies and Organic Gardening Catalogue). Blogger and garden writer Nic Wilson has compiled a list on the PeatFree April Facebook page.

3. A lot of peat is used by commercial mushroom growers, with some of the largest using as much as 2.5 tonnes of peat per week. The growers claim that they haven’t been able to find any alternatives. Most button mushrooms are grown in peat, so steer clear of these and choose shiitake or oyster mushrooms.

4. Make your own

compost. This is by far the most climate-friendly route and surprisingly easy. Garden Organic’s website has plenty of information on this topic (www.gardenorganic.org.uk) and see also Kim Stoddart’s tips, Supplement, page 30.

5. Support the #PeatFreeApril campaign on social media. The PeatFree April Facebook page has

lots of information and links to events, talks and walks that you can join.

6. Be vocal. If you see peat on sale, raise this on social media. Ask the company about their environmental policy and why they are still selling peat.

7. Tell your MP and local counsellors that you want to see sales of peat stopped.



THE TIMES THEY ARE (OR COULD BE) A-CHANGING

Paul Hetherington wonders what weather the spring will bring and how this will affect invertebrates

SPRING IS a time when traditionally new life appears and the planet awakens from the cold of winter, but what will spring 2020 have to offer? Recent weather trends have seen prolonged dry periods in spring, which is bad news for spring-sown food and flowers alike. Indeed, when it comes to creating wildflower meadows for pollinators, Buglife's recent experience favours autumn seed sowing for best plant establishment.

It seems that, on the whole, we have had a warm but wet winter with many areas, particularly on floodplains, constantly under water. So what does this mean for invertebrates? Well, heavy waterlogging and flooding is extremely bad news for those who are sheltering in the ground, such as hibernating bumblebees, or solitary bee larvae, and even earthworms whose numbers will have been greatly reduced.



What is needed is a warm spring with sufficient overnight showers that will help plants to grow

All this is bad news too for those trying to grow on this land in the year ahead.

There is, though, a double whammy for growers as warm and wet also means no hibernation for slugs and snails which will have instead remained active throughout the winter doing what they do — eating

and breeding — so the ranks of herbivores will be swollen as those first spring sowings burst into leaf.

Winter then has already got us off to a bad growing start, so what is really needed is a warm spring with sufficient overnight showers. This will help plants to grow and the beneficial invertebrates to revive. The only good thing about an arid spring would be that it would at least stop the slugs in their tracks, but what flowers could thrive for our pollinators in this case?

If current weather patterns set in to become the long-term norm, we may all have to re-evaluate what is grown and when as the fauna will be forced to change too.

Paul Hetherington is director of fundraising and communications at Buglife, www.buglife.org.uk

HARE TODAY, BUT HOPEFULLY NOT GONE TOMORROW

The Easter bunny's cousin, the mountain hare, is in serious trouble, but research is underway in a bid to help, explains Nida Al-Fulaij of PTES

SPRING IS associated with life: new growth, hints of warmer sunshine, sleepy mammals emerging from hibernation and, towards Easter, the bunny. But less is known about its wilder cousin — the mountain hare.

Mountain hares are in trouble. They died out in England around the last Ice Age, leaving only a few populations confined to Scotland and Ireland. In the 1880s, landowners attempted to reintroduce mountain hares

back to England, but sadly most attempts were unsuccessful.

Against the odds, a small group of hares has survived in the Peak District, though, establishing a population across this northern National Park. However, due to an increased number of roads, infrastructure, climate change (milder temperatures don't bode well for a species adapted to the cold) and the threat of hybridisation from their sister species, European brown hares,

England's mountain hares are now under threat and are vulnerable to extinction.

This group of hares is effectively an 'island population', meaning that they are isolated and, without the opportunity to meet and mate with other mountain hares, these individuals are at risk of genetic depression.

Thankfully, something is being done to help. PTES is funding Carlos Bedson, a PhD student from Manchester Metropolitan University, who is undertaking vital research into understanding the sustainability and viability of the remaining hares in the Peak District. Using camera traps, a high power thermal imager and transect observational surveys (the first time all three techniques have been used together on hares), Carlos' novel combination of surveying aims to evaluate the estimated number of hares left, their habitat preferences and assess the effects of human

land use and infrastructure on the population. These surveys will continue throughout spring.

If you're a landowner, help hares by reporting any sightings to the Hare Preservation Trust, which is also supporting Carlos' research.

The journey to save mountain hares has just begun, but with the right conservation action, the future could be bright once again for this bigger bunny. To find out more, visit: ptes.org/grants/uk-mammal-projects/mountain-hares-peak-district/

Nida Al-Fulaij is grants manager at PTES; tel: 0207 498 4533; email: enquiries@ptes.org; Facebook: www.facebook.com/ptes.org



Against the odds, a small group of mountain hares has survived in the Peak District

people's
trust for
endangered
species

PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO/ARDVARK STUDIOS/CARLOS BEDSON



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LIFE IN THE COUNTRY

With **Adam Henson**

IT ISN'T often that Britain's rare livestock breeds make the news, but then North Ronaldsay sheep are so distinctive and unique that they deserve a bit of media fuss. If you have never seen a North Ronaldsay (or even heard of them), then let me introduce you to these remarkable little island survivors. As the name suggests, these slender, primitive-looking sheep originate from wild and windswept North Ronaldsay, the most northerly island of the Orkney archipelago. Their meat is tasty, lean and gamey with a flavour not unlike wild duck, and it's got a brilliant reputation among some of the best gourmets in the business.

My friend, the restaurateur and TV chef Cyrus Todiwala, is a particular fan and he even cooked North Ronaldsay mutton for The Queen during her Diamond Jubilee celebrations. And if you're a keen *Countryfile* fan, you might remember seeing some old home-movie footage of me as a cheeky little boy helping my dad move a huge flock of North Ronaldsays off the island to spread the precious population, as a way of safeguarding them from disease or disaster.

But the breed's biggest claim to fame is that they're the world's only seaweed-eating sheep. In fact, there are only two groups of animals on Earth which survive solely on seaweed and the other one is a marine iguana found in the Galápagos Islands. It's the North Ronaldsay sheep's exceptional eating habits that are exciting academics and have caught the attention of broadcaster Emma Jane Kirby. She's the former BBC correspondent in Paris, Brussels and Geneva, as well as



The 'seaweed breed'

Adam Henson divulges why the unique North Ronaldsay sheep is leading the way in terms of methane research

ABOVE:
The rare breed North Ronaldsay sheep has exceptional eating habits

being an award-winning author and a familiar voice to Radio 4 listeners. Emma Jane has been reporting on studies that suggest that livestock which have a proportion of seaweed in their diets belch less methane than animals fed conventionally.

A three-year project is now underway in Scotland to assess what impact adding protein-

rich seaweed to manufactured animal feeds might have on the environment.

North Ronaldsays have a special place in my heart, and not just because of those wonderful boyhood memories of my island adventure in the '70s. The descendants of some of the sheep we re-homed are alive and well today, and living a wonderful life at the Cotswold Farm Park. Which means that every day when I look out of the office window, check on the paddocks, or walk into the Animal Barn, I'm reminded just how special the 'seaweed breed' is to me. I'll be watching the ongoing experiments north of the border with real interest. ■

'There are only two groups of animals on Earth which survive solely on seaweed and the other one is a marine iguana found in the Galápagos Islands'

PICTURE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO/ANDY ROLAND

WHAT'S ON

IN SPRING FOR SMALLHOLDERS

COMPILED BY: Lydia Tewkesbury



The wildlife garden from www.morethanagarden.uk will open once a month

7 MARCH GARDENING FOR WILDLIFE

Tyland Barn, Maidstone, Kent
Learn about the two principles of a wildlife-friendly garden: water and shelter. Celia Davies, the Kent Wildlife Trust's habitats officer, will take you on a guided walk through the trust's wildlife-friendly farmhouse garden at Tyland Barn before taking you to the classroom to discuss what you've seen in greater detail.

TICKETS: £17.50
www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/events

7-8 MARCH POPLAR PARK HORSE TRIALS

Poplar Farm, Hollesley, Suffolk
Dressage, show jumping and cross-country all in one day. There are classes for all levels, from BE100 to intermediate. There will be trade stands too, so you can shop between the action.

TICKETS: £10 per car
www.poplarparkevent.co.uk

15 MARCH SOMERSET'S WILDLIFE GARDEN

Badger's Cottage, Peak Lane, Compton Dundon, Somerset
Kate and Dylan of www.morethanagarden.uk are opening up their wildlife garden to the public once a month to provide a glimpse of the reality of wildlife gardening through the seasons. This month they're showing off their forage, with edible plants and their cherry plum tree providing food for them as well as a visiting badger, woodpeckers, bees and many wild birds.

TICKETS: £3 on the gate
www.somersetwildlife.org/events

17 MARCH SOIL HEALTH AND REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE FOR LIVESTOCK FARMS

Stonegate Village Hall, Stonegate, Ticehurst, East Sussex
Basically everything you've ever wanted to know about soil in one course. Learn how to improve soil and pasture health,



Timmy the ram at the Introduction to Smallholding course

drainage and waterholding, grow more and better forage, reduce reliance on external inputs, identify opportunities for out-wintering and season extension and how to monitor land more effectively.

TICKETS: Various prices, check online for more information
www.sustainablesoils.org/soil-events-calendar

21 MARCH & 18 APRIL INTRODUCTION TO SMALLHOLDING

Bristol/Yatton; check online for more details
A crash course in everything

you need to know to get your own smallholding journey underway. Have your questions answered on issues such as land management, animal husbandry, growing food (for yourself and your livestock) and finances.

TICKETS: £45
www.eventbrite.com

28 MARCH CHRIS PACKHAM TALKS TO PHILIP LYMBERY

Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, Oxfordshire

In this Peter Roberts Compassion In World Farming lecture, Chris Packham, TV presenter, naturalist and conservationist, will talk about his passion for the environment, and how he believes we need to change the way we farm for a more sustainable future.

TICKETS: Prices vary; check online for more details
www.list.co.uk and search *Chris Packham talks to Philip Lymbery*

4 APRIL RARE BREEDS POULTRY SALE

Melton Mowbray Market, Leicestershire

Following the success of the auction in the autumn, Melton Mowbray Market's next sale will see a wide selection of graded, traditional, pure and rare breed poultry and waterfowl in one place. The autumn sale saw 900 birds on offer, with similar numbers expected this time around.

TICKETS: FREE
www.meltonmowbraymarket.co.uk

9 APRIL COUNTRYTASTIC

Three Counties Showground, Malvern, Worcestershire
Countryfile's Adam Henson is returning to headline this annual day of farming fun. Get the kids involved in all things agriculture with tractor rides, a livestock parade (as well as a chance to meet the animals, of course), auction, a Q&A session with a farrier and so much more.

TICKETS: (only available online) adult £9, under-16s £6, under-2s FREE
www.countrytastic.co.uk

'Raddling black sheep is not very successful for obvious reasons'

New diarist **Paul James** is a doctor in a busy NHS hospital, but home is a smallholding in Derbyshire complete with sheep, poultry and a Welsh Mountain pony called Malt

It has been a little over a year since we have been able to 'properly' call ourselves smallholders – in so much as we now have a growing menagerie of animals, a burgeoning orchard and, of course, the obligatory plans, schemes and wild dreams. It is along this journey that I have acquired an appreciation for the hitherto unmarked seasons (at least what passes for seasons in our wet and windy slice of the world) and the changes they bring.

First spring, like a much beloved but long-time errant friend, arrives in a riot of colour and growth. All around nature seems to breathe a collective sigh of relief. New shoots spring forth, new life erupts with playful abandon and birds return with joyful and heartening song. Grass grows and the drudgery of eking it out, or hefting hay up the hill to the ponies, dwindles to a dim and distant ache in my lumbar region.

Along bowls summer. Fruits ripen (fingers crossed that the malicious rabbits haven't destroyed the fruit bushes), drinks cool and the smell of back garden barbecues pervades the length and breadth of



Hebridean sheep — 'an old breed for modern times'

'First spring, like a much beloved but long-time errant friend, arrives in a riot of colour and growth'

the country. Long, languid, seemingly endless days offer boundless possibilities to complete the myriad tasks around the holding, teamed with just as many excuses to put them off for another day. Shorts are worn and anaemic legs are aired. At precisely the same time, the biting horseflies make an appearance, raising many an unsightly welt and turning my legs knobbly like two oversized twiglets. Somewhat bemusingly, summer's paradox finds us spending as much time and energy fending a potentially laminitic pony off growing grass as winter does the obverse.

Autumn is beauty and melancholy in equal parts. Trees transform, ambers, russets tinged with gold and then a mutual shrug abandons them bare to the ravages of the oncoming winter. Collectively the countryside seems to hunker down for the season to come. The chickens roam less, we skate dangerously close to running out of eggs, and meals become 'hearty' and 'rustic'. Harvested berries are drenched in vodka and gin, with dreams of warming syrupy winter tipples by a raging log fire.

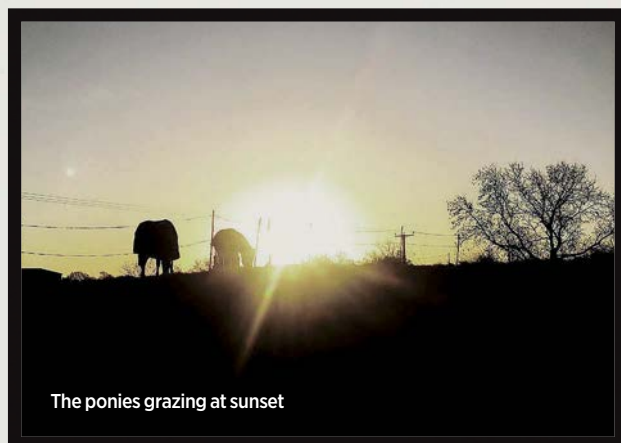
The nights draw in, the smell of bonfires fades and winter in its malevolent majesty creeps over the land. Perpetual dark saps any and all but the most important of endeavours, and everyone (bar the sheep – pun intended), acquires new coats to fend off the finger-numbing cold. Winter is not without its merit, however. Frozen horse poo, it turns out, is far easier to shovel and, to paraphrase Steinbeck, "without it [winter obviously, not horse poo] summer would not taste so sweet".

It is thus befitting for my first article, the metaphorical spring of this column, to turn to some 'firsts' to introduce our smallholding life.



All about Paul James

Paul James is husband to Kate and dad to Phoebe (seven) and Abigail (five). Smallholding and family life provide a welcome balance to the demands of working as a doctor in an increasingly busy NHS hospital. With little experience, but (near) boundless enthusiasm (if not energy), he is hoping that his and Kate's accrued skills are eminently transferable to the Good Life experience



The ponies grazing at sunset

First egg

In our tale, it was definitely the chicken(s) that came first: Snowy the Leghorn star, Henrietta the Rhode Rock, Midnight the Silver Sussex, and Speckle the Speckledy; the first of our growing motley menagerie. Swiftly they imposed their routine on us with an astounding array of expressions. First the morning's curmudgeonly clucking on approach to the chicken house, as if to say, "Where have you been, human? We've been waiting for ages, don't you know". Next the hopeful dash to the gate, followed either by ne'er a backward glance when allowed to roam free, or reproachful cackles and caws if kept in for their own protection and safety. Finally, as day becomes twilight, the petulant warbling as I cajole them back to the run with delicious, but seemingly not good enough, corn.

After a couple of weeks the chickens had settled into life on the holding and our oviparous friends justified their presence, gracing us with the first egg: white (clearly Snowy's); gleaming; an ovate miracle. Had it been a rare diamond-festooned 18th century Russian masterpiece it would have seemed no more wondrous.

I reached into the nesting box to ferry it inside, to show it off and marvel with the family and was astounded by the warmth in my hand. In retrospect, not unsurprising given its 25-27-hour journey to this point. As an aside, when later reading about egg production, my mind was

blown by the fact that most birds, the chicken included, produce eggs only in their left ovaries (notable exceptions are vultures, falcons and eagles). With caution normally reserved for the most delicate of delicate objects, the egg was passed from hand to hand in hushed reverence.

Then the inevitable questions from Child One (who never stops thinking about the next meal): "Can we eat it?" and "How should we cook it?" For four curious mouths the only feasible answer seemed to be hard boiled, one of the most ancient methods of egg consumption, dating back to 5000BC, apparently.

What a revelation it was, particularly the near luminescent yolk, the like of which I had never seen in shop-bought eggs. Upon finishing her carefully apportioned but meagre ration, Child Two, like the eponymous Dickensian street urchin, eyes pleading, questioned: "Please, can we have some more?" Obliging the rest of the flock soon began to lay. Now our only problem is the ceaseless search for new and interesting egg-based dishes, since there are only so many omelettes one can eat!

First born

We have Hebridean sheep. They are lovely diminutive creatures, hardy, with beautiful plaintive tawny eyes and a lively, curious nature. The multi-horned examples (ours are single-horned) are particularly eye-catching,

although I wouldn't fancy the shearing dramas (more on that another time). As coined by the Hebridean Sheep Society, they are "an old breed for modern times".

We have Peter Farmer to thank for introducing us to the breed and helping us to take our first faltering steps into sheep husbandry. Six shearlings joined us in July and, again courtesy of Peter and his wife, Anne, these were put to tup Jack in November 2018. Planning ahead, Wife enquired when we could expect the lambs. "In with a bang, out like a fool," Peter said as we stood watching the introduction of Jack. Glancing across, I couldn't make out whether there was a mischievous glint in our erstwhile Sheep Guru's eyes.

What unfolded in front of us was akin to an early black and white silent movie chase. Jack, resplendent with curling horns and graceful stature, every bit the alpha male, slowly approached the flock, sniffing at the air as he went. The flock edged away en masse like giggling pre-pubescent girls at their first school disco. Jack moved closer again, the flock shuffled further away, and so a pedestrian cat and mouse-esque chase ensued. I have to admit that I had very little faith in Jack's efficacy. At no time did I catch him 'in action', and raddling black sheep is not very successful for obvious reasons. Most of the time he stood, seemingly perplexed, head resting on a small tree in the middle of one of our fields. In fact, this was such a frequent occurrence that the tree has

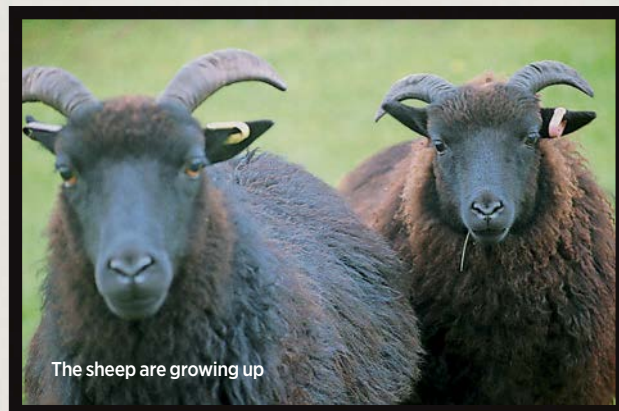
now acquired the moniker Jack's Tree.

The average gestation of a sheep is 147 days, and next time I will make sure that I write down the day of the ram's arrival in my diary, because on 30 March 2019 I was caught completely off guard. Up on our hill, sheltered in a thicket of gorse and hawthorn, one of the ewes was refusing to come to the usually magnetic rattling of the feed bucket.

On closer inspection she was found standing with a newborn lamb, upright, clean and seemingly perfect in every way. For the first time, but by no means the last, I marvelled at the adroitness of Nature and her ability to just get on with things without interference. Sadly, this was but fleeting as our new mum seemed reluctant to follow baby into a bonding pen to allow closer inspection. Cue a bizarre round of follow my leader with much cooing and sweet talking to achieve eventual success. Penned up, lamb and mother happily feeding, the sense of awe returned: new life, on our holding — what a boon.

As season follows season, one to the next, inexorably, so too our smallholding journey will continue. There will undoubtedly be many more firsts, some lasts, and some "never agains" to share and lay bare for your amusement, entertainment and (maybe) education. ■

(Dedicated to the memory of Peter Farmer. Your knowledge and help were much valued and will be keenly missed.)



The sheep are growing up

'We suddenly seem to have a problem with most of our boundaries'

With plenty of escapees, plus some unwanted visitors, poultry diarist **Julian Hammer** finds that the fencing at Rose Cottage is in need of some TLC

can't overstate the value of good fences. Secure, sturdy fencing must be among the top 10 requirements for a successful smallholding. At Rose Cottage we have a hodge-podge of fencing that has developed over time as our requirements have changed. We have livestock fencing to contain pigs, home-made anti-deer and rabbit fencing to keep the greedy freeloaders out of the veg beds, double-height chicken wire fencing for poultry enclosures, hedges and livestock mesh for the pig loading area, barbed wire to deter walkers from trying to feed or pet the pigs from the footpath and, finally, boundary post and rail fencing that separates our land from our neighbours to the north and the south. Oh, and throw in some drystone walls just for good measure.

The problem with this is that they all need maintenance. Wooden posts eventually rot, chicken wire rusts and tears, and drystone walls succumb to gravity and, before you know it, the pigs and chickens are feasting on pastures new. Or, in turn, something is feasting on them.

I mention this because we suddenly seem to have a problem with most of our boundary fencing. As you may recall, I broke my leg last year in a tussle with a pig which put me out of action for a number of months. My wife, Emma, did her best to keep on top of the endless smallholding chores, but with two pigs, 35 hens, 10 ducks and two beehives, along with the veg beds, greenhouse and polytunnel to look after, something had to give. The



'My wife, Emma, did her best to keep on top of the endless smallholding chores, but with two pigs, 35 hens, 10 ducks and two beehives, along with the veg beds, greenhouse and polytunnel to look after, something had to give'

casualties were inevitably the maintenance jobs.

We are now into our seventh year at Rose Cottage. Our smallholding life began with three hens and grew organically from there. Each year has seen an expansion in our activities and more of the garden turned over to livestock, poultry, bees or horticulture. It doesn't stop there. The garage now doubles as a butchers' workshop; we've installed a microbrewery in the old kitchen; and because Emma drew the line at experimenting with a pig and poultry poo digesting boiler in the cellar à la Tom and Barbara Good, we installed solar panels on the roof and a hydro turbine on the stream. (Probably less prone to exploding and certainly less smelly.) However, this year we

are taking a break on the road to self-sufficiency. No expansion and no new projects planned. It's going to be a maintenance year.

LYING FALLOW

The pig field has to lie fallow to recover from two consecutive pig years. To start the process off we threw a bucket of grass seed over it in November when the pigs went to slaughter. This helps to bind the soil and prevent winter erosion. In spring we'll seed the bare patches with native wildflowers for the bees and then run the woodland chickens on it in the summer. After the last two porkers, the fences need some attention. The pigs loved to dig and have undermined some fence posts bordering our northern neighbour's land. His converted farmhouse sits foursquare in

acres of pristine lawns which he guards zealously from atop his ride-on mower. Thinking of the damage two escaped pigs would wreak on this has given me many sleepless nights.

The last two pigs decided that they wanted to see what life was like as a chicken and they broke into the woodland enclosure on a number of memorable occasions, destroying a gate and posts in the process. But, to be fair, the woodland chickens took every opportunity to try out life in the pig field too and even took to laying eggs in the pig arc, much to the gastronomic satisfaction of the pigs.

We've also recently discovered that someone has removed the nuts from the hanging bolts of the access gate from the track into the pig field, leaving the gate to sink into the mud. I doubt that the pigs or chickens did this in a clever and innovative attempt to abscond. I suspect it was a failed attempt to remove the gate to steal the livestock trailer. Another job to add to the list.

LOSS

The greatest downside of smallholding must be the loss of livestock. Taking pigs to the abattoir, or finishing a chicken for the pot, although hardly pleasant, is a planned part of the chosen way of life and is dealt



TOP: The pigs break into the woodland enclosure and experience life as a chicken

LEFT: The woodland hens escape into the pig field and eat the weaner's food

with as such. The sudden loss of livestock to a predator is a shock and can be heartbreaking.

Following on from our duck behavioural problems (*Country Smallholding*, February), we managed to settle the randy runner duck drakes in with the existing flock only to lose the original drake to a fox. The cause? A hole in the fence.

The ducks have lived happily in a large enclosure at the top of the paddock. They have a stream and a small pond along with a grassed area to turn to mud each winter and gated access to the veg patch for periodic slug hunting and de-weeding duties. The duck run is mostly enclosed by a 6ft high chicken wire fence

BELOW: The grass is certainly greener on the neighbour's side of the fence

which has provided security quite effectively for the past three years. The only weak point in this enclosure is the boundary fence with my neighbours to the south. This is of standard post and rail construction to which I've added chicken wire. The fence is effectively inaccessible from our land as it runs along the top of a vertical bank on the far side of the duck pond and is buried in a dense thicket of brambles and nettles on the neighbour's side. It was the weight of this uncleared undergrowth that eventually pulled the fence over and, being totally unreachable to someone on crutches, it remained in this sorry state for the whole of the autumn and into the winter.

Unfortunately, clearing the dense, impenetrable bramble thicket to repair the fence gave the fox his opportunity as it exposed a couple of weak points in the chicken wire.

As if this wasn't enough to deal with, the northern boundary fence is drooping. It's another post and rail boundary field fence, never designed with livestock in mind. To date it's just had to keep the chickens in. Running chicken wire along the fence sufficed for this, despite northern neighbour's gardener's propensity for cutting holes in the wire with a strimmer. These we plug with clay flower pots which do an admirable job in preventing chicken escapees, but do nothing to deter the nocturnal visits by the badger who has now taken to breaking into the chicken enclosures in search of layers' pellets.

The guilty party was caught red handed on a wildlife camera, which explained the removal of the anti-chicken flower pots, the holes in the mesh on gates, and the overturned chicken feeders.

With the need to keep chickens, ducks and pigs in and foxes, deer, dogs, badgers, rabbits and thieves out, I've been googling fencing solutions on the internet. Someone called D Trump has some prototype sections over in New Mexico. A bit too expensive, but with a visit to the scrap yard I'm sure we can "build that wall". I just need to figure out how to get Messers Fox and Badger to pay for it. ■





An idiot's guide to... lambing

Newish sheep-keeper **Mike Fry** reveals what the textbooks don't tell you when it comes to welcoming little woolly bundles into your smallholding life

If you know plenty about sheep then I suggest that you skip over the next two pages as you won't learn anything new and, indeed, you might be alarmed that at least one of your fellow readers once knew so little about your specialist subject. However, if you know very little about sheep, do please read on. And if you currently know very little about sheep and are embarking on lambing very shortly then switch off the TV now, stop looking at your phone and concentrate on the next couple of pages...

To be honest, my first idea was to start breeding alpacas, but then I heard that sheep were much simpler to begin with so my attention shifted to our four newly acquired Ryeland ewes. When I was told that the breed was known for being comparatively uncomplicated on the breeding front, my mind was made up.

In autumn 2018 I arranged to hire a fine Ryeland ram called Zanadoo from local breeder Gail Dodd. In the meantime, I'd been reading everything I could lay my hands on about

the whole lambing process and so, on the morning of Zanadoo's arrival, I was ready to apply red dye (known as raddle) to his chest to enable me to know when each of my four girls had received his attentions. In fact, I recall being startled to see that within 10 minutes of his arriving two of my ewes were sporting red backsides. Clearly Zanadoo was getting down to work, but there was a momentary thought of "goodness girls, surely you could have played a bit harder to get". Ewe No 3 succumbed to his charms two days later, with ewe No 4 holding out until day six.

It was then – I foolishly thought – a simple matter of counting the 147 days to gestation and clearing my work diary accordingly. In fact, I thought I was erring on the side of caution when I allowed 10 days either side of the anticipated six-day lambing period before work and normal life could resume.

Meanwhile, I continued to read up on the whole sheep husbandry business and to arm myself with the various items required. The

MAIN PICTURE: GETTY

more I read, the more my eyes bulged at the range of things that could go wrong. From twin sheep syndrome to hock and tail presentation, and from coccidiosis to Schmallenberg virus. Suggested essentials for the lambing kit didn't do anything to quell my nerves either, with the list including castration pliers, birthing ropes and vaginal prolapse supports!

I then enlisted the help of local sheep vet Amy Cox from Nantwich Farm Vets who did her best to reassure me and even added me to her 'friends and family' incoming calls list in case I ever needed her when she wasn't on call. She agreed to scan the ewes to confirm that they were indeed pregnant and, at my request, used the much cheaper backpack scanner method. This served to confirm the pregnancies, but couldn't determine any multiple embryos, nor the precise stage of development. Not that I minded now that I knew I wasn't having to contend with phantom pregnancies.

BAGGING UP

The lambing period eventually arrived and while I thought that the ewes had fattened up, it wasn't that clear to me underneath their thick fleece, and the various behaviours that had been set out by the textbooks didn't seem that obvious either. However, I was now in my clear diary period and several times each day could be found prowling the field urging the girls to fulfil their side of the deal. They didn't seem particularly interested and, as the estimated arrival dates arrived and went, nothing happened.

I sent for Gail, our local Ryeland expert. She took one look at the ewes and said that she believed they were still "a few weeks away" from producing. As my disbelief subsided – "but

my work commitments are about to restart," I wailed – she coached me in the hitherto unknown secret of 'bagging up'. This is when a pregnant ewe's udder fills to being drum-tight immediately before the birth. Sounds obvious doesn't it? (No sniggering at the back... You experts aren't even meant to be reading.) However, none of the books, nor the articles that I had read, had even referred to it. Presumably something so basic wasn't worth mentioning?

Further newbie confusion arose from expert statements that ran: "The first indication that a ewe is about to commence lambing is that she behaves abnormally." I was watching the sheep more intently than I'd ever done in the past, and I kept spotting things that to me looked odd. But still no lambs.

At least I comforted myself with the fact that all of the experts concurred about water bags – that they would appear just before lambing, or an empty water sack would dangle from mum's rear end....

SOMETHING'S HAPPENING

Well, this wasn't the case with ewe No 1, and nor did she paw the ground, nor stretch her head upwards. Without warning she started to have unmistakable contractions and then 20 minutes later delivered what I now know to be a very large ram lamb. A mere 24 days late.

The other three ewes obliged similarly over the next three weeks, although not in the order expected. The longest labour took 35 minutes (so much for the extended labours for first-time mums), but thankfully none required any intervention.

'Thank goodness my obstetric gloves, large container of lubricating gel and very rudimentary understanding of the birth canal had no need to spring into action'

Thank goodness my box of obstetric gloves, large container of lubricating gel and very rudimentary understanding of the birth canal had no need to spring into action.

Undaunted, I still tried to do things according to the textbooks, including solemnly keeping watch over each new arrival in the hope of catching sight of their first faeces. (Honestly! Just read those books yourself if you think I'm joking.) However, the all-important black meconium was never spotted and I contented myself with checking that there was a hole in roughly the right place. Oh, by the way, did I mention 'closed anus syndrome' in my list of dread conditions...?

So, by early May, we had three ram lambs and one smaller ewe lamb. And one emotionally wrung-out smallholder.

When I'd completed my convalescence, I reflected upon my first taste of lambing and drew the following conclusions:

- Too much studying of the theory might sometimes make the reality harder;
- The experts don't always agree;
- The experts also understandably tend to dwell on those rare occasions when things go wrong;
- Some of the basics are so basic that they don't occur to those explaining the basics;
- A mentor to whom you can ask really dumb questions is invaluable. They will help you to avoid some of the elephant traps and will also assist you in climbing out of those you don't. (Thanks again Gail and Amy);
- Nature is pretty damn clever, but she works to rules that are different to much of modern life;
- Lambing is a wonderful and magical experience and it shouldn't be missed by any smallholder. ■



All about Mike Fry

In 2015 Mike Fry, together with wife Nadine and step-daughter Becky, moved from the fairly leafy Manchester suburb of Lymm to the very green environs of South Cheshire. The move was partly to enable Mike to realise an ambition to look after his own livestock. He now keeps alpacas and sheep for their fleece and small breed Dexter cattle for their excellent beef. He still works part time in hospital construction and management



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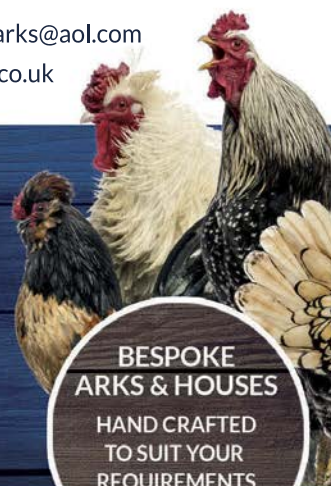
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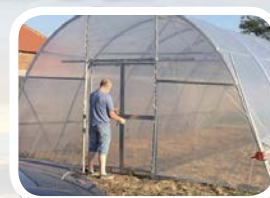
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COUNTRY
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2020 SHOW GUIDE

Sheep, cattle, pigs, horses... Who doesn't love the show season? But there aren't just myriad animals, there is also entertainment, fabulous food and a chance to socialise. Here we bring you a guide to the larger shows across Britain that boast all kinds of everything that will appeal to smallholders

PHOTO: John Eveson

Spring Wayland Show

Sunday 3rd May 2020



The new date for the Wayland Show means that we are one of the first events in the country show calendar!

Join us for a day filled with tradition, family entertainment and hands-on experiences.

Whether you're interested in **cattle, sheep, goats, fur & feather, pigs** or taking a **tradestand** space we will ensure you enjoy a great show.

More information at www.waylandshow.com



FIRST THINGS FIRST

Wayland Show, Norfolk, 3 May



AS THE first fixture in the 2020 show calendar, Wayland Show brings the perfect opportunity to ease visitors and competition entrants into the new season.

The new spring date of 3 May is an ideal opportunity for attendees to try entering a competition for the first time, or to meet with fellow livestock owners and learn from them. Livestock competitions will include goats, pigs, cattle, fur and feather and sheep. This is also the first 2020 show to be a qualifier for the RBST Young Shepherd of the Year.

Attendees will love the day-long entertainment, which will range from main ring attractions and a shopping village promoting local crafts and industry, to a food festival showcasing delicious produce from across the region.

One of the oldest rural shows in the UK, Wayland Show is now firmly in the 21st century, with the website including online ticket purchasing and downloadable entry forms and schedules.

For more information, visit www.waylandshow.com

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31st July

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31st July

HORSE SHOWING

(including HOYS Qualifiers)
1st August

SHOW JUMPING

28th August

HOME & GARDEN

21st August

See show website for details, schedules & online entries
www.moretonshow.co.uk

TRADITIONAL AND ALWAYS CHANGING

Moreton Show, Gloucestershire, 5 September



MORETON SHOW always runs on the first Saturday in September and is often called one of the biggest one-day agricultural shows in the country.

It has a heritage that stretches all the way back to 1949 and that first show attracted a crowd of 2,000, making it the biggest event in Gloucestershire. Now Moreton show regularly attracts crowds of more than 20,000 to the 165-acre showground on the Batsford Estate for this celebration of farming, food and family fun.

Traditional and always changing — that's what they say about Moreton Show. Come for the day and prepare to be surprised at how much there is to see.

The top-class livestock section includes the National Poll Hereford Cattle Show, while in the five equestrian rings there will be more than 1,000 entries for showing and show jumping classes, many of which are Horse of the Year Show qualifiers.

A busy dog show and a Farmtastic section are also run. Farmtastic sees youngsters and their parents getting up close and personal with chickens, piglets and alpacas. Come along and enjoy the 350 tradestands, fabulous food and the best in flowers, vegetables and home baking. You definitely won't be disappointed.

For more information, visit www.moretonshow.co.uk



Kent County Show takes place on 10-12 July

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E: info@ukgamefair.co.uk
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3 NORTH SOMERSET SHOW, BS48 1NE
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5-6 MAY SHEEP FAIR & SALE, EX2 8FD
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E: lorraine@ayrcountyshow.co.uk
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WATERFOWL SHOWING is fairly easy — a bird in good condition is pretty much in show condition. Cleaning beaks, legs and feet is desirable just before penning. It is much better to provide the opportunity for birds to clean themselves and stay clean rather than try to clean their feathers yourself. Shows are a great place to see the diverse varieties, compare the quality of your bird(s) and gain customers for your stock. All standardised varieties of waterfowl can be exhibited and if your bird's attributes, breeding and conformation fit a breed standard, you may be taking some trophies home!

You must be sure, though, that your bird is a true representative of a standardised variety. The standards for each breed are published in *British Waterfowl Standards*.

Sometimes it's a good idea to attend local shows first, although novices are welcome at our Champion Waterfowl Exhibition too. Speak to exhibitors — no question is a silly question. We were all new once, so go ahead and ask away.

The main waterfowl shows are held during the autumn and winter months — when the birds have recovered from the rigours of the breeding season and are in full colour. They also travel better in cooler weather.

Exhibitions bring together hundreds of show classes of domestic ducks and geese and waterfowl eggs. There are usually classes for juniors and novices, too. There can be Call Duck and wildfowl displays, and sometimes a selection of waterfowl is available for sale. The shows at Bultwell, Oswestry, Stroud, Cornwall, Telford and Stafford qualify for points in the British Waterfowl Association Breeder of the Year scheme.

For more information, visit www.waterfowl.org.uk



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For more information, visit www.edenbridge-show.co.uk; tel: 01737 645843; email: jackie@edenbridge-show.co.uk

● The SE Shire Horse Association's Heavy Horse and Country Show on 2-3 May features traditional heavy horse skills and falconry, while on Sunday a dog show, Gundogs and terrier racing will be run. For more information, visit www.sesha.org.uk/

● The London Harness Horse Parade on 13 April is an unusual Easter Monday day out to see transport through the ages with horse-drawn carriages and historic vehicles. For more information, visit www.lhhp.co.uk/



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W: www.cerealsevent.co.uk

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DID YOU KNOW?

- 1 Published for over 40 years, Country Smallholding is the most popular magazine among seasoned and would-be smallholders
- 2 Every issue of Country Smallholding magazine contains expert advice on the animals smallholders own as well as the crops they can grow
- 3 We have a growing digital audience with an average of 21,645 monthly personal visitors

Source - Web report - Adobe Analytics August 2019



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A TRUE CELEBRATION OF RURAL LIFE

Royal Welsh Smallholding & Countryside Festival, Powys, 16-17 May



THIS YEAR will see the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society celebrate its 20th year of hosting the Smallholding and Countryside Festival. The weekend of 16-17 May will bring this popular showcase event to the Royal Welsh Showground where the real diversity of the Welsh countryside will be demonstrated but with smallholding and country pursuits at the heart of the event.

This is a true celebration of rural life and country living for everyone looking for business ideas or a fun family day out. If you're seeking some inspiration for your garden, allotment, help with that fledgling business venture idea, or are looking to improve your skills and knowledge, the festival is the place to be.

The Smallholders Centre will be the hub for those wanting to learn more about the smallholding way of life. Additionally, there will be a new Rural Diversification Showcase Zone running at the Smallholders Centre.

And this event wouldn't be the Smallholding and Countryside Festival without showcasing the best food

and drink that Wales and the border counties have to offer. If its take-home treats for later, or a snack or substantial meal that you're after at the festival, you'll be able to find it here in the food areas.

If you're interested in learning more about the art of shearing and wool handling, the shearing shed is the place to go. There will be blade shearing and wool handling demonstrations throughout the event, with the return of the popular wool handling competition for those with a competitive streak.

Pygmy goat, sheep, cattle, pig and equine contests will also be running, where competitors will vie for cups and rosettes. New to the livestock sections will be the Blue Texel section, plus two inaugural sections for Dairy Youngstock and Young Handlers. Schedules will be released this month.

"The Festival will be packed with information, fun and entertainment for all the family, and we're excited to be bringing new sections to the livestock competitions

and new areas to the festival itself," says Geraint James, honorary festival director. "Whether you're well established in the smallholding community, or want to learn more about it, you can show off your skills and learn new ones by having a go at anything from milking a cow to spinning wool here at the Smallholding & Countryside Festival."

A totally new concept this time will be the Wedding Festival Zone, which will bring a chance to look at the more unique wedding venues with a festival feel.

As well as innovation, there will also be plenty that is familiar, from scurry driving, the Welsh Festival of Land Rovers, show jumping, the only Premier Open Dog Show held in Wales, plus children's activities, country pursuits and much more.

Children 16 years and under will enjoy free entry. Buy your tickets online NOW for great discounts. Free parking is available close to all entrances.

For more information, visit www.rwas.wales





The Royal Cornwall Show
takes place on 4-6 June

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E: ben@hometown-events.co.uk
W: www.southdownsshow.com

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MID SOMERSET SHOW, BA4 5RT
T: 01749 347607
E: secretary@midsomersetshow.org.uk
W: www.midsomersetshow.org.uk

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MOTTRAM & DISTRICT SUMMER SHOW, GREATER MANCHESTER
SK14 6LT
T: 01613 388497
E: hello@motttramshow.co.uk
W: www.motttramshow.co.uk

18-20

PEMBROKESHIRE COUNTY SHOW,
SA62 4BW
T: 01437 764331
E: info@pembsshow.org
W: www.pembsshow.org

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**GILLINGHAM & SHAFTESBURY
SHOW, DORSET SP7 9PL**
T: 01747 823955
E: info@gillinghamandshaftesbury
show.co.uk
W: www.gillinghamandshaftesbury
show.co.uk

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CHAGFORD SHOW, DEVON
TQ13 8JN
T: 07511 778641
E: chagfordshow@gmail.com
W: www.chagfordshow.co.uk

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DENBIGH & FLINT COUNTY SHOW,

SCOTLAND LL16 4UB
T: 01352 712131
E: show.office@btconnect.com
W: www.denbighandflintshow.com

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TA24 6SL
T: 01984 656990
E: secretary@dunstershow.demon.
co.uk
W: www.thedunstershow.co.uk

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LE16 7QX
E: info@leicestershirecountyshow.co.uk
W: www.leicestershirecountyshow.co.uk

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org.uk

W: www.minsterleyshow.org.uk

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W: www.mirfieldshow.com

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E: info@buckscountyshow.co.uk
W: www.buckscountyshow.co.uk

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W: www.melplashshow.co.uk

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EGHAM ROYAL SHOW, SURREY
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T: 07448 766325
E: showsecretary@eghamroyalshow.
org.uk

W: www.eghamroyalshow.org.uk

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E: info@bellinghamshow.co.uk
W: www.bellinghamshow.co.uk

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NORTH YORKSHIRE DL8 5JG
T: 01969 623138
E: secretary@wensleydaleshow.org.uk
W: www.wensleydaleshow.org.uk

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DORSET DT10 2BG
T: 01963 23511
E: office@stockgaylard.com
W: www.stockgaylard.com

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RH7 6LL
T: 01737 645843
E: jackie@edenbridge-show.co.uk
W: www.edenbridge-show.co.uk

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NR11 6NF
T: 07717 860756
E: adminandfinance@theaylshamshow.co.uk
W: www.theaylshamshow.co.uk

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GLENDALE SHOW,
NORTHUMBERLAND NE71 6QX
T: 01668 283868
E: info@glendaleshow.com
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CA12 5RY
T: 01697 323418
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W: www.kilnseyshow.co.uk

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LANCASHIRE GAME & COUNTRY
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W: www.stanhopeshow.com

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E: secretary@stokesleyshow.co.uk
W: www.stokesleyshow.co.uk

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ROYAL COUNTY OF BERKSHIRE
SHOW, RG18 9QZ
T: 01635 016083
E: office@newburyshowground.co.uk
W: www.berkshireshow.co.uk

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SOMERSET COUNTY SHOW AT
TAUNTON RACECOURSE, TA3 7BL
T: 01823 476250
E: sharon@somersetcountyshow.co.uk
W: www.somersetcountyshow.co.uk

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T: 01969 650129
E: info@niddersdaleshow.co.uk
W: www.niddersdaleshow.co.uk

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GRANDSDEN & DISTRICT
AGRICULTURAL SHOW,
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W: www.gransdenshow.org.uk

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W: www.bathandwest.com

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W: www.alwintonshow.co.uk

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PLOUGHING CHAMPIONSHIPS,
NORTHUMBERLAND TD12 4QL
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W: www.ploughmen.co.uk



Show Guide 2020

Fixtures for small farmers

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W: www.ssgf.uk

24-25

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E: info@yas.co.uk
W: www.countrysidelive.co.uk

NOVEMBER

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MIDLANDS MACHINERY SHOW, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE NG24 2NY
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W: www.midlandsmachineryshow.com

21-22

ENGLISH WINTER FAIR & NATIONAL PEDIGREE CALF SHOW, STAFFORDSHIRE ST18 0BD
T: 01785 258060
E: enquiries@staffscountyshowground.co.uk
W: www.staffscountyshowground.co.uk

30-1 DEC

ROYAL WELSH AGRICULTURAL WINTER FAIR, POWYS LD2 3SY
T: 01982 553683
E: requests@rwas.co.uk
W: www.rwas.wales/winter-fair/

DECEMBER

5-6

THE NATIONAL POULTRY SHOW, SHROPSHIRE TF3 4JH
T: 01830 520856
E: info@poultryclub.org
W: www.poultryclub.org

19-20

FEDERATION CHAMPIONSHIP SHOW, STAFFORDSHIRE ST18 0BD
T: 01270 619990
E: fedchampshow@gmail.com
W: www.federationpoultryshow.weebly.com

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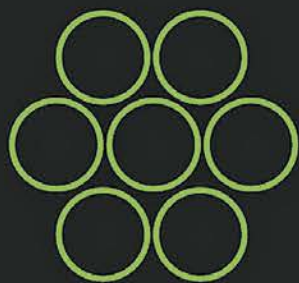
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takes place on
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The Royal Isle of Wight Country Show takes place near
Northwood and a stone's throw from Cowes

Picture: Michael Peler





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Delightful Dorpers

The British Dorper, a true all-round breed, seems to have everything a smallholder could want, but UK numbers are very low.

Charlotte Cooper visits a Derbyshire breeder who has gone to the other side of the world in her bid to create the perfect sheep

You have just decided to get into pedigree sheep. You want something a bit

unusual and you don't want to shear as you are only going to buy a small number. Your herd also needs to be able to pay its way with good carcass values, and be able to survive on little hard feed. It sounds like a tall order, but enthusiasts of one of the UK's least-known sheep breeds – the British Dorper – think that they have just what you're looking for.

With its snow-white body and black head, the British Dorper looks like it is poking its head out of a big woolly jumper. This unusual look comes from its ancestry. The Dorper was created in South Africa in 1942 by crossing a Dorset Horn ram with a Blackhead Persian ewe. This created a very meaty, prolific sheep, capable of producing lambs every eight months. Other benefits are that it is self-shedding – so it doesn't need shearing – and is an excellent, milky mother.

The breed only came to the UK in 2004 and, although very common in South Africa and Australia, where they are among the most popular meat breeds, there are just 28 registered breeders in the UK and the British Dorper remains largely unknown.

There is also a White Dorper, which, as the name suggests, doesn't have the classic black head.

One of the most proactive British breeders of Dorpers is Margaret Hollinrake. She lives high up on the limestone hills above the market town of Bakewell in Derbyshire and I went to meet her and fellow



ABOVE: Margaret Hollinrake is one of the most proactive breeders of Dorpers in Britain

Dorper enthusiast Alison Richards, congregating in Margaret's cosy stone farmhouse for a chat.

On an early spring day Knotlow Farm is green and pleasant, with a camping site, wooden yurts with barbecue pitches and hot tubs – all the ingredients needed for an idyllic holiday away from the working world. But in the middle of

winter it is a bleak and exposed place and the sheep need to be able to deal with whatever the weather throws at them.

"The Dorper can withstand extremes of hot and cold climates, so they're perfect for us situated some 1,000ft above sea level in the Peak District," says Margaret as she offers tea and some of her legendary cakes.

PICTURES: CHARLOTTE COOPER/JS & M HOLLINRAKE

"Their skin is twice as thick as that of a normal sheep, which means that their skins are used in high-end cars and by glovers in South Africa. They will happily tolerate wet and cold, and their fleece is like a coconut mat, so the rain doesn't penetrate it."

Margaret and her husband, John, farmed dairy cows for 30 years, but made the move to Aberdeen Angus beef cattle around 13 years ago. They started to diversify the farm with B&B rooms, a campsite and yurts, and in 2014 Margaret decided that she wanted to add a specialist meat sheep.

"I came across the Dorper by chance. I was searching the internet for 'meaty sheep' when the breed came up, and reading the information about it led me on to the 'Dorpers for sale' page. The nearest breeders to us were in Cheshire, and we duly purchased three ewes. We then had to find an unrelated ram, which proved more difficult as the gene pool in the UK is quite small."

Again, Margaret took to the internet, finding breeders in

South Africa and Australia. However, export rules in South Africa preclude the export of semen or embryos to the UK, so Australian bloodlines it was.

"I picked Dell Dorpers on the East Coast and decided to give them a call to see if they would ship semen. I had to get up in the middle of the night," she laughs.

For the past four years Margaret and Alison – whose Anchor Dorper flock is based in North Yorkshire – have purchased semen or embryos from Dell each year.

"The improvement in shape and size of my sheep is obvious," says Margaret.

Last year's sire was Dell Jackpot, who was recently sold to new owners for A\$9,000 (around £5,000). The excitement on the ladies' faces as they show me pictures of him on Margaret's iPad is contagious.

"He's sheer muscle – so strong," enthuses Alison. "They're not like normal sheep."

"We are looking for length, depth, muscle and backside," says Margaret. "We have to breed something that has good bone to meat ratio."



ABOVE:
One of Margaret's 56 sheep

She now has 56 sheep, 11 of which are young rams that are sold on as breeding stock.

"The ewes tend to twin and give birth with ease because the lamb's head is long and narrow. The lambs are like Exocet missiles: up, on their feet and feeding in a matter of minutes and in a couple of hours they're running around the field," she tells me. "They work well in our diversification as they lamb early and are out of the way before the camping season starts."

The ladies could sing the praises of these sheep all day. ▶

BELOW:
Dorpers will live on poor land, they lamb easily and make great mothers



Dorper meat is naturally lean, marbled, moist and succulent, with a sweeter and milder flavour than most other breeds. The bone to meat ratio and growth rate are excellent.

Another reason why Dorsers are easy for smallholders is that they will eat all the coarse grasses and weeds – preferring to browse like goats rather than needing prime pasture.

“During last year’s drought conditions my Dorsers didn’t need any extra feed as they graze on vegetation other breeds would find unpalatable,” adds Margaret. “Apart from routine checks and worming, they are easy-care; they’re low maintenance and they just get on with things.”

We go outside to see the ewes and lambs happily grazing in the field that will be filled with tents come the warmer weather. The new mothers aren’t keen to let me view their babes, but they happily follow Margaret’s bucket so I can get some pictures.

Now in the lambing shed, which Margaret has kitted out with CCTV so that she can easily monitor her ladies from the farm office or from her iPad, she says: “This has revolutionised lambing. Not that they need any help as a rule, but I can keep an eye on them while carrying on with whatever I’m doing. We have one for the cattle too. It’s really helpful.”

The ewes lie about, happily chewing, while the lambs



investigate the straw and each other.

“They only come in at lambing – they really are very hardy. I can’t recommend them highly enough,” she smiles.

There are so many plus points in the Dorsers’ favour. The only downside seems to be their rarity in the UK, but with Margaret and Alison pushing the British Dorper Society forward it can only be a matter of time before we all have the ‘Aberdeen Angus of the sheep world’ in our flocks and on our tables.

“We have big plans for the breed. The top breeder in South Africa is Mickey Phillips and I

ABOVE:
Margaret’s son Philip finishes in the ribbons at Cheshire Show with one of the family’s shearling rams

BELOW:
The only downside for the Dorper is their rarity in the UK

would like to get him over here to grade British Dorsers. I would also like to start a sale in the UK for breeders to bring their sheep to. Ours is an evolving breed. There is no such thing as a perfect animal. You always want to improve and farming is all about that – and there’s no doubt it’s addictive!” ■

■ *Following her visit to Margaret Hollinrake, Charlotte Cooper is now also the proud owner of some British Dorsers!*

■ *Find out more about Dorsers and White Dorsers through the British Dorper Sheep Society: www.dorsersheepsociety.co.uk*



WHY DORPERS?

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- Good milky mums
- Easy lambing
- Happy on scrubby land

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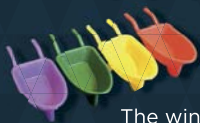
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Product: The PetSafe Drinkwell 7.5ltr Pet Fountain is an automatic water bowl featuring a free-falling water stream with adjustable flow control. Choose from nearly silent circulation on the lowest setting to a tranquil stream on the highest. The flow control allows you to tailor the water flow to your pet's needs. The large capacity bowl is perfect for big dogs and multiple pet households and the square bowl design is large enough to let several pets drink at the same time with minimal splashing.

Cost: £70.99

Tester Hayley Marsh says:

"This drinker looks smart and, although it looked daunting to set up, it was surprisingly straightforward and quick to put together. It's quite a big piece of kit and needs plugging into the mains, which does limit where you can put it, especially in a smallish kitchen. It is easy to fill and clean out and my two spaniels appreciated the fresh water. The quality of the materials is good, and I liked the range of settings to adjust the flow of water. It's also big enough to enable my dogs to drink at the same time. My only concern is that it is rather expensive for what is effectively a large water bowl. It does help that the water stays fresh, but my spaniels drink so much that I refresh their bowls every day anyway. The benefit of this drinker is that no dog will run out of fresh water if they are left alone for a few hours."

Star rating: 3/5

To sum up: "A practical waterer offering a constant supply of fresh water, but it comes with a high price tag." <https://intl.petsafe.net/en-gb/health-wellness>



Tried & Tested

This month our testers give their verdicts on a VW truck, a pet fountain, a pair of wellies and a natural tumeric pet supplement

COMPILED BY: **Stephanie Bateman**



VW AMAROK HIGHLINE 3.0 V6 TDI 4MOTION 258PS 8SPD AUTOMATIC

Product: The Amarok's 3.0 litre V6 TDI engine has more than enough power to tackle the most demanding terrain, and it combines high ground clearance and body stability with 4MOTION all-wheel drive. It can handle pools with a wading depth of 500mm, and the spacious cargo area offers space for 1.28m³ of bulk goods. What's more, when towing, the trailer stabilisation system provides the best possible protection against snaking trailers. It also features all the latest technology, such as a multi-function display with sat-nav, rear-view camera and parking sensors.

Cost: From £35,380, excl VAT

Tester Stephanie Bateman says:

"I loved the bright blue colour of this enormous truck when it arrived on my drive — on which it took up a lot of space! Inside it boasts all the tech of a modern car, but with the space and practicality required in a smallholder's vehicle. The cargo space is huge — numerous bales of hay and bags of feed are no problem, but you need a bit of strength behind you to hoist them up into the back — it's pretty high. The driving experience is fab — you glide along motorways, but it's when you head off-road that this vehicle really comes into its own. The all-wheel drive

system enables the truck to cover any going, however rutted, muddy, or stony, with total ease, and the spongy suspension ensures a soft, comfortable ride. Driving through flood water is no problem, and with a whopping 3.1t towing capacity, there's not much that it won't pull. It's a big truck to park in tight spaces at the supermarket, but on the smallholding it's functional and useful."

Star rating: 5/5

To sum up: "A beefy truck with superior off-road capabilities and all the space and power a small-scale farmer could want." www.volkswagen-vans.co.uk

'Inside it boasts all the tech of a modern car, but with the space and practicality required in a smallholder's vehicle'



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Product: Buckingham Wellington Boots are made from neoprene, with a natural rubber sole. The neoprene feels comfortable against the skin and can be worn with thin socks, as it helps to keep feet cool in the summer and warm in the winter. These multi-seasonal boots are waterproof and perfect for year-round country activities whatever the weather. The heel and sole spread weight evenly, offering comfort when walking, while the high grip tread provides underfoot security on all surfaces.

Cost: £54.99

Tester Jeff Brinkley says: "I have been wearing these attractive boots around the plot and out walking the dogs for a number of months now and they have been great. They are comfortable, warm and waterproof (very important with the weather we have been having). These boots are certainly easier to wear all day than normal



wellies as they provide better support and cushioning. Traction is good and they fit snugly against the calves so you don't feel as though they will pull off in the mud. I have never had half neoprene/half rubber boots before, so I was surprised at the comfort and hard-wearing feel to the product. They are essentially a neoprene sock with a moulded rubber half-boot attached and you could be forgiven for thinking that the join would weaken, but after months of hard use this shows no sign of happening. The one

drawback is that you do need to pull them on and pull them back off again, the latter with a boot jack. This is not a huge issue, but if you are carrying something when you come to don your boots, you will need at least one hand to pull them on. They are good value, and I'd definitely recommend them."

Star rating: 5/5

To sum up: A comfortable, practical and hard-wearing wellington boot that is perfect for working around the holding.

www.townandco.com

GOLDEN PASTE COMPANY TURMEREASE



Product: The award-winning TurmerEase™ pet supplement is popular with owners looking for an easy

way to add the benefits of bio-available turmeric to their friend's diet. Made from ethically-sourced raw chicken, TurmerEase™ has a grain free, high meat, hypoallergenic formula that aids joint health by supporting the body's natural inflammation processes.

Cost: £24.99

Tester Fiona Howard says:

"I liked the nicely designed and informative packaging. I used the product on my 10-year-old spaniel as a supplement for his aches and sensitive tummy. He has certainly seemed less stiff in the cold weather and it has helped to sooth his stomach — tumeric, the key ingredient, is a natural anti-inflammatory. It also supports healthy joints, aids digestion, helps mobility and is good for coats and skin. I was surprised how tasty Enzo found it — he was happy to have it as a treat — and I was also impressed by the amount of vitamins and minerals found. I would recommend it and really like the fact that it is a naturally occurring, healthy supplement that is easy to administer. It is also a good price."

Star rating: 5/5

To sum up: Supplements are tricky to measure, but this worked well for us.

www.goldenpastecompany.com



WIN, WIN, WIN!

Win a limited edition mounted print, worth £85

One lucky reader will win this beautiful print by talented artist Colin Brown.

"I'm from the north west, but my love for art and animals comes from growing up with farm animals with my family in Surrey," says Colin. "I still keep my own chickens, which is why I'm a fan of *Country Smallholding* magazine. To celebrate my love for this magazine, I'm giving away a limited-edition print of a painting very close to my heart for many personal reasons, but one being that it's a painting of my first Silkie chicken."

Alongside selling his originals and prints, Colin is also available for commissions. You can see more of his work and contact him via his website: www.colin-brown-art.com

To be in with a chance of winning, send your name, postal address and a daytime phone number on email to editorial.csh@archant.co.uk. **The closing date for entries is Monday 6 April 2020.**

MEET THE TESTERS



Stephanie Bateman

Stephanie Bateman is a keen horse rider and freelance journalist who reports on a variety of equestrian pursuits. She enjoys growing vegetables and flowers in her garden and has a rescue Border Collie called Tess.



Fiona Howard

Fiona Howard lives on a 17-acre smallholding in Cornwall with her family, plus two donkeys, 12 sheep, some chickens, bees and fish. Her focus is on the environment, conservation and sustainability.



Jeff Brinkley

Jeff Brinkley has lived on his smallholding on the Welsh Borders for five years. He keeps a variety of animals, including ducks, chickens, quail and pigs, and has a polytunnel where he grows vegetables alongside his fruit garden.



Hayley Marsh

Veterinary physiotherapist Hayley Marsh owns a nine-acre smallholding in Gloucestershire where she keeps a variety of polocrosse horses and two working Cocker Spaniels.

Sometimes you only have to look at something to know that it's designed perfectly for the job. The Yanmar tractor is an example of this. One look and you can see that this tough little machine is ideal as a workhorse on a small farm.

Small tractors often form the backbone of a smallholding. They provide the means for a single person to maintain a few acres themselves. A range of attachments makes so many things possible that would have been unthinkable 100 years ago.

Yanmar was founded in Japan in 1912 by Magokichi Yamaoka, the ninth of 10 children of a farming family. He was a driven man. He had a vision that he wanted to contribute to society through technology. He set up a business working on reconditioning oil engines, but wanted something that was lightweight and mobile that could be moved and used by farmers for different purposes. He developed smaller oil engines. His business succeeded in making things Japan's agricultural industry needed at the time, such as rice balers and the first powered rice huller.

The depression led him to rethink things. In 1932 a trip to Germany and a visit to an expo of diesel engines led him to realise that there was no manufacturer making one small enough for what he thought Japan needed. His mantra was "To conserve fuel is to serve mankind", and he thought a smaller engine would help to do this. A little over a year later, he had created the first small diesel engine.

Germany is the undisputed home of diesel, so he was honoured that he was the first non-German to win the Diesel Gold Medal awarded by the German Inventors' Association and later the German Merit Cross.

By 1992, the company had produced 10 million diesel engines and, for many years, John Deere used rebranded Yanmar diesel engines in its small tractor range.

Steve Stanford runs a smallholding near Malvern



'To conserve fuel is to serve mankind'

There are times when less is more and small is truly beautiful. **Kevin Alviti** finds that the tough little Yanmar tractor is the perfect workhorse for a small farm

ABOVE:
The Yanmar 1610D is made almost entirely of metal so 'if you bend it, you just bend it back again'

and works in agriculture and horticulture. He bought his Yanmar 1610D three years ago at auction for £3,000.

"It was for sale with a topper. It seemed ideal; the perfect size for what I needed and in good condition," Steve recalls.

The tractor is just 20Hp, but that's plenty for Steve's needs and, although it's more than 35 years old, it still looks in great condition, with the red paintwork shining brightly.

"Some of the wildflower meadow work I do calls for chain harrowing or topping, and it handles this fine. I also sell a lot of logs, so being able to have the log splitter on the back is great. It even has powershift, so, once

you select your range, you don't need to touch the clutch to go up through the gears – a great feature for a tractor of this age."

Steve has no regrets about buying his 1610D: "She's from a time where things were built right. Only the dash is plastic, with everything else metal. If you bend it, you just bend it back again. Also there's no solenoid or complicated electrics; it's all levers so you can easily fix it yourself."

Small is beautiful on the smallholding sometimes. A bigger tractor might seem the better investment, but sometimes less is more, and there is little doubting that this diminutive Yanmar is ideal for small farmers. ■



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Nettle Pie contains four handfuls of young nettle tops, washed, dried and chopped

GRASPING THE NETTLE

Now is the time to make the most of the beneficial health effects of nettles, which make a fantastic (and free) addition to soups, puddings and pies

VITAMIN- and mineral-rich nettles have been a traditional part of our spring diet for centuries. They taste surprisingly delicious once heated to remove the sting and are said to have a purifying and cleansing effect upon the system.

Nettles can be put into any recipe where you might use cooked spinach. They make fantastic soups, puddings and pies, or you can stir them through pasta, or into risotto.

The best time to harvest tender young tops is from March to the end of May. Wear rubber gloves to pick and handle the nettles until they have been cooked. You can also use dead nettle *Lamium album*, including garden varieties, in the same way as the stinging variety.

NETTLE PIE (TWO SEASONS PIE)

The last of the old season and the start of the new are combined in this tasty pie.

Ingredients (Serves 4)

Filling

- 1 large leek, trimmed and cut into ¾cm slices
- About 500g boiled and sliced winter vegetables: carrot, parsnip, swede and celeriac (retain cooking water)
- 300ml milk
- 100ml vegetable cooking water
- 3 level tablespoons cornflour
- Freshly ground black and ground white pepper
- 1 vegetable gel stock pot or similar
- 4 handfuls of young nettle tops, washed, dried and chopped

- Generous handful of chopped chives and parsley

Pastry

- 340g strong bread flour
- 170g cold salted butter, diced
- 5 tablespoons cold water
- PLUS 1 small egg, beaten with 1 teaspoon water

Method

Preheat the oven to 180°C (fan oven) or equivalent.

You will need a 24cm pie dish.

Steam the leeks until tender.

Set aside.

Mix the cornflour to a smooth paste in a heavy-bottomed pan with 2-3 tablespoons of milk. Gradually add the remaining milk and vegetable cooking water, stirring constantly. Change to a whisk as it loosens.

Bring to the boil while still whisking. Lower the heat and whisk until smooth. Stir in the pepper and stock pot.

Combine with the veg/nettles/herbs in the dish. Leave to cool.

Whiz the flour and butter into fine crumbs in a food processor. Add water and whiz until large clumps form. Remove from the machine and knead gently into a ball.

Roll out and mark a circle to fit the top of your dish. Grease the dish rim and line with a strip of pastry. Brush with egg-wash and lift the pastry circle on top. Indent the edges to seal with a knife handle or similar.

Brush with egg-wash and decorate with pastry leaves.

Bake for 30 minutes or until golden brown.

NETTLE PUDDING

This traditional old pudding was once eaten on Good Friday in country areas. It is good on its own or as part of a fried breakfast.

Ingredients (Serves 4)

- 430ml milk
- 275g breadcrumbs (use fairly stale bread, but don't toast or crisp it up in any way)
- 2 medium eggs, as fresh as possible, well whisked
- Freshly ground black and ground white pepper
- Freshly grated nutmeg to taste
- 50g diced salted butter, plus extra for dotting
- 3-4 handfuls of young nettle tops, washed, dried and chopped
- Generous handful of chopped chives and parsley
- Salt to taste, if necessary

Method

Preheat the oven to 160°C (fan oven) or equivalent.

You will need a buttered 24cm pie dish.

Pour the milk into a pan and stir in the breadcrumbs. Stir in the eggs and seasoning and leave to stand for 30 minutes.

Stir in the butter and nettles and heat through gently.

Stir in the herbs, test for seasoning and pour into the prepared dish.

Bake for 25-30 minutes or until risen and golden.

Tip

Leftovers are great sliced and fried.

Batsford's brilliant 2020

Batsford Timber supplies myriad products to a huge range of customers, and it is predicting that this year will be its most successful to date

From small beginnings to the present day, Batsford Timber has grown to supply all types of customers. From the DIYer to fencing and landscaping contractors, farms, estates and industrial users, Batsford Timber is proud to offer a quality service and value for money to all. In fact, as part of the company's commitment to service, Batsford Timber has endeavoured to start 2020 with more stock than ever before.

The company's extensive stock ranges from posts and rails, building timbers, all types of stock netting (deer, badger, rabbit, chicken and dog mesh), to specialist tools, fittings, timber and metal gates, hurdles and panels.

Robin Clark, director at Batsford Timber, says: "Last year was challenging at times for supplies of round timber, especially small roundwood. We rely on imported timber from the Baltic to supply the large quantities of 3-4in needed to satisfy our customers' demands. At certain periods last year supplies were delayed due to reasons out of our control. To ensure that we avoid this problem in 2020, we have invested heavily into having plenty of stock ready for the new year."

Batsford Timber is one of just a few companies left in the UK which can offer pressure creosoted timber treated at its South West depot located on the Longleat Estate. Creosote is a proven wood preservative which is still used in areas such as highways and agricultural and equestrian fencing where a long service life is critical.

"Creosote treatment has been offered from our Longleat site for over 60 years and we have



customers who tell us how they have just taken out the fence their grandfather put in and have reused some of the posts," says Robin.

Batsford Timber also offers Tanalith E (tanalised) treatment from both its Midlands and South West depots, and it offers a treatment service for customers' own timbers.

Robin adds: "We endeavour to offer a 'one-stop shop' service for our customers to complete any fencing and landscaping project. From creosoted and tanalised timber to gates, wire, tools, fixtures and fittings, we have the lot. In fact, many customers are surprised at the variety of products we keep."

As well as the huge range of products, Batsford Timber also offers a delivery service for customers, with 'self-unload' ability on larger vehicles to make deliveries as convenient as possible, saving customers from having to organise offloading at the delivery location.

ABOVE:
Batsford Timber has endeavoured to start 2020 with more stock than ever before

BELOW:
As well as a huge range of products, Batsford Timber also offers a delivery service for customers

The experienced sales staff at Batsford Timber are always happy to advise on the myriad types of fencing available.

Now in its 31st year, Batsford Timber supplies to customers up and down the country – who can all vouch for its brilliance. ■

Call the Midlands depot, tel: 01608 651096; or the South West depot, tel: 01985 219555; visit www.batsfordtimber.co.uk; or simply drop in for a look.



Safe as houses

Worried about your flock? Then **Garden Life's** steel-framed walk-in cages and runs will provide the perfect solution

It is a sad fact that Garden Life Ltd receives many phone calls from poultry-keepers after they have suffered a fox attack.

Garden Life is a family run business that offers a large selection of steel-framed walk-in poultry cages and chicken runs – all intended to keep your poultry and other animals/livestock safe. All frames are made from strong, galvanised 38mm tubular steel and boast a timber door frame.

The frames are covered in strong 20-gauge hexagonal chicken wire mesh (or there is the option to upgrade to the even stronger 19g welded mesh), while a mesh ground skirt all around deters tunnelling. These self-assembly runs are designed to allow easy access for you, but they keep your poultry in one place, as well as offering protection from predators when you can't be with them.

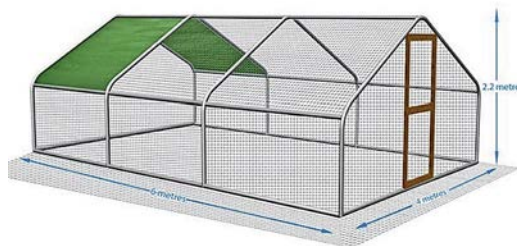
"Don't believe anyone who claims to have a 100% fox-proof chicken run," says John Bolton of Garden Life. "However, our 19g welded mesh with 0.5in holes is probably our safest option at a reasonable cost. Many have been sold to the British Army to house their guard dogs, and we have even supplied them to rescue centres for keeping foxes in! We offer free delivery to most UK mainland addresses to provide great security for your chickens, or whatever pets you have."

The width of the frames can be 2m, 3m, 4m, or 6m, while the depth can be any that the customer requires.

"We often get asked if we can supply mesh to lay on the ground inside our chicken runs," continues John. "This is a great idea, so we've added the option of a mesh ground cover for all run sizes. No matter which mesh option you chose, our ground cover is made of our ultimate

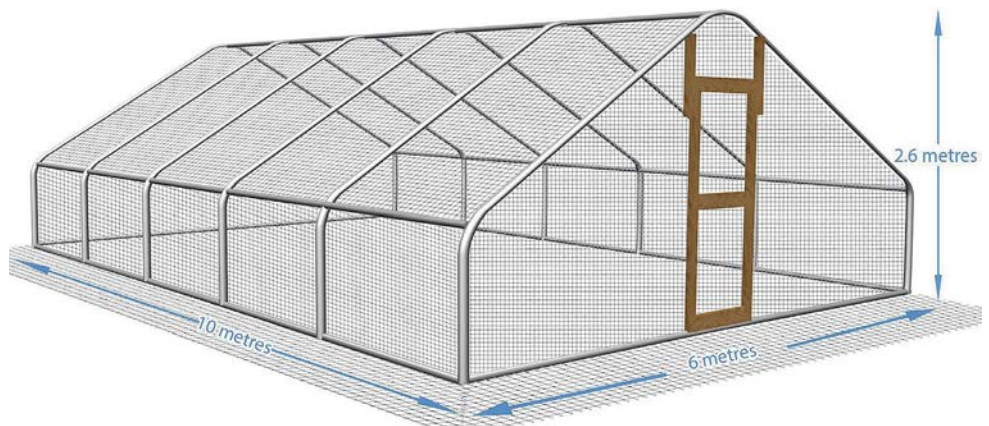


'These self-assembly runs are designed to allow easy access for you, but they keep your poultry in one place, as well as offering protection from predators when you can't be with them'



welded mesh with a 0.5in hole. This is ideal for people who have problems with animals like rats tunneling underground and popping up inside the run. When selecting a run, you will find the option of a ground mesh cover along with the usual upgrade options." ■

The full range of sizes and mesh options can be seen on the website. View www.gardenlifedirect.co.uk. As Country Smallholding went to press, there was 15% off all sizes.



A poultry giant with northern roots

All **Hinchliffe's** birds are bred to bring out the best of both worlds – where a good commercial laying bird is crossed with an attractive old breed to produce a range of good-looking multi-coloured hens with great laying ability

Today Hinchliffe's is the largest rearer of specialist 'fancy' hybrid poultry for the domestic and hobby market. It is also one of the biggest independent producers of commercial hens for the egg industry – rearing up to 1 million birds a year on 18 sites around the North of England.

Hinchliffe's has a long and fascinating past and was established in 1929 as a butcher's shop in the centre of Huddersfield. Later, in the 1950s, Hinchliffe's began keeping hens in order to supply those shops with freshly laid eggs. Later still, it went on to help pioneer the modern hen rearing industry and to rear layers on a large scale for egg producers.

All Hinchliffe's birds are

'At point of lay, most birds are sold on to other suppliers around the country'

bred with the sole purpose of bringing out the best of both worlds – where a good commercial laying bird is crossed with an attractive old breed to produce a range of good-looking multi-coloured hens which lay more frequently than the old breeds.

Hinchliffe's follows a strict rearing plan and a comprehensive vaccination programme which protects the birds from all major strains of disease and this is continually updated in accordance with veterinary advice on new strains.

Ben Hirst, fourth generation great grandson of founder Allen Hinchliffe and partner, says: "Our decades of experience help to produce the robust



and placid birds Hinchliffe's is known for and this makes our hens ideal pets to be enjoyed by all the family. With the added advantage of fresh eggs every day, they are more than just a pet. We also sell bantams [*below left*] and ducks."

At point of lay most are sold on to other suppliers around the country, so the chances are that you'll be buying a Hinchliffe's hen wherever you are in the UK.

Customers can also buy direct and pop into the farm shop at the family's main site in Netherton, Huddersfield, and potter around what is believed to be the UK's first ever farm shop. Many also stay for a spot of lunch or coffee at The Rusty Bull (*above left*), the daytime café bar next door that is named after Hinchliffe's beef herd of South Devon cattle. ■

For information, visit www.hinchliffes.com; tel: 01484 661231.

DID YOU KNOW?

- 1 Published for over 40 years, Country Smallholding is the most popular magazine among seasoned and would-be smallholders
- 2 Every issue of Country Smallholding magazine contains expert advice on the animals smallholders own as well as the crops they can grow
- 3 We have a growing digital audience with an average of 21,645 monthly personal visitors

Source - Web report - Adobe Analytics August 2019

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'We're dreading the day our favourite spade finally breaks'

Helen Doggett, a heritage consultant turned gardener and part-time smallholder, couldn't manage without her other half and their well-worn Wilkinson Sword spade, as well as myriad other things

Helen Doggett fantasised about living in the country for as long as she could remember. Her husband, Mick, a professional gardener, was just 13 when his longing for his own piece of land began. Therefore, when, in November 2014, the couple who had been together for a decade began to create a smallholding from scratch on a 1.6-acre field that was long neglected and badly overgrown, they were beyond excited.

"The nearest I'd got to living my fantasy was buying my first house in 1989, partly on the strength of its sizeable garden containing a Bramley apple tree," says Helen, who spent many years working as an objects conservator in museums in the UK and US. "That enabled me to get seriously into gardening/growing and preserving my own fruit, veg and herbs at the age of 28!"

Home for the Doggetts today is an early 1960s three-bed brick house that was among the first to be built on the Kettlethorpe estate on the Denby Dale edge of Wakefield.

"Even though we're on a council estate, it's actually the most rural place I've ever lived – we look out onto woods and farmland," says Helen.

Their home's distinguishing feature is its 'forest' of variegated ivy on the front.

"We can't bear to cut it back because it's such good shelter for the birds," notes Helen.



ABOVE:

Helen and Mick, who had both long harboured dreams of the Good Life before they finally took the plunge; Their trusty spade

OPPOSITE:

The fruit press was a Christmas present from Mick's parents eight years ago; Mick using the log-splitter; The Countax ride-on is 'wonderfully reliable'

"Our garden is full of tatty-looking brown vegetation, again preserved because it's full of seeds and insects for bird fodder, and we have a very shaggy lawn that's full of dandelions and daisies to harbour and feed insects. Mick would never let one of his customer's gardens look so unsightly, but for us nature conservation means much more than appearances."

Their land is sited half a mile from their house, a 10-minute walk along a path that runs through a belt of woodland. Christened Becksides, they cleared the field of brambles and invasive weeds and then planted it with woodland for coppicing, a forest garden with native fruit and nut trees, an orchard of traditional British cider, cooking and eating apples, plus they retained meadow areas for potential livestock purchases.



"Luckily Mick had lots of knowledge of tree planting and he was determined to fill it with native species, which were all put in as whips or transplants sized from 60-120cm. People often think that these are so small they'll take decades to grow, but, in the last five years, they've attained girths of up to 15cm and heights up to 5m, so the site now looks well wooded," says Helen. "The most notable successes have been the native cherry *Prunus avium* and willow species *Salix alba* and *Salix caprea*. However, the birch *Betula pendula* is also doing well, as are the hawthorn and blackthorn hedges *Crataegus monogyna* and *Prunus spinosa*. We've had decent crops from the forest garden trees (damsons, Victoria plums and hazelnuts) – at least when the wildlife don't steal them."

Livestock remain on the couple's wishlist.

HELEN DOGGETT DESCRIBES THE THINGS SHE LOVES



“Thus far all we have is the start of the stock fencing. As we don't have to make a living from Beckside, livestock aren't essential, although we would like to have some to increase biodiversity and help with nature conservation on the site. The jury is still out on exactly what we'll get and when, but the day will come as we both approach retirement.”



Our best spade

Mick's Wilkinson Sword general-purpose spade is almost as old as his gardening business. It's worked so hard during its lifetime — planting nearly 20,000 trees, for example, including 2,000 at Beckside — that the original 10in blade has worn down 3in (roughly an inch per decade)!

We both love it because it's sharp enough to cut through the toughest roots, and the reduced blade is light enough to spare our aching backs. We're dreading the day it finally breaks.

My husband

With over 30 years' experience in professional gardening, Mick is very much the driving force behind Beckside. His passion inspired our good friend and long-standing customer Richard to buy the land in the first place, and his vision is transforming it into a Garden of Eden, productive for us and a haven for wildlife. I could never do it without him, and I'm incredibly proud of his efforts to give us a wholesome, self-sustaining lifestyle in our retirement.

Ride-on tractor

Our 12-year-old Countax 13Hp ride-on tractor is a wonderfully reliable machine that has never had a serious breakdown. It was bought for the gardening business, to cut grass on big factory sites and school football fields, but now, like us, it's gone into semi-retirement as our main workhorse at Beckside. Until we get geese and sheep to graze the grass down, it's an absolute godsend for mowing the meadow and orchard and pulling trailers of logs around the site (as well as being great fun to

drive). It also has a belt-driven wood-chipper that attaches to the back and converts brash into mulch for putting around the trees and hedgerows, or it creates chips for making paths.

Log splitter

We acquired a Lawnflite 5 tonne hydraulic log splitter in 2018. Mick once scorned these machines as “old men's tools”, preferring to use his axe, splitting maul, chopping block and brute strength. But now he's turning into an old man, he's glad of a less strenuous way to cut logs for our stove. And, being no expert axe-woman, I'm glad of a way I can help with the job. The splitter is so easy to use that it becomes quite addictive. The “just one more piece before I knock off” usually turns into at least a dozen more. And it makes short work of even the toughest, knottiest chunks — an indispensable tool, given that firewood will always be Beckside's main product.

Wood store

Our landlord Richard thoughtfully built our wood store shortly after we began clearing the site in late 2014, generating tonnes of waste wood in the process. Made of timber, with a sheet-metal roof, the store has three internal bays for logs to dry out and season before they're burned, plus an integral shed where the log-splitter and ride-on tractor live. It's an essential adjunct to wood-processing, and it tends to be our main base of operations when we're working at Beckside.

Fruit press

My Vigo Fruit Press was a Christmas present from Mick's parents about eight years ago. Initially I used it for making juice and jelly preserves from our own garden produce and fruit

from my father-in-law's allotment. Despite its small size, it's also given us many gallons of alcoholic pleasure by pressing the hundredweights of apples we've been given over the years by friends and customers, which Mick converts into his deadly home-brewed cider. And it's still handy for processing our (as yet) small crops from the fruit saplings at Beckside, but it will need to be replaced with a much bigger version to cope with the increasing yield as the trees grow.

Volunteers

We could never have achieved so much in such a short time without the unstinting help of our landlord and numerous other friends who have always willingly lent a hand with everything from hauling out Himalayan balsam to processing wood and putting up stock fencing. They also provide the perfect excuse to round off a hard day's work with a cold beer (or several) in the shade of the oak tree.

Straw hat

And last but not least, I couldn't get by in sunny weather without my trusty straw hat. Originally part of my costume for our former hobby of Medieval re-enactment, the demands of Beckside soon meant that we no longer had the time or energy to spend weekends recreating battles. In any case, role-playing a 15th century peasant rather lost its attraction when I started labouring on the land for real! Still, a good straw hat is as important today as it would have been for any Medieval countrywoman. Naturally ventilated, it's cool and comfortable to wear, and I wouldn't dream of going outdoors in the sun without it. ■

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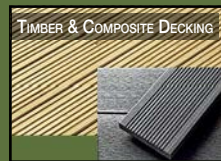
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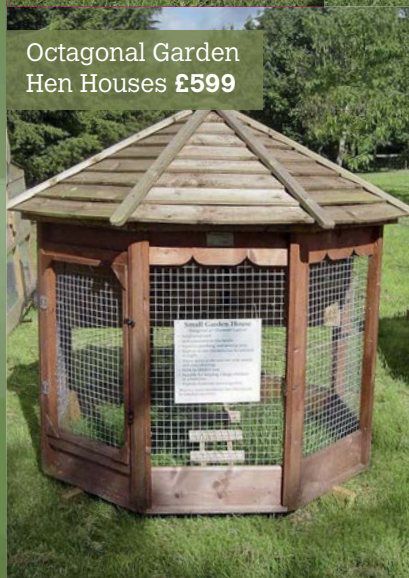
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Discover the wonders of wool and its versatility for myriad craft projects. Marcella Craven explains how to wash and card it in readiness (page 33)

All the articles in this supplement – and often elsewhere in the magazine – are colour coded according to which of the above categories they fit into, enabling you to instantly identify the features that most interest you.

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Trials not tribulations

In the final part of his mini series on training a sheepdog, **Dudley Edmunds** says why not consider moving on to the next level by taking part in trials with your canine superstar



IF YOU have been putting in the time training your dog with instructions from this series (*Country Smallholding*, January, February, March) you should now have one who will, at the very least, gather your sheep, bring them back to you, help put them in a pen, hold them to a wall or fence and perhaps even be happy to take them away again.

Driving, the taking away, however, can be a difficult move to teach as the natural inclination of the dog tends to be to bring them and hold them to you. As in all parts of training, though, patience and consistency is the answer.

Some dogs do have a natural tendency to drive but, if not, this is a time when a long line can prove very useful. Sheep in

front, dog next and you at the rear. I like to hold the end of the line in my left hand and use my right to control the length and put tension on the line. Don't loop the line around your wrist, but a glove on the hand that controls the line can save you from a painful rope burn.

Work with a small packet of sheep and help your dog by using the line to keep him on line. Aim for a straight walk up but ease the line to let your dog go out to the side to tuck the edges back in when needed. I have seen one or two very good handlers use a long line when the dog is at the back of the sheep and they are at the front. It is an art that I have never mastered! This exercise is a good opportunity to teach or reinforce the 'steady' command and teach the dog pace. ▶

ABOVE:

Teaching Vic distance. Dudley has asked him to stand and he has clapped down. Dudley will leave him there until the sheep have moved forwards and will then ask Vic to 'walk up'. The sheep will continue to move and it will help the dog to learn that he doesn't have to be on their tail to move them!

'SPOT HAD THE ATTENTION SPAN OF A GOLDFISH'

Let's take a look at one dog that I have helped to train. 'Spot' is owned by an experienced trialist who isn't as sprightly as he used to be. When he first brought Spot to me, I really wondered if the dog had it in him. He had been bought from a place I wouldn't recommend and seemed to have the attention span of a goldfish. Any small distraction would turn him off the sheep, and he only had one speed: fast! Stop wasn't a word he recognised, and flanks could be anything from an emulation of an Australian Kelpie to going so wide he could have gathered the M25. He was a real handful, but also a very nice dog, just one that was a bit bonkers and I did wonder if he was deaf (selectively or naturally).

I trained him on a one-to-one session basis over a total two-hour period usually working in 20-minute blocks. In the early days I would go home and sit and wonder how to bring him under control. He hadn't got much power to move sheep and very little control, so I kept things simple. We worked on very short outruns, getting the flanks correct, working on the stop and then walking on.

It was very obvious that a consistent and kind approach was the answer. I followed the Julie Hill concept of 'ask, tell, insist' and made sure that I was always consistent. We did a lot of repetitions while I ensured that I kept the attention of this easily distracted dog. Some days when I got home I managed not to sit with my head in my hands.

I borrowed another idea from a trainer that I had benefited from and I gave Spot a week's rest from lessons (well, me really). When he came back I was expecting mayhem, but the hard work and patience had paid off. He was much more controlled, took his flanks, stopped when asked (more or less), but, most of all, he had started to listen. Deciding that calm consistency was the way forward, I have kept to that and he's improving every time I work with him. There's still a long way to go, but the light is definitely gleaming at the end of the sheep pen.

WHAT'S NEXT?

So you have the basics, but where do you go next? To an extent that will depend on what you want. If you have a small number of sheep and just want a useful set of paws to help you then you may well be satisfied with the basics and fine tune those until they are as correct as they can be. You may, however, be at the other end of the scale and be so taken up with training and working your dog that you want to have a go at sheepdog trials.

If you are happy with the basics then keep working on them and improving your dog and yourself. You can work on tidying up the outrun or gather and improve putting the sheep together. You can work on a straight drive or fetch for no other practical reason than the pleasure of working your dog if that's what you enjoy doing. You can work on penning movements where your dog will move 6in and not 6ft (or several more). It's a case of improving on the basics, but not to the extent where dog and you get bored. Having a reliable dog will make your life much easier. And don't forget to teach the 'look back' should your dog miss or drop a sheep or two.

There is a piece of sheepdog wisdom that says if you get it right at the bottom it will probably be right at the top. In other words, get it right when the dog is close to you, then there is a much better chance it will be right when he's away up the field: a point worth remembering.

TRIALS

However, what happens if you're so taken up by all the sheepdog work that you think you would like to try your hand at trials? I always used to think that trials were a simple extension of everyday work and, to an extent, they are (and arguably should be). But there is much more to it than that. Even competing at a small trial, at a club, can be quite 'interesting', and if you're considering playing out there with the top handlers, it's a completely different world!

If you do think that you would like to trial then my

ABOVE:

Beth and the sheep moving at an acceptable, steady pace. She is a little close, but these sheep are difficult to move

OPPOSITE ABOVE:

Another distance exercise with Vic. Dudley is holding him off until the sheep have moved forwards

OPPOSITE BELOW:

Vic has been sent out right with the intention of doing a cross drive. He is tight and there is a little too much pressure on the sheep

advice would be get yourself to a top trainer and learn. Then get yourself off to another top trainer and learn a different perspective. Why two or more trainers? As a generalisation if you put six trainers in a room and ask the same question you will receive more than six answers back. Different people have different ideas and it is well worth exploring those ideas, find out what works for you and then store the other ideas away for a later date.

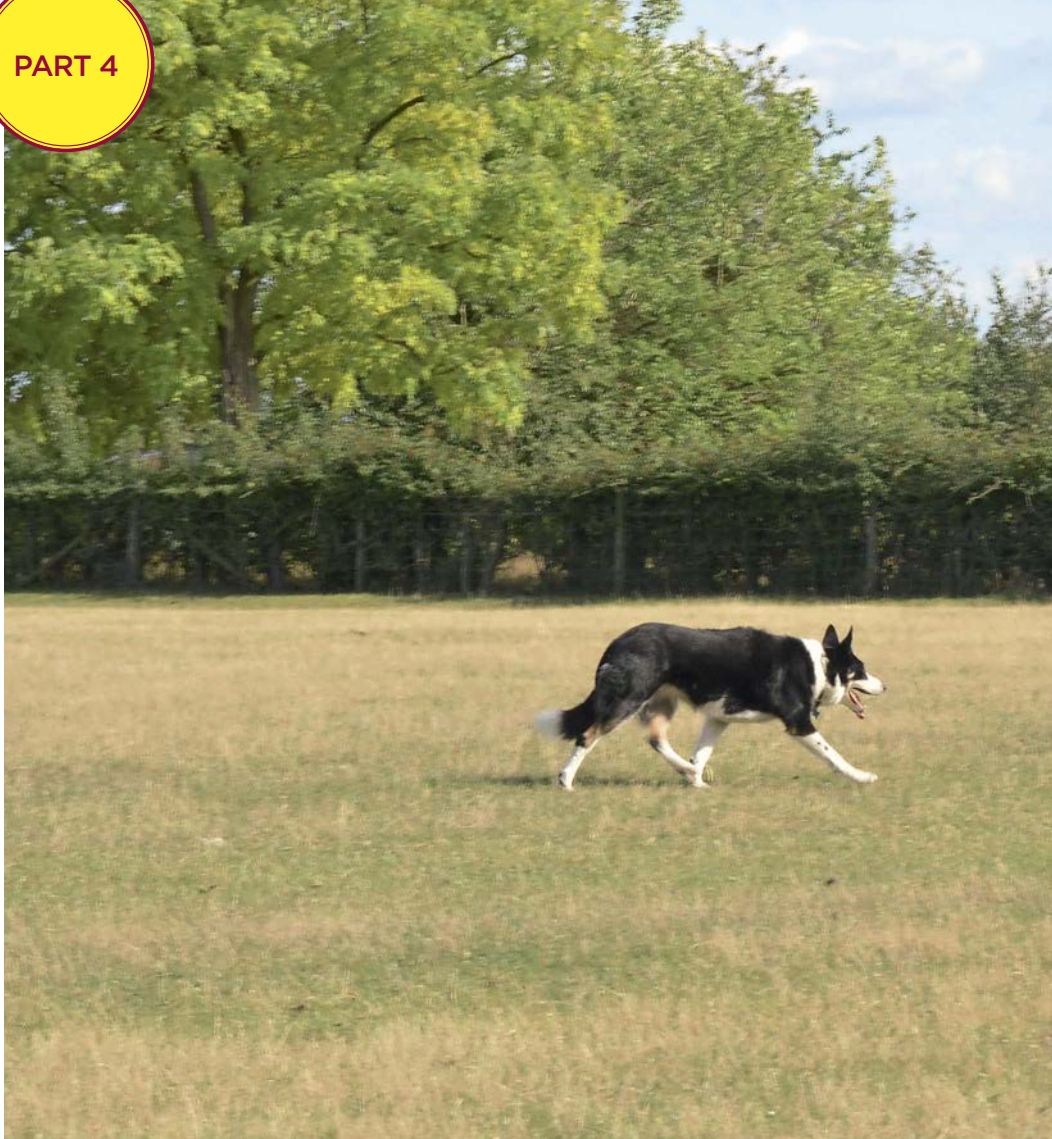
Over the years, I've been fortunate to have lessons from some top trainers. Some have been as part of a masterclass, others on occasional days run by one of the clubs of which I'm a member. I've learned a lot from these. However, I have two trainers who I use on a 'regular, as needs' basis. They are very different in their approach. One will invariably be in the field with me, the other will watch from the sidelines and give an appraisal and tips when I've finished. Both are very valuable, quite different, but completely

complementary. Even if you don't want to trial, it's always worthwhile going along to watch a few contests, both at club and higher level.

Sheepdog trials progress from cradle to nursery, novice and open. Some handlers will start their dogs at cradle, although there are not that many cradle trials hosted. Others may go straight into nursery. The main differences are the length and complexity of the course and the 'severity' of the judging.

The general idea is that your dog progresses through the levels until it reaches open. However, remember that at a trial the handler running an open dog may be new to that level, while the handler running a nursery dog earlier in the season may be a top international handler. The dogs on televised national or international trials and on *One Man and His Dog* will probably all be open level dogs.

There is a certain degree of flexibility as to which dogs can compete in the lower trials,





especially at club level. Check on the International Sheep Dog Society website (www.isds.org.uk) for more information.

Now you have a working dog, he will be a great companion and a help to you around the holding. He has probably learned to gather your chickens and ducks and possibly even the geese.

A while back I was at a training session with my older bitch. Sheep, goats, geese and horses were in the field. She happily took the sheep out from underneath the heavy horse, completely ignored the goats, but did let the geese join in on one drive.

HAPPY READING

To recap, patience, consistency, kindness, firmness and more patience are key in training. As

it hasn't been possible to cover everything in this series, now is the time to add a few books to your library. My favourites are:

- *A Way of Life* – H Glyn Jones (talks to Barbara C Collins). An excellent and informative book by a great trialist and trainer. The DVDs are good too.
- *The Natural Way* – Julie Simpson. A brilliant training book by an exceptional handler that should be a constant reference. Also a great DVD.
- *Herding Dogs* – Vergil S Holland. Well illustrated and easy to dip into.
- If you are new to keeping sheep also read *Little Bit O'Nonsense About Sheep* by Henry Brewis. It's very funny and very true.
- As a general read about the Border Collie, try anything written by Barbara Sykes. ■



All about Dudley Edmunds

Dudley Edmunds has been a hobby shepherd and sheepdog trainer for the last 15 years. A business consultant within wealth management by profession, he started his working life as a chemist and microbiologist in the wine trade. He runs a small mixed flock of sheep that he keeps purely for training sheepdogs

Western wonders

Queen Elizabeth I was a staunch advocate of Ryeland wool, while the last of the original Portlands to be sold at market 100 years ago were so poor that they barely received a bid. **Tim Tyne** looks at the fascinating past and present of both breeds

One of the most interesting things about the history of UK sheep breeds is the genetic linkage between various types that we today recognise as completely different breeds. What some purists may now look down upon as ‘crossbreeding’ is, in fact, the mechanism by which our traditional breeds evolved in the first place, so not something to be scorned at all. In last month’s feature I mentioned two breeds that had played important roles in the development of Poll Dorset and Dorset Horn sheep – the Portland and the Ryeland. Therefore it makes sense to take a closer look at those breeds now.

THE PORTLAND

The Portland breed draws its name from Portland Bill, a rocky outcrop off the Dorset coast. A similar kind of sheep would at one time have been found throughout the South West of England, but the type became restricted to Portland Bill as the mainland sheep were improved and developed by crossing with a related breed from Somerset.

Youatt, writing in 1837, states that: *“In the Isle of Portland, and formerly extending more than they do now into the neighbourhood of Weymouth, and about Wareham and Poole, there is a very small breed of sheep. They are horned, short in the carcase, and many of them black-muzzled, and having black and white wool intermixed on the lower part of the leg. When fat*

they do not weigh more than 8 or 10lbs per quarter, and the fleece varies from 1½ to 2lbs. The flesh is delicate, and somewhat sought after; but the breed is little cultivated, except in the localities which Nature has assigned to it.”

The modern Portland still exhibits many of the early characteristics of the tan faced pre-Roman breeds, although it is unique among the more primitive breeds in that it is able to breed at any time of year.

The last of the original population were removed from the island in 1920, to be sold in Dorchester market, but were in such poor condition that the auctioneer struggled to get a bid! By this time the breed had become more or less extinct. In 1974 the RBST stepped in to trace the last remaining animals, and a breeding programme was established to safeguard the future of the breed. Portland sheep were reintroduced to the island in 1977.

Portlands today are still a fairly small, unimproved type of sheep, with typical weights being 38-40kg for ewes and 55-60kg for adult rams. They’re a fine boned breed, with legs free from wool. Both the legs and the face are tan in colour, but often they have lighter areas around the eyes and muzzle. The face is free from wool, except sometimes a tuft is present on the forehead. Horns are present in both sexes, with those of the ram being heavily spiralled. Although the fleece of Portland



The lighthouse at Portland Bill – the place from which the Portland sheep draws its name

LEGEND OR TRUTH?

One popular story concerning the Portland sheep is that they appeared in Britain after swimming ashore from the wrecked ships of the Spanish Armada in the 16th century. The same story has also at times been claimed by the Jacob, Herdwick and Cheviot breeds! Personally, I don’t believe a word of it, particularly as I can’t find any reference to sheep of any type having been carried by the cargo ships that accompanied the fleet. However, it is likely that the Portland’s out-of-season lambing characteristic is the result of the introduction of a Mediterranean breed. Possibly this was as early as the Bronze Age, although other sources suggest that the introduction occurred during the 13th century, which seems more likely to me.



RYELAND TIPS AND TRICKS

Ryeland sheep (see page 8) are so heavily woolled about the face that their eyes are often obscured. As a result, it's easy for the shepherd to overlook an animal that's suffering from an eye infection. To avoid this scenario, some flock owners like to clip the wool away from around their sheep's eyes. It's noticeable that the strain of Ryeland sheep that has been developed in New Zealand, where shepherds have a much more 'hands off' approach, has far less wool on the face. However, smallholders in the UK seem to prefer the teddy bear look, even if it does entail a bit of extra work.

Many Ryeland sheep-keepers are enthusiastic competitors, and classes for both Ryeland and Coloured Ryeland sheep at local and regional shows are well supported. The breed society stipulates that sheep being shown must not have been shorn before 1 January (or 1 May in the case of breeding ewes). Usually, once the wool has grown back a bit, exhibitors clip the fleece into a shape that enhances the animal's chunky appearance.

Ryeland sheep are rather inclined to get overfat. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that for many novice breeders their first contact with the breed is at a show. Seeing animals in show condition gives the impression that that is how they should look at all times, with the result that a lot of inexperienced breeders overfeed their sheep. In actual fact, breeding stock should be kept in a fit and lively condition, not fat.

In common with all other dark fleeced breeds, it can be very difficult to spot the early signs of flystrike on a Coloured Ryeland, so shepherds must be particularly vigilant during the summer months.

If you're interested in starting a flock of Ryeland (or Coloured Ryeland) sheep, note that the breed society holds two annual sales: the first at Ludlow in late August and the second at Carlisle in late September.



Portland ewe and lamb. The modern Portland still exhibits many of the early characteristics of the tan faced pre-Roman breeds

sheep is a creamy white colour, the lambs (usually singles) are born with a gingery red coat, which gradually changes during the first few months of life.

The breed is still noted for the texture and flavour of its meat, which is something I can testify to as a friend of mine kept a flock of Portlands to supply his regular meat box customers, and I have eaten some memorable meals of Portland mutton. In fact, the breed is particularly well suited to the production of mutton as a specialist niche product, and would be an appropriate choice for any smallholder with poorer ▶

■ Sheep Breeds/Husbandry

with Tim Tyne

quality heathland-type grazing looking for a small and thrifty, yet versatile, breed of sheep.

RYELAND (AND COLOURED RYELAND)

The Ryeland is one of the oldest British sheep breeds. Its exact origins are unknown, but it is believed to have been derived from the Spanish Merino, with the addition of Cotswold and New Leicester bloodlines.

Mediaeval records show that abbeys in the Herefordshire area kept Ryeland flocks numbering several thousand ewes, with wool being exported to Flanders and Italy, where it commanded the highest price in Europe. It became the measure against which the quality of other wools was assessed. The breed further increased in popularity during the 16th century, helped by the fact that Queen Elizabeth I was a staunch advocate of Ryeland wool. Apparently a pair of stockings made from the wool of the breed pleased her so much that she would only wear clothing made from Ryeland wool thereafter!

It is believed that the Lord Chancellor's seat in the House of Lords, the Wool Sack, was originally stuffed with Ryeland fleeces in tribute to the breed's significant contribution to the wealth of the nation. However, by the beginning of the 20th century, the Ryeland was falling out of favour. A breed society was formed in 1903 to encourage and promote its breeding, but, despite its efforts, the breed was classified as rare by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) in 1974, when there were only 980 ewes in existence.

Since then the Ryeland has bounced back and there are now an estimated 11,000 registered breeding ewes. This success is almost entirely due to the popularity of smallholding, with the Ryeland being an ideal sheep for novice shepherds and small-scale farms. Indeed, membership of the Flock Book Society has more than tripled in the past 10 years, with the majority being smallholders and people who keep a small number of sheep as a hobby.

The Ryeland is a very docile breed, with the ability to



'It is believed that the Lord Chancellor's seat in the House of Lords, the Wool Sack, was originally stuffed with Ryeland fleeces in tribute to the breed's significant contribution to the wealth of the nation'

TOP:
A Ryeland ewe and lambs

BELOW:
A Coloured Ryeland ram

produce a high-quality butcher's lamb off grass alone. Admittedly they won't grow as fast as a modern breed, but a liveweight of around 45kg can be expected at six months of age. They also produce one of the finest fleeces of all the UK breeds, which are sought after by hand spinners.

In addition to the more traditional white-fleeced Ryelands, there is also a coloured version of the breed. It is believed by many that the coloured strain originated in the Mediaeval flocks of the abbeys, where a certain number of coloured fleeces would have been required for the production of the monks' dull brown habits. However, following the dissolution of the monasteries, any incidental coloured sheep occurring in commercial flocks would have been culled because they were not true to type, and the dark coloured fleeces were worthless.

This situation continued until the relatively recent rise in the popularity of smallholding and artisan crafts, and increasing

interest in coloured breeds.

At this point, some Ryeland sheep-keepers began to actively select for the coloured variant, partly because they wanted the interesting fleeces for hand spinning, and partly because, being non-commercial flock owners, they saw no need to cull these otherwise very attractive and productive animals.

Initially this didn't sit comfortably with the breed society, as the description of the breed quite clearly stated that it should be white fleeced, but, realising the increasing popularity of Coloured Ryelands, the Flock Book Society introduced a registration category for these animals and the society itself became all-encompassing. Now around 48% of all registration applications submitted to the society office are for coloured sheep.

However, it is important to note that the coloured gene is recessive, meaning that while matings between white fleeced Ryelands may well produce coloured offspring, it is impossible to breed white fleeced sheep by mating together two Coloured Ryeland parents. Therefore breeding for colour is a one-way street, and some care needs to be taken to ensure that the current enthusiasm for coloured sheep doesn't result in a dwindling gene pool of traditional (ie, white fleeced) Ryelands. To guard against this situation, the breed society actively discourages mixed colour matings. ■



PICTURES: JOANNE FISHER/SUSAN BRYDEN



COCCIDIOSIS OR 'cocci' is one of the most common and economically important diseases that can affect sheep. Caused by a single-celled protozoal parasite which infects the intestines, it can lead to diarrhoea, abdominal pain and reduced growth rates.

The disease is most common where lambs are intensively reared with high stocking rates, especially if housed, but outdoor lambs may also be affected. Higher stocking densities mean that the environment becomes heavily contaminated and disease is more easily spread between lambs. It is important that we understand the parasite lifecycle so that we can better work out how to control them. So what is the lifecycle of cocci?

- Some coccidia oocysts (eggs) are in the environment on all farms — ewes pass small numbers in their dung and some may survive on pasture through the winter. Oocysts are very resistant to cold, heat, drying and even many disinfectants.
- Lambs ingest the microscopic oocysts.
- Inside the lambs' gut, the cocci invades the cells lining the intestine and multiplies within these cells.
- The cocci bursts out of the cells in huge numbers, destroying the gut lining and causing the symptoms of disease we see.
- Three weeks after ingesting cocci, infected lambs shed millions of oocysts (often over 100,000 per gram of dung), leading to heavy environmental contamination and infection of more lambs.

COCCIDIA SPECIES

There are numerous different species of coccidia and some cause disease and some don't. The parasite is also 'host-specific', meaning that the coccidia that infect sheep will not infect cattle or poultry, for example, and vice versa. In sheep we are concerned with two pathogenic (disease-causing) species of coccidia, *Eimeria ovinoidalis* and *Eimeria crandallis*. Lambs will tolerate



A sheep-keeper's nightmare

Coccidiosis in lambs can lead to diarrhoea, abdominal pain and reduced growth rates. Vet **Bella Lewis** explains how to treat and prevent an outbreak

ABOVE: Coccidiosis is caused by a single-celled protozoal parasite which infects the intestines

low levels, but if there is a heavy burden of infection, or lambs are stressed, then disease may occur between three weeks and six months of age (animals older than six months have usually developed immunity).

Affected lambs look unthrifty, with loss of condition and reduced appetite. They commonly have diarrhoea, which can include mucus and blood, and they may strain to pass dung. Look out for mucky back ends as this is often the first sign of mild diarrhoea. In extreme cases, death may result.

If you suspect that cocci is a problem in your flock then contact your vet for an investigation and diagnosis. It is crucial to differentiate coccidiosis from other diseases, such as gut worms, that would require different treatment and control measures. Laboratory examination of dung samples, along with history and clinical

signs, should allow a diagnosis to be made.

TREATMENT

Treatment of an outbreak of coccidiosis involves giving specific medication, as well as moving lambs from the contaminated environment. This should be instigated as quickly as possible after signs are seen to minimise the detrimental effects on lamb growth. However, prevention is better than cure, so contact your vet to ensure that your flock health plan includes coccidiosis control measures. These may include cleaning and disinfection; adhering to recommended stocking densities; separating lambs into age groups; rotating pastures and moving feeders regularly. The strategic use of preventative in-feed medication or drenches can be useful, but the timing of administration is critical, so follow your vet's instructions. ■

Fact or fiction?

Newcomers to pig-keeping are often bombarded by 'words of wisdom' from those who have been in the game for a while. But, says **Liz Shankland**, not all tips should be taken as gospel

Everyone is glad of some friendly guidance when starting a new venture, and smallholders are no exception. When it comes to queries about keeping livestock on a small scale, beginners are far more likely to turn to a smallholder friend, neighbour, or social media than any other

source of information. Even in the case of medical matters, it's a sad fact of life that the first port of call for assistance is increasingly Dr Facebook rather than the veterinary practice.

While there is no doubt that friends with livestock – whether real-life ones or 'virtual' ones encountered online – can be

a tremendous support when you're a novice, but they can also be unwitting suppliers of misinformation, half-truths and potentially dangerous suggestions.

So let's take a look at some of the most common misconceptions trotted out regarding pig-keeping.



When it gets to the stage where animals are belly deep in mud and pens become no-go areas, the welfare implications can be serious

'Pigs won't mind living in mud'

In the summer, pigs love mud. In hot weather, a pig will struggle to control its body temperature, largely because it cannot sweat as we do. Cooling down by rolling around in a mud wallow is normally the best way pigs can keep cool, and covering the skin as much as possible in mud is the porcine version of slapping on copious amounts of suncream.

But fast forward to the wetter months of the year and mud can become a big problem. Anyone who has been keeping livestock through this year's spells of torrential rain will know that keeping up a good level of pig husbandry when pens have turned into a quagmire has been no easy task.

Most smallholders prefer to keep their pigs outdoors, but

when it gets to the stage where animals are belly deep in mud and pens become no-go areas for their keepers – or even the vet – the welfare implications can be serious. Normally straightforward tasks, like keeping arks topped up with bedding straw, can become impossible and feed quickly gets trampled and lost in the sludge. Heavily in-pig sows

or huge boars may run the risk of slipping and damaging limbs. Similarly, if pigs are already lame, lifting legs out of thick, deep mud won't help. Even worse than wet mud is frozen mud. If a sudden cold snap follows heavy rain, a paddock that has previously been churned up by pigs can become treacherous – for pigs and humans alike.



All about Liz Shankland

Liz Shankland has been a smallholder for 20 years, keeping prize-winning pigs, sheep, goats and poultry. A journalist and broadcaster by profession, she has written four books, including the *Haynes Smallholding*, *Pig* and *Sheep Manuals*. She is a qualified lecturer, running courses in smallholding and pig husbandry at Humble by Nature – Kate Humble's rural skills school in Monmouthshire – and she teaches at agricultural colleges in Wales



Misuse and abuse of drugs is occurring every day by the 'jab it just in case' brigade, and this could be helping to produce resistant animals

'Sick pig? Give it a jab — it won't do any harm'

Surely everyone knows that correctly diagnosing an illness is vital before attempting to administer any kind of veterinary medicine? So why do so many people reach for antibiotics whenever a pig appears under the weather — even before establishing whether an antibiotic is the appropriate treatment?

Serious concerns that livestock are developing antibiotic resistance (sometimes referred to as antimicrobial resistance — AMR) have led to high-profile campaigns to reduce over-use and abuse in farming. Considerable scientific research has shown that resistant bacteria from animals, humans and food can be shared, with potentially disastrous consequences, for livestock and humans alike. Routine use of antibiotics as a preventative measure in intensive farming is, thankfully, declining. However, misuse and abuse of these drugs is still occurring every day, by the 'jab it just in case' brigade, and it could be helping to produce resistant animals.

Also worrying is the common practice of sharing veterinary medication. *Don't do it.* There are regulations in place that restrict the sale of certain veterinary products. If the rules say that only a vet or a suitably-qualified person (SQP) in an agricultural supplies outlet or pet shop can prescribe or supply a particular treatment, that also means that you are not allowed to give something to your best mate to use on his or her livestock that was originally prescribed for yours.

PICTURES: LIZ SHANKLAND

'YOU CAN FEED THEM ANYTHING EXCEPT MEAT'

Yes, pigs are omnivores, just like humans, but that doesn't mean that they should be fed the same way. Older pig-keepers will be familiar with the once acceptable practice of feeding 'swill' (heat-treated food waste) to cut costs and recycle unwanted kitchen scraps. This is now illegal, but there are still misconceptions about what can and cannot be fed. Following the BSE crisis in the 1990s, feeding meat and bone meal to livestock was banned. Then, a few years later, following Foot and Mouth disease, all kitchen waste was banned, to eliminate any risk of accidental contamination by animal by-products.

Nothing that has been stored or prepared in a domestic or commercial kitchen — unless the premises are completely vegan — can be fed to pigs, even pets. Enforcing the ban has become increasingly important as the African Swine Fever (ASF) virus continues to sweep across Europe.

Confusion starts when smallholders hear of others cutting costs by supplementing diets

Protect your pigs from the risk of disease by feeding them the right food

✓ You can feed:

- Specially formulated commercial pig feed – this is the safest and easiest way to give your pigs a balanced diet
- Fruit and vegetables that have never entered a kitchen and which have not come into contact with material of animal origin. This includes those grown in domestic gardens

✗ Do not feed:

- Food scraps and catering waste from any restaurant or commercial kitchen (including vegan kitchens)
- Domestic kitchen waste
- Raw, partially cooked or fully cooked meat and fish, including shellfish
- Dog and cat food

Animal & Plant Health Agency #PigKeepers

with surplus fruit and veg from greengrocers, whey from cheese makers, bread and leftover dough from bakeries and supermarkets, or grain used in breweries or distilleries. Described as 'co-products', these can legally be fed, as long as both the supplier and user comply with the registration process and adhere to strict rules regarding the management of facilities, equipment, quality control, storage, transport and record keeping.

'There's no point paying for pedigree pigs'

Lots of smallholders slip into pig breeding almost by accident after becoming particularly attached to a favourite gilt which was originally going to be raised for meat. She might be descended from pedigree parents, so why not breed from her and help to support a rare breed?

There are several reasons why not. The breeder is the one who decides whether a pig is good enough to be registered as pedigree; if you bought her as a 'meat' weaner, it will probably be because he or she considered her unsuitable for breeding. That might be because of some minor physical deformity, such as a missing or an extra teat, or a slightly ingrowing toe.

It could be because of a cosmetic imperfection — a problem with markings or coat colour, the shape or position of the ears or tail — which means that the pig doesn't meet the appearance criteria set out in the official breed standard.

Either way, that pig won't have been registered as a pedigree pig, so she won't contribute to boosting the breed's numbers. Neither will she be able to produce registered pedigree offspring — even if mated to a registered boar. By breeding from her, you aren't helping the breed. In fact, by selling her offspring, you may be competing with a pedigree breeder who needs pig sales in order to keep on producing quality pedigree litters.

If you think you might want to start breeding at



some point, put your hand deeper into your pocket and pay the extra — probably twice as much — for registered gilts. If you see pigs advertised as 'pure', don't assume that is an alternative word for 'pedigree' or 'registered'.

Should you decide to buy registered stock, remember that the only way you can register any offspring as pedigree is by becoming a member of the British Pig Association — or, in the case of the British Lop and KuneKune breeds, by joining the relevant breed society.

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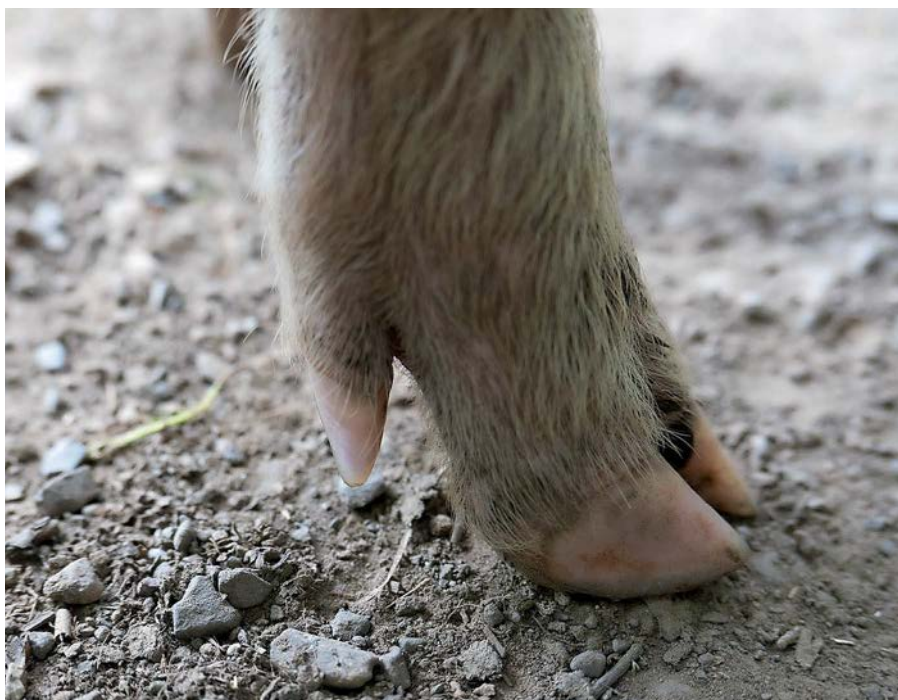
TAKING CARE of your pig's feet is essential. For a pig to be comfortable it needs to be able to walk soundly on all four legs. Many causes of lameness are due to problems in the foot, most of which can be prevented by ensuring that it is well balanced from a young age.

Pigs are even-toed ungulates. They have two cloven hooves called trotters on each foot (equivalent of the third and fourth digits on the human hand), and two smaller accessory dew claws above (digits two and five). Hooves are made of keratin, the same component that makes up horn, hair and fingernails. Like fingernails, hooves never stop growing. Their growth rate is affected by many factors, including diet, terrain, genetics and breed.

Foot health can be maintained by ensuring not only dry, clean bedding, but having an area of hardstanding where the toes can be naturally filed every day. Toes should be even in length, with a healthy heel pad. The pad is the area directly under the toe and is the part of the foot that sets down on the floor. It should be smooth, with no cracks or bruising. Standing on persistently wet or muddy ground can also lead to problems by overly softening the hoof.

Getting your pig used to having its feet handled from a young age can really help if he/she requires trimming in the future. Older pigs can have weak pasterns or ankles, meaning that they walk 'back' on their heel. This prevents the tip of the foot wearing down and they can grow excessively long. As the hoof grows longer it becomes a vicious cycle as the foot is pushed even further back. The longer the toe gets, the harder it is to correct by trimming. Coupled with obesity, this puts more pressure on the joints which can then cause painful arthritis.

Touching your pig's hooves often, and trying to keep it a positive experience, will reap rewards in the future. Clean the feet first if possible, then check out the nails and pads, looking



Time for a pedicure?

No foot, no pig! Vet **Liz Bennett** discusses trotter health

ABOVE: Foot health can be maintained by using only dry, clean bedding and also by having an area of hardstanding where the toes can be naturally filed every day

for cracks, splits, or overgrowth. Use your nose, too, as some infections can have an obvious odour. If your pig will lie down for a belly scratch, this is the perfect time. What you are doing is desensitizing your pig to their hooves being worked on. This can prevent your vet having to sedate, or even fully anaesthetise, your pig for foot treatment in the future.

Some pigs may require frequent trimming, as often as every couple of months. It is better to trim little and often than to let the toes become excessively long. You may even be able to trim the feet yourself with some horse hoof clippers.

Dietary deficiencies can also cause problems in the feet. Zinc, vitamin D, biotin and selenium are all linked to horn growth and health.

Common problems to look out for are:

1) Overgrown toes. Failure to trim regularly when needed can

cause excessively long toes which then put pressure on the tendons and joints.

2) Cracks. Uneven horn growth or trauma can lead to cracks in the claw. These trap dirt which can widen and lengthen the crack. It can also lead to infection and ultimately bush foot. Thoroughly cleaning, trimming if possible and applying a biotin cream, conditioning oil, or moisturiser will help.

3) Bush Foot. This is a septic laminitis, often occurring in the outer claw of the hind limb as these bear the most weight. Very painful, the foot will be hot and the swelling can extend up the leg. Take swift action to prevent a developing infection invading the joint and tendons. In most cases a swelling will be visible around the coronary band which may form an abscess and burst. Treatment often requires high dose antibiotics for long periods. ■

Stop thief!

There are many preventative measures you can take to cut the risk of farm machinery and livestock theft. If you are an animal owner, the RBST's **Tom Blunt** has some tips you can't afford to ignore

Whether you're a farm owner, tenant or just rent land, you are at risk of being exposed to rural crime. So how can you best prevent theft on your smallholding?

Living on the holding instantly increases security as there will always be someone around, which in itself helps to deter intruders. However, general security measures still need to be taken. Simple things, such as locking doors and windows, even if you're on the farm, is essential. Other preventative measures, such as having gravel drives, security lights, a dog, fencing and gates, can all help to reduce the risk of crime. Installing CCTV around farm buildings is good practice, and if you don't have an electricity supply to the buildings there are options, including installing solar panels to provide the power required for the system.

There are a number of items that are considered prime targets when it comes to rural crime. These include metal, tools, equipment, vehicles, fuel, machinery and livestock. Along with livestock, there are also an increasing number of cases of farm and working dogs being stolen, so it's important to be extra vigilant. Often stolen equipment is used for further criminal activities.

There are, however, a number of ways in which you can mark your equipment so that it can be identified as yours, and for machinery this is by using trackers. There are other options, though, and some choose to use paint/print their postcode on items (such as on the roof of cattle trailers), while forensic marking systems utilise a clear liquid that is visible under UV



ABOVE: Hedges form a natural barrier and are more difficult for thieves to break through than wire or wooden fencing

light. It is important to keep a list of serial numbers for equipment and also record identifying features and take pictures.

I have personal experience of gates and livestock feeding equipment being stolen and, as a result, I adjusted how my farm gates are hung to make it more difficult for them to be removed. The simple way to secure a gate is to have the top and bottom hinges facing opposite ways, which means that they then can't simply be lifted off their hinges. It does make it slightly more complicated when installing them, however, but the benefits are obvious.

LIVESTOCK THEFT

For the UK's farming sector the theft of livestock is one of

the costliest crimes. Livestock theft not only has financial implications, but also genetic consequences. Those who own pedigree livestock understand that their genetics are unique; they are often extremely valuable; and they cannot be replaced. Therefore it's essential to put measures in place to make it as difficult as possible for your animals to fall victim to livestock theft.

Usually, when linking rural crime with livestock, people think of theft, but unfortunately in 2019 there was a high level of illegal butchery in the field, predominately of sheep. In order to best protect your stock, the same security measures need to be implemented for this as for theft.

If you, like many, rent various pockets of land, you are likely to be more vulnerable to crime as, like mine, your land will probably be spread over an area without the added security of someone being located on site. In these circumstances, there are several things you can do to try to ensure that your livestock is as secure as possible.

The simplest and most basic means of protection is a secure gate, ideally metal, which cannot be lifted off its hinges, and with metal gate posts for added security, plus a padlock and chains – all of which will make it more difficult for access to be gained by trespassers.

Of course, illegal access can also be gained via fencing, with wire being cut, or wooden fencing destroyed. Additional measures, such as hedge planting, digging a trench, or building a mound, can all help. Planting a hedge is the most common approach, but it will take time before it becomes a substantial obstruction.

Reducing the number of access points is another positive step to take. This will involve blocking gateways by installing security barriers, or using concrete blocks, or silage bales.

IDENTIFICATION

The identification of your livestock is essential, not only from a legal point of view, but



ABOVE: Padlocks and chains can be effective deterrents

also from a security standpoint. All cattle should be double tagged. The primary tag must be a yellow plastic tag that is readable; this includes the herd mark and individual animal number. The secondary tag contains the same information, but it can be displayed in a different format. If an animal loses a tag, a replacement should be ordered and inserted as soon as possible. Be aware, though, that tags can be removed or replaced with different numbers. As an additional security measure, though, you can take photographs or videos of individual animals, clearly showing any obvious markings that could be used to help identify them if they are stolen.

Checking your livestock on a daily basis is essential and, ideally, you should do this at either end of the day, although this may not always be practical.

BELOW: Checking cattle regularly may put off those intent on stealing them

However, you may be able to enlist friends or neighbours to help. Regular checks can be a deterrent to potential thieves and, if you can vary the times of the checks, you will prevent criminals building a picture of a pattern.

Many smallholders move stock, so it's worth keeping a log of which individual animals are in which field/location. This is especially good practice for when others check the livestock on your behalf.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Your local community can be key in helping to tackle rural crime, with farmers, police and local residents working together. It's important to have a relationship with the properties that are close to your grazing, keeping them informed of what stock should be in the field and ensuring that they have your contact details in case they spot anything suspicious. Inform them of who will be checking on the livestock if it isn't you and in what vehicles.

There are several Farm Watch schemes and their ultimate aim is to reduce the opportunities for rural crime. Speaking to other farmers and livestock keepers can help to prevent others becoming a victim.

Often it is assumed that livestock theft is covered in the terms of your insurance, but it is essential to check your cover and ensure that it is adequate. There are various companies that offer insurance and it may be included in another policy you have, but ensure that you look into this in depth rather than trusting to luck.

If you are unfortunate enough to be a victim of rural crime, it is essential that you report it. Many cases go unreported for various reasons, such as frustration at a lack of action, but reporting a case is the only way a record will be made. Ultimately the stock may be taken to an illegal abattoir, but there have been cases in which animals have been found at auction and on other rural premises.

Preventing any livestock crime from occurring isn't easy, but there are measures you can take to reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim. ▶



PICTURES: GETTY

MEET THE BREED: BELTED GALLOWAY

With its distinctive white band encircling its mid-section, the Belted Galloway — or Beltie — is one of the UK's most iconic breeds. Its origins are unknown, but the most popular theory is that it resulted from crossing the ancient Galloway cattle, which originated in the old Scottish counties of Kirkcudbright and Wigtown in south west Scotland, with the Dutch Belted cow, the Lakenvelder, in the 17th and 18th centuries.

With its eye-catching appearance and renowned hardiness, the breed flourished in the UK. In terms of rarity, the Belted Galloway is one of the RBST Watchlist success stories. Once a breed considered to be under threat, the Belted Galloway has experienced an upsurge in popularity and the breed is now listed in the relatively safe haven of Watchlist Category 6 – other native breeds.

Handling

With the naturally-polled Beltie, you don't have the job of either disbudding — a process that is not particularly enjoyable for either animal or handler — or dealing with a horned animal. It is medium sized, slightly bigger than the traditional Hereford and, by nature, beefier than the Irish Moiled.

One thing you may hear about the Beltie is that it can be somewhat difficult to handle. In fact, it isn't an inherently aggressive breed, but if, as a smallholder, you're looking to purchase Belted Galloways for your holding, it's advisable to consider the environment they have been used to. The Beltie is predominantly a hill breed and many will be used to living in herds where they have minimal

human contact. Ironically, if they come from a herd where the majority of the management is undertaken from the back of a quad bike, you will find that they have no problem with such noisy machinery, but they may become skittish around someone on foot. On the whole, though, enthusiasts are quick to point out that the Beltie is generally a good-natured breed.

The Beltie does have one very distinct advantage if it is being grazed extensively on hills or moorland — its white belt is visible from quite a distance. In the days before railways, when cattle were driven from Galloway and Dumfries to cattle fairs in Norfolk, the drover always liked to have a Beltie in the bunch so that during dark days they could see where the cattle were heading to. Many of today's Beltie keepers also find it a time-saver to be able to spot and count their animals from a distance rather than having to trek over rough terrain to ensure that all are present and correct.

Input

The self-reliant Belted Galloway thrives best if they can live out and be finished on grass. As is specific to the Galloway family of breeds, the Beltie has a dual coat, which gives it additional



Belted Galloways are hardy, long lived and the females calve with ease

protection against rain, snow and wind. Their hardy digestive system works well on rough ground, converting to high quality beef.

As is the proviso with most of the hardy native breeds, living out throughout the winter is not a problem for the breed, but may not be best practice for your ground. You may need to have sheds available during the wettest months to prevent the damage that these robust animals can do to your ground. Other than that, this is an economical breed to keep, and it doesn't need any supplements.

Output

Belted Galloways are perfectly suited to turning rough hill pasture into fine quality meat. It is said that having the dual coat for winter warmth means

that the breed doesn't have the layer of backfat that most other breeds need, delivering a lean and succulent beef with good marbling throughout that is highly rated by chefs.

Breeding and birthing

Belted Galloway cows make particularly good mothers and are never known to reject their calves — in fact, they never require help and are best left to get on with calving by themselves. Belties are also a very productive breed, with cows being known to carry on producing calves into their 20s, thus reducing your stock replacement costs.

Health issues

Hardiness says it all — this is a robust breed with no inherent health issues, so this, matched with its natural mothering ability, will ensure that only routine vet visits and general health checks are required.

Getting started

The best starting point is The Belted Galloway Cattle Society website: www.beltedgalloways.co.uk. This offers a wealth of information on the breed, events such as herd visits, articles from breeders and details of stock for sale. The society also has a network of regional groups.



'Belties' thrive on living out and can be finished on grass



Tom Blunt

Tom Blunt has been a field officer for the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) for four years. He works with rare and native breeds of farm livestock. He keeps sheep and Red Poll cattle at his family's smallholding in North Buckinghamshire and has a degree in agri-business from Harper Adams University





Kaz Strycharczyk is a vet with Black Sheep Farm Health, a dedicated farm practice serving farmers located in Northumberland and beyond

CALVING PART 1



VET'S VIEW
with Kaz Strycharczyk



Deliver with confidence

Calving is usually straightforward, but it is worth being prepared and knowing what to expect, says vet **Kaz Strycharczyk**

UNLIKE SHEEP, cattle aren't seasonal breeders. Nonetheless, cattle farmers often time their calving to hit the spring for several reasons – and smallholders should consider doing the same.

WHY SPRING IS BEST

Although some dairies calve all year round and beef herds calve in the autumn to ensure a steady supply of milk or beef respectively, most calves in the UK are born in the spring.

Grass is then at its most nutritious – high in energy and protein. This is vital as the immediate pre-calving stage and lactation is the most metabolically demanding part of the cycle.

Likewise, as grass continues to grow well in the summer and autumn, there is plenty for the calf to tuck into once it starts to graze. Grass is the easiest and cheapest ration for cattle, as well as being environmentally sound.

Adult cattle are extremely resilient against low temperatures and inclement weather due to their thick coats and stomach fermentation (think of the rumen as a constantly running Aga).

Calves have neither of these advantages and

can quickly succumb to hypothermia. Cold, wet and windy is frequently a lethal combination to neonatal calves and lambs.

HOW TO PREPARE

Calving usually happens quickly and without drama. Nonetheless, there are several steps you can take to minimise stress and make for a smooth intervention if necessary.

If you are calving your cow inside, the pen should be cleaned and disinfected with an approved disinfectant. Ask your vet which one to use as some bugs are remarkably resilient. The pen should be bedded generously with dry straw. A dusting of hydrated lime –

about a tin can's worth per square metre – will help dry it out and kill bugs further.

Sort kit well in advance. Your vet will be able to help you, but it will typically include:

- A working torch with spare batteries;
- A cow halter;
- Ample lubricant – at least two bottles;
- A clean bucket or two;
- Arm-length gloves and regular hand gloves;
- Calf ropes – two ropes for the feet and a head rope;
- Strong iodine for dipping navels;
- Ear tags and applicator;
- Powdered colostrum;
- Sterilised bottles;
- A calf stomach tube;
- A bag or cupboard box to keep it all in.

BOVINE GESTATION

Bovine gestation is 283 days, so if you know when a cow was bulled, you can calculate expected calving dates. If she's been running with the bull, she should be in-calf to the first few cycles. If you have used artificial insemination, you can expect a calf 283 days following service, give or take a week either side.

You have a limited period to register the calf with the

British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS). The consequences if you don't are serious, including not being able to move the animal between holdings, and the meat cannot enter the human food chain.

STAGES OF LABOUR

As in sheep, there are several signs in cows that suggest calving is imminent within the next 12-24 hours. These include:

- Separation from the rest of the herd;
- Lack of appetite;
- Mucus or slime at the vulva;
- Signs of restlessness or discomfort, such as tail swishing;
- Anatomical changes due to relaxation of ligaments known as 'springing', swelling of the vulva and a dipping between the tail head and pin bones;
- Udder development or 'bagging up'.

These signs vary and can be less obvious in fat cows. Check for them as often as possible, but quietly so as not to disturb the cow. ■

NEXT TIME: When things don't go to plan.

Stage of labour/typical duration	Processes and signs	Notes
1: Preparation 2-8 hours	• Cervix dilates • Signs of imminent calving (see above) • Fetus enters birth canal	• Heifers typically take longer • Excessive disturbance can disrupt labour at this point • Some types of calving issues, eg, breech birth or uterine torsion can present as persistent stage 1
2: Expulsion of calf 30 minutes-2 hours	• Water bag appears at the vulva • Visible abdominal contractions every 2-3 minutes • Ends once calf delivered	• Cows that become exhausted, or with malpresented calves, will get stuck in stage 2
3: Expulsion of placenta Up to 8 hours	• Placenta detaches from uterine wall and is expelled	• Placenta or 'fetal membranes' 'cleansing' is more likely to be retained if the cow has had to be assisted during calving • Call your vet for advice if the cleansing is retained for >24 hours



ASK THE VET

Ben South BVetMed MRCVS from The Chicken Vet



CLIPPING THE WINGS OF FLIGHTY BIRDS WILL HELP TO PREVENT ESCAPEES



1. Fan out one of your bird's wings to identify the feathers that need trimming



2. Boldly cut in a straight line out towards the tip of the wing

I have four large hens that have been laying well all winter. They are starting to escape out of their pen and range far and wide. Can you explain how I clip their wing feathers to limit their flying capabilities?

BEN SOUTH SAYS: As is often the case, some backyard hens can get themselves into mischief or danger by escaping the confines of their range or pen. As you have mentioned, a common way to resolve the problem of 'flighty' birds is to remove some

feathers from the wing. It is important to understand that the aim of wing clipping is to make the bird unbalanced, so only clipping the feathers on one wing is necessary. The process, if performed correctly is painless to the bird, although it may cause her to be slightly agitated for a short period afterwards.

It is easier to perform this task with two people, one person to hold the hen while the other clips the feathers. Once you have caught your bird, hold her with her weight on your forearm and her legs between your

fingers. Gently fan out one of her wings and identify the feathers that need trimming from underneath. You are aiming to trim the 10 large primary flight feathers just in front of the flight coverts (see above).

Once identified, take a large, sharp pair of scissors or secateurs and boldly cut in a straight line out towards the tip of the wing. You must ensure that you don't cut through the flight coverts or you may cause severe injury. Once completed, gently place the hen on the floor to gather herself before returning her to the flock.

CHICKENS BENEFIT FROM A CONSISTENT AND BALANCED DIET

I have bought some new chickens and I'm a first-time keeper. What should I be feeding them? There seem to be so many options.

BEN SOUTH SAYS: It is easy to become overwhelmed with the array of nutritional options for poultry and even just visiting your nearest farm stores can cause confusion. However, chickens are simple to feed and will lay well on an uncomplicated diet. One thing to point out, which is absolutely necessary to understand, is that by law you mustn't feed your birds anything that has come from the kitchen, raw or cooked, as stated by

Defra. The only exception is if the household is vegan and there is no risk of animal by-product contamination.

Ultimately, your chickens don't need extra titbits. Often these can cause gut disturbances that have a negative impact on your birds' health. My advice to any chicken-keeper is to pick a commercial layers' pellet or mash that is affordable and stick to it. Chickens don't take kindly to regular changes in diet. Commercial feeds are carefully formulated by nutritionists at feed mills to ensure that a full spectrum of vitamins, minerals, fats and proteins are present for your laying birds so that they maintain a healthy weight and

lay efficiently. Mash or pellet should be made available ad-lib.

As well as feed, it's important to offer your hens grit. The gizzard is a muscular organ that is integral to your chicken's ability to process cereals and fibre in her diet. It acts like a miller's stone and crushes food particles to around 0.5-1mm before it moves on through the bird's digestive tract. In order to facilitate the grinding in this organ, the birds will pick up little stones and grit. I would advise buying a commercial poultry grit with added oyster shell. This additional calcium source will ensure that there is enough available for eggshell development without



Chickens will lay well on an uncomplicated diet

compromising your bird's bone health. Products such as mealworms or whole wheat can be given as treats once or twice a fortnight. If given too often, birds will be reluctant to feed on the layer concentrate, which could lead to nutritional complications.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO/KNEVILLE/NICK BEER

ABOUT... BEN SOUTH

Ben studied veterinary medicine at the Royal Veterinary College, London. Poultry health became his primary focus and in 2016 he joined the St David's Poultry Team. He has a lead veterinary role in its subsidiary company, The Chicken Vet. www.chickenvet.co.uk

COCKEREL CASTRATION ISN'T A STRAIGHTFORWARD PROCEDURE

I have hatched out several chicks and I now have five males. Can I have them castrated to avoid them fighting, crowing and disturbing the neighbours?

BEN SOUTH SAYS: There is a lot of conflicting information available on the laws around the castration of cockerels. Historically, cockerels were castrated chemically for the commercial meat market to produce a capon. Due to decades of selective breeding, the meat birds in today's market are very different and grow well regardless of gender. Capon birds are still enjoyed and grown in mainland Europe. Chemical castration or 'caponisation' is illegal in the UK poultry meat market due to the risk of chemical substances entering the human food chain.

The use of hormones to suppress testosterone and reduce testicle size is widely employed throughout the UK in both domestic dogs and ferrets. These implants last around eight to 12 weeks in dogs and up to four years in ferrets. They can be used successfully in female birds to control and stop laying if egg peritonitis is present.

If your cockerel isn't destined for human consumption, then a commercially available implant may be worth a try. Advice from your vet is crucial as the placement of such implants is important; they don't come cheap and will be used 'off licence'. Surgical removal of the testicles in cockerels is possible, but the risk of complications is high due to the anatomical location of the testis. They are located deep within the bird's abdominal cavity and sit close to the spine and major blood vessels supplying the kidneys. Specialist avian surgeons can perform surgical castration by endoscopy, but the procedure can take time and costs can escalate. Opinions are divided as to whether surgical castration should be allowed as an elective procedure due to the potential risks and location of the testicles. Unfortunately, as with many nuisance cockerels, often euthanasia is deemed to be the best option.



Chemical castration may be an option in certain cases

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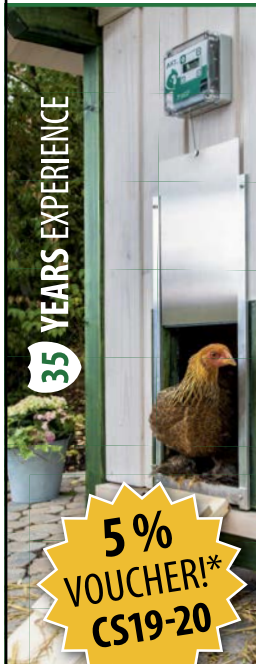
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Hatching a plan

Breeding chicks is awesome, but **Andy Cawthray** urges a responsible approach

Hatching chicks via a broody or an incubator is fascinating. I find it an amazing process to observe, both as a scientist and a chicken-keeper. In truth, I've lost count of the number of times I've had a hatch, except that I've recorded details about every sitting of eggs I have set and the outcomes.

Over the years I've been a strong advocate of hatching chicks and engaging in the whole process from egg to fully grown adult. It's a livestock experience that is accessible to anyone with a small amount of garden – if well planned. I've always coupled it with driving home the point about planning. Rearing livestock – no matter

whether it's chickens, ducks, pigs, or cows – needs planning and recognition that you have a responsibility for all of the offspring.

So, obvious as it may seem, before you embark on hatching yourself a nice little flock of layers, be aware of one key element; on average 50% of what you hatch will be male. It sounds logical, yet it surprises me year in, year out just how many people claim to be aware of that basic fact but hatch anyway, with absolutely no idea or plan to deal with the inevitable surplus of males.

Now you may be ahead of me and have noticed gadgets that proclaim to be able to sex an egg. You may even have read articles

or have seen nature programmes about the Australian brush turkey and the way these birds have the ability to manipulate the sex of the chicks that hatch through the temperature control of their incubation mound in a manner similar to reptiles. Stop! These aren't what they seem. To me, egg sexing devices are something like flipping a coin, and the turkey doesn't use reptilian temperature-dependant sex determination (TSD). Instead it works on temperature-dependant embryo mortality. This means that the heat of the mound can define, to an extent, which sex of chick hatches and which dies in the shell. I guess there may well be a similar technique that could be

ABOVE:

Unless you have an unlimited amount of land and housing to accommodate male chicks, you are likely either to need to cull out the spare males or grow them on for the table

‘Before you embark on hatching yourself a nice little flock of layers, be aware of one key element; on average 50% of what you hatch will be male’

applied to artificial incubation in chicken eggs, but I’ve not seen any evidence of one as yet that could be applied successfully in a backyard situation.

So, going back to the inevitable cockerels, what is your plan? Rehoming or selling on is possible, but unless you have a stunning bloodline of a particular breed, then those options are extremely limited. Selling them on accompanied by pullets is an option, but unless you have significantly more pullets than cockerels, you could end up selling stock you wanted to keep. The bottom line is that until the birds hatch, you have no idea what the ratio of male to female will be.

The reality is that unless you have an unlimited amount of land and housing to

accommodate the extra chaps, you are likely either to need to cull out the spare males or grow them on for the table. Planning what to do is part of your responsibility when it comes to hatching and rearing chicks, just as it is for rearing any livestock.

Ringling up your nearest breeder and asking them to take on your unwanted birds is likely to be met with a polite “no thank you”. Taking them to an animal rescue centre is unwise. Apart from the fact that most aren’t geared up for poultry and could struggle to accommodate them, you need to take responsibility and not absolve yourself of it.

So plan before you hatch, and remember that you have a duty in terms of the welfare and future of every chick that appears. ■

ASK ANDY

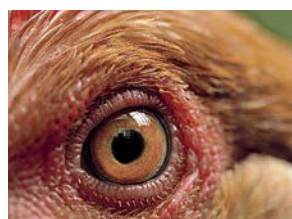
Give space to avoid confrontation

Is it true that the more space you give chickens, the better it is for them?

ANDY SAYS: Putting aside the concept of caged-rearing systems versus free-range and breed sizes, it is an interesting point. How much space would a chicken choose if given the choice? Assuming that appropriate space is provided for nesting and roosting, then the space a chicken would elect to use for ranging appears to be dependent on its position within the flock. Experiments using a peck stimulus that adjusts the size of the ranging area have

shown dominant birds within a flock prefer smaller spaces. This is because it gives them easier access to resources and easier management in keeping lower-ranked birds away from those resources. The subordinates, however, have a preference for a larger space for probably the opposite reason. It gives them more opportunity to access resources without drawing the attention of the dominant bird and more space to avoid interactions. This does seem to compare well with the behaviours in backyard flocks, particularly when bringing new birds into the flock. A large space with more places to hide

and more than one feeder and drinker will help to ensure that new birds settle quicker and it will limit aggressive encounters with the established flock members.



The benefit of near all-round vision
My birds seem to spot me no matter where I approach from. What is their field of vision?

ANDY SAYS: Chickens’ eyes are positioned on the sides of their heads, so they have almost all-round sight, making them efficient at spotting potential predators. It’s not completely all-round, though, as there is a blind spot toward the back of the head, but if you consider full spherical vision is 360 degrees, then a chicken can see forward with both eyes (binocular vision) for about 26 degrees. The left and right eyes can operate in a

monocular fashion to account for a further 300 degrees, leaving only 34 degrees of a blind spot, which provides a total field of vision of 326 degrees. That’s pretty good when compared to the human at 180 degrees, and pretty difficult for you if you’re trying to catch them unawares!

Make no bones about it, insufficient calcium is serious
I understand the need for calcium in the diet of a chicken in order to replace that lost during egg production. Is it true that if the calcium levels are too low in a laying hen she can get rickets?

ANDY SAYS: A diet with insufficient calcium can result in calcium being drawn from the cortical bone of the skeleton. This is the outer part of most bones and the element that provides support to the mass of the bird. Drawing down on this source of calcium without replacing it through diet can result in osteoporosis, fractures and possibly even rickets, also known as ‘caged layer fatigue’, and it would need vet treatment.





In the buff

In his series on birds that breed true, **Grant Brereton** looks at the various buff varieties, one of which has a very special royal connection

There are many breeds of poultry that have a buff version, and by far the most popular of these is the Buff Orpington. The term buff describes fowl that are generally the same shade of light orange all over, but in terms of descriptive accuracy, the word buff is perhaps a little loose. Buff as a feather colour ranges from a light blonde, as seen in the Buff Plymouth Rock, to a shade that borders on ginger, as seen in some strains of Buff Orpington.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Buff plumage in poultry, particularly soft-feathered breeds, is attributed largely to a common ancestor that eventually became the large fowl breed we know today as the Cochin. Early Cochins were imported to British shores in

the 1840s from the Far East province of Shanghai in China and were referred to here as Shangaes. However, in stark contrast to what they would later evolve into (profusely feathered, feather-legged Cochins), the Shangaes were quite tall specimens with sparse leg feathering and black tails.

As well as undergoing their own transformation into Buff Cochins, Shangaes were readily crossed with farmyard fowl to form the basis of other breeds.

One such variety became the Lincolnshire Buff, which was a popular fowl in the Lincolnshire area in the late 1800s and supplied the London poultry markets with plucked meat. With Old English Game and Dorking also in the Lincolnshire Buff's ancestry, the result was a hardy and ▶

WHAT IS BREEDING TRUE?

If a variety of pure breed poultry breeds 'true' then it produces offspring consistent with its own features, ranging from comb right through to plumage colour/pattern, in male and female respectively. In basic terms, the sons should all look very similar to their father, and the daughters very similar to their mother. And you would be forgiven for thinking that this is a prerequisite of being bestowed the honourable title of 'pure breed', but this isn't necessarily the case. Some colour options across the different chicken varieties won't breed true, which is also the case for certain physical features we find in our chickens in the exhibition world; an example being really short legs. Sometimes nature won't allow certain factors to 'lock in' because it will be to the detriment of survival. Many newcomers to the hobby (me included) start by purchasing a breeding pair or trio from market, then are soon perplexed by the variability witnessed in the offspring, often with only half of them looking like their parents. In this series, I aim to examine closely a cross-section of available pure breeds and mutations, to determine what you can expect from breeding together fowl you believe will 'breed true'.

ABOVE:
Buff Plymouth
Rock bantams

vigorous meat bird that laid well, even into winter. The Dorking ancestor provided qualities such as five toes and white flesh/skin, and the Game or local fowls contributed towards both meat qualities and vigour. However, technically the Lincolnshire Buffs would be regarded as 'black-tailed buffs' rather than buffs per se; perhaps quite obviously because of the black pigment found in their tail feathers.

Buff Cochins were produced as far back as 1849 by Alfred Sturgeon, who supplied many of the export ships to China. He had a business by the Thames in Grays in Essex, and a farm at nearby South Ockendon. His clerk was instructed to buy anything of interest that came in from the ships, and that included livestock. He was fairly ambitious in his vision of a loose-feathered and completely buff coloured fowl that would also have very feathery legs.

Shanghaes of the time were quite a mishmash in terms of colour, but Alfred Sturgeon began a long breeding journey using specific groups of birds that were deemed to have the most favourable buff colour. He employed judicious selection processes to produce fowls that resembled what we know and love today as Buff Cochins.

Sadly, the rise of the Buff Orpington from creator William Cook in the 1920s meant that the earlier mentioned Lincolnshire Buffs would fall out of favour, and indeed they faded away for 60 years until the 1980s when they were reintroduced through the hard work of Lincolnshire Agricultural College and local breeders. They were officially standardised in 1997 by the



ABOVE:
A Buff Pekin male

Poultry Club of Great Britain and now have their own thriving breed club.

A TRUE ROYAL CHAMPION

Regarded by the late Will Burdett, one of the most famous poultry keepers of our time, as the 'one true buff', it is perhaps unsurprising that the buff Orpington became and remains so popular, with its abundance of feather and contrasting white legs, together with a short red comb and wattles, even piquing the interest of royalty.

In 1977, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother was gifted a trio of large Buff Orpingtons at Sandringham. It was a breed she had cherished since childhood. They were cared for by royal poultry keeper Will Burdett at his home in Thirsk, Yorkshire.

The royal Orpingtons had success at many shows, with The Queen Mother conversant with the finer points of the breed, and each win gratefully acknowledged by Clarence House. The Queen Mother was also patron of the Buff Orpington Club, as well as the Poultry Club of Great Britain for many years.

VARIABILITY OF BUFF

Not only does the buff plumage vary greatly between breeds, it can often display a range of variation between individual specimens of the same breed, due largely to the strain in

question and the individual's interpretation of the word buff (even though breed standards should clarify any uncertainty).

The blondest buffs can be found in the Plymouth Rock breed (particularly the bantams), but many Orpingtons and Wyandottes can be just as light, although Orpingtons do tend towards a darker butterscotch type colour which some describe as strawberry blonde. Buff is still seen in Cochins, but in breeds like Pekins and Leghorns it can struggle for interested keepers.

Buffs are also available in other breeds, such as Faverolles and Minorcas, but living examples are rare. In truth, even the ever-popular Buff Orpington could do with a few more keepers and exhibitors at shows today, although the bantam version has seen a recent resurgence of interest.

DO THEY BREED TRUE?

Generally, the buff colour does breed true, but anomalies in colour can occur. Genetically, buff is a blend of many factors that aren't fully understood by geneticists. It isn't unusual to experience buffs that show a bit of black in the tail feathers, or patchiness in areas that cannot be attributed to sun-bleaching. And on that subject, the best of buff birds will fade in the sun, which is something to keep in mind if they are intended for the show ring in the future. ■

BELOW:
Adolescent
Buff Orpington
bantams



HOW TO MAKE...

An activity centre

Life is more fun for chickens – especially through the dark and often dismal winter months – when they are provided with enrichment, and an activity centre is easy to create, says DIY expert **David Marek**



A simple activity centre can be placed outdoors, or inside during bad weather

Throughout the year, but particularly in winter, chickens may need extra enrichment if they're inside a large shed or barn, or the natural enrichment

of bushes and plants have died back for the season.

This month I'm going to guide you through the process of creating a simple activity centre for your chickens that can be

placed inside or outside. Specific measurements are provided, but the design can easily be adapted to suit the available space and the number of chickens in your flock.

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

MATERIALS REQUIRED

For the end frames

4.2m (14ft) of 50x50mm (2x2in) pressure-treated timber.

For the horizontal bars

6m (20ft) of 50x50mm (2x2in) pressure-treated timber.

For the perch

1m (3.3ft) of 25x50mm (1x2in) pressure-treated timber.

For the ramps

4m (13ft) of 25x150mm (1x6in) pressure-treated timber.

For the ramp treads

3.2m (10.5ft) of 25x50mm (1x2in) pressure-treated timber.

For the hanging basket brackets

1m (3.3ft) of 50x50mm (2x2in) pressure-treated timber.



Plus:

Two wire-framed hanging baskets
Two galvanised hooks
Exterior screws

TOOLS REQUIRED

Saw (a mitre saw is ideal, although a hand saw will work too), drill, driver, pencil, tape measure, square, clamps, sander or sandpaper.

METHOD



1. Start with two wire-framed hanging baskets. These will be used to hold veg and other treats for the chickens. They are inexpensive and widely available from garden centres and online and the activity centre will have

these hanging from a suitable height so that the birds can easily access them.



2. Make two triangular end sections that will support the bars. Each section consists of three pieces of 50x50mm (2x2in) timber cut at 30 degrees. The triangular ends

will have an external length of 680mm (27in) and an internal length of 630mm (25in). This step is easily completed with a powered mitre saw, but a hand saw with a 30-degree cut would also do the job.



3. Construct two end sections, making the cuts for one of these

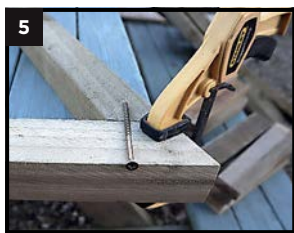
first and then use this as a template to mark the timber to make cutting the second end section easier.



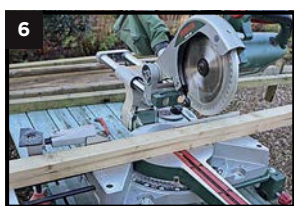
4. The completed end sections should look as above, with the top of the triangle being flat rather than pointed as this will support a perch on top.

Practical/Poultry DIY projects

with David Marek



5. Fix the timber together to form the two triangles using two 80mm (3in) exterior screws on each join and clamp the pieces together beforehand to ensure a tight fit.



6. The activity centre will have three horizontal bars on either side, and you make these from 50x50mm (2x2in) timber with rounded over edges that are cut to 1m (3.3ft). Again, a powered mitre saw makes quick work of this step, but a hand saw could also be used.



7. Mark the edges of the end supports at 100mm (4in), 350mm (14in) and 600mm (24in) which will guide the placement of the horizontal bars. Mark the horizontal bars themselves 150mm (6in) from the edges to give an overhang. Starting with the bottom bar, use two exterior 80mm (3in) screws per join to fix the horizontal bar to the end supports.



8. Carry on with this method to fix the middle and upper bars to the end supports, ensuring that the horizontal bars are fixed at 90 degrees to the end supports. I deliberately choose not to make these horizontal bars perches by setting them onto the face of the end supports so that the bars are effectively at 30 degrees. If you wanted to have these as perches, fix them to the inside of the end supports and set the bars so that the top edge is flat rather than angled.



9. Make a top perch to the activity centre. This is a piece of 1m (3.3ft) 25x50mm (1x2in) timber that is screwed to the end supports with two 80mm (3in) exterior screws at each joining point. Cut the timber for the perch, but don't fit it just yet.



10. For increased interest, four ramps are added that can be placed at various heights on the activity centre. Cut four 1m lengths of 25x150mm (1x6in) pressure-treated timber using a mitre saw or hand saw.



11. For the lip and treads of the ramps, cut 16 pieces of 25x50mm (1x2in) timber. Each ramp will have a lip that will hook over the horizontal bars and three treads. A mitre saw is ideal for this step as a 200mm (8in) stop block can be set up for these repeated cuts, meaning that you only need to measure the first piece and then you can quickly cut the rest.



12. Fix the lip to the end of each ramp, with the ramp centred on the lip using two 50mm (2in) external screws.



13. Mark the ramp at 300mm (12in), 600mm (24in) and 900mm (36in) and then fix the three treads to each ramp at these positions. Centre the ramp on each tread using two 50mm (2in) external screws.



14. The hanging baskets need a bracket positioned higher than the perch, so make brackets for either side that will support the baskets. Begin by cutting two 200mm

(8in) lengths of 50x50mm (2x2in) timber with 30-degree angled ends so that the pieces look like a parallelogram.



15. Fix the angled pieces to the underside of the perch ends using two 80mm (3in) external screws at each joint. Turn the perch the right way round and fix this to the end supports using two 80mm (3in) exterior screws at each joining point.



16. Cut two 300mm (12in) lengths of 50x50mm (2x2in) timber and fix a galvanised hook to the end of each piece using 50mm (2in) exterior screws.



17. Turn the timber around and fix these to the angled pieces using two 80mm (3in) external screws at each joint.



18. The completed activity centre. Place the ramps at varying heights to add interest and fill the hanging baskets with healthy leafy treats for your chickens! ■



David Marek lives in Cheshire with his wife, Sarah, and a large flock of adopted ex-battery hens whose tales are told on their website (www.undermywing.org.uk) and social media channels. David and Sarah are volunteers for the British Hen Welfare Trust and they co-ordinate the Cheshire re-homings

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Remedies for ewe

Prepare your lambing toolkit with the likes of the 'corpse reviver' and other traditional medicines. Vet **Nancy Morris**, who runs a referral practice in homeopathy near Worcester, looks at how homeopathic remedies may be able to help expectant mums and new arrivals

In addition to the usual preparations for lambing, having a homeopathic toolkit ready can be a valuable extra. You can administer the remedies yourself, and, if you need assistance, you can give a remedy while waiting for the vet to arrive.

Remedies are easy to administer to ewes and lambs. The easiest way is by spray, using either a pharmacy-prepared, ready-to-use aerosol, or by dissolving a tablet of remedy in a spray bottle of water, such as a small garden spray.

Spray the remedy a few times into the mouth. Remember that remedies are absorbed through the lining of the mouth; you are not aiming for the stomach. Spraying into the mouth is more effective than just onto the muzzle. A plastic tool tray with a handle is ideal to store the remedies ready for use. If you can get one with a lid, so much the better. Label each remedy clearly in large letters, also with potency, as they all look the same.

Keep your homeopathic kit stored well away from your usual lambing kit. Store in a cool, dark place, as sunlight destroys their action, so avoid windowsills, or exposing to strong daylight. Even more vital is to keep it well away from any strong smells, such as antiseptics and iodine, which will render the remedies useless. Your remedies are potent, so correct storage of them is key. Owners sometimes store remedies incorrectly when they haven't been made fully aware of the importance of this issue when they bought them.

Make room for a notebook – preferably waterproof – and pen to record what remedies you use,



when and why, as well as the response. This way you will fine-tune your use of remedies, gain enormously worthwhile experience, and boost your confidence going forward.

TRAUMA BUSTERS

Caulophyllum 30C is a good remedy to use in ringwomb, when the cervix fails to dilate properly, preventing the lamb from being born. It relaxes the tissues to help stretch the birth canal. You may need to call the vet, but giving a dose of caulophyllum will make his/her work easier. It is prepared from a plant called blue cohosh, known as squaw root, which Native American women used to chew on to aid and ease labour.

Arnica is a must for any lambing kit, its indication being trauma and bruising after a hard labour. Give 30C or 200C every 10 minutes for a few doses, then give a few more every hour until the ewe is more comfortable and her shock has eased. Again, record how many doses you give – every case is different – but you will soon be aware of the optimal for each case.

Bellis perennis is a flower in the same family as arnica and is

reputed to be more effective for trauma of the pelvic organs and abdominal walls. Use as arnica.

Hypericum 30C should be added to either arnica or bellis for any ewe that shows weakness or paralysis of the back end after lambing, especially after an assisted birth. It helps greatly with pain, as well as weakness.

HELP FOR NEW ARRIVALS

Arnica 30C or 200C will help a lamb with a swollen head, where the head was born with the legs still back, making it swollen and congested. Give a few doses 10 minutes apart, as well as nursing it well to help it suckle.

If a lamb is weak after a long birth, looking blue around the mouth, cold and not breathing properly, try Carbo veg 30C or 200C. It has earned its nickname of 'the corpse reviver'. One dose may be enough, but, if not, repeat after 10 minutes.

Of course, in all the above situations, good husbandry and nursing are vital. Homeopathic medicine is no more a substitute for good management than conventional medicine.

Good luck for your 2020 lambing season. As always, don't hesitate to call your vet if needed. ■

ABOVE: Remedies are easy to administer to ewes and lambs and the easiest way is by spray in the mouth

ALL ABOUT... HOMEOPATHIC REMEDIES

Any substance, including poisonous plants, can be potentised in a homeopathic pharmacy into a homeopathic remedy – this should only be done by trained personnel and not tried at home. It is prepared in a variety of potencies, each of which is appropriate for different patients.

Following the principles of physics, once a remedy is above potency 12C, there is no material substance in the remedy, only the energy of the remedy. Therefore, despite the poisonous nature of the original substance, there is no risk of administering poisonous material by using a remedy at 30C potency or higher.

Any trained homeopath treating patients has firstly to find the simillimum, ie, the remedy that best matches the symptoms. They then have to assess the energy of each individual case and match it to the correct potency.

For more information on homeopathy and to find a homeopathic vet, visit the British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons, www.bahvs.com

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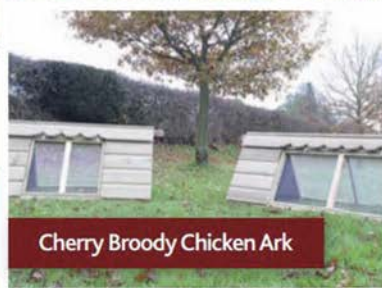


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For peat's sake, think outside the bog

Do your bit to save the planet – stop using peat. **Kim Stoddart** looks at the alternatives and explains how easy it is to make your own compost

There are a few campaigns in 2020 that highlight why continued use of peat-based composts is a bad idea (See Special News Report, main magazine, page 12). It's about time, as we have degraded or decimated nearly 95% of peatland in the UK. These natural habitats are excellent at storing carbon; they are the most efficient land-based store that exists. So when a peat bog is dug up for use as compost, the carbon dioxide it had been storing diligently is released into the atmosphere. When you consider all the challenges we face with climate change right now, it's more imperative than ever that we wean ourselves off peat-based products – and urgently at that.

Also not using peat is so easy. I've never used it, apart from the time I bought a bag to try and understand why people seem so set on using it. Frankly, I was massively unimpressed. There are so many great peat-free varieties of compost on the market with good water-retention properties that make the use of this precious, natural material simply indefensible.



LEFT: Avoiding peat when growing is incredibly easy

BELOW: Melcourt SylvaGrow, a popular peat-free compost option



SWITCHING OVER

Avoiding peat happens to be one of the best and easiest steps you can take right now in the face of climate change concerns. Garden compost can be used for mulching, as well as planting out and it is easier to purchase peat-free options these days.

It's the seed compost and multi-purpose varieties that are normally the culprits. Dalefoot and Melcourt SylvaGrow are the best alternatives in my opinion, but there are new brands coming onto the market all the time. I just use these for my seeds and seedlings to provide them with the best possible start in life.

DIY GARDEN COMPOST

You probably make some already

– ideally an equal mixture of brown and green ingredients – but you might be surprised exactly how much can be composted in the first place to help your pile go that valuable bit further:

- Cardboard;
- Plastic-free teabags and tea leaves;
- Coffee grounds;
- Garden clippings;
- Weeds (just soak those with roots and seed heads for a month first);
- Vegetable peelings from the kitchen, including citrus (it's only in a wormery that citrus causes an issue);
- Plants with blight or insect damage;
- Black slugs are great in the

composting process, so put them to use;

- Paper;
- Leaves;
- Woodchip;
- Old clothes if made from natural fibres, such as cotton. Just cut them up first;
- Compostable plastics, such as Aldi's new bags;
- Manure from any livestock;
- Chicken bedding, which is excellent as a compost accelerator;
- Seaweed from the beach is highly recommended for your plants;
- Comfrey;
- Borage;
- Nettles to supercharge your home-made efforts;
- Wool, which is an ingredient in Dalefoot's compost. Again just cut it up.

WHAT YOU CAN'T COMPOST

You can't compost meat or anything cooked in a normal, cold composting system. However, you can use hot

composting systems, such as Hotbin, for such kitchen waste. It kills pathogens and deters rodents in the process because, as the name suggests, it gets hot.

TOP TIP

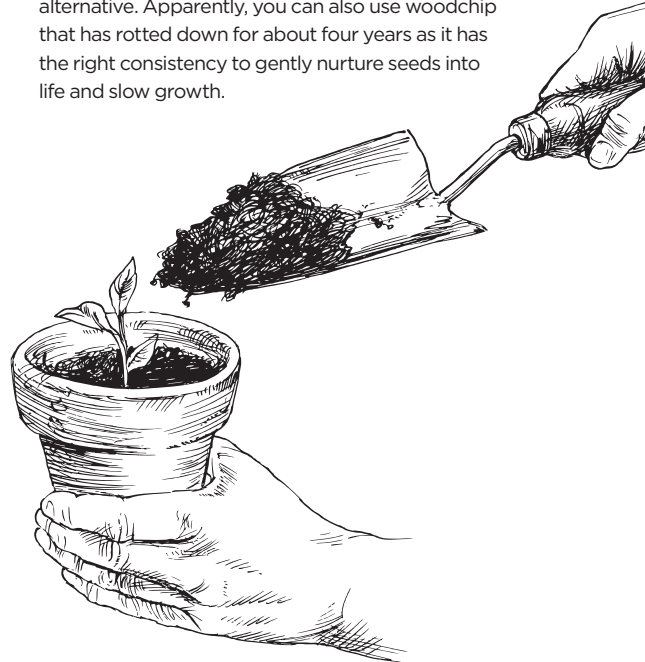
As you layer and turn your pile, adding some already rotted-down compost to the top will help to speed the process along no end. ■

■ Kim Stoddart teaches polytunnel growing and climate change gardening courses from her smallholding in West Wales. Country Smallholding magazine readers can benefit from a special 20% off courses for 2020 booked before 10 April. Contact Kim and quote code CSNY20 for more information. Visit www.greenrocketcourses.com; tel: 07796 677178.

'Avoiding peat happens to be one of the best and easiest steps you can take right now in the face of climate change concerns'

PROJECT IDEA: MAKE YOUR OWN SEED COMPOST

You can make your own seed compost with leaf mould. I had a go myself a few years back and found it reliable. Yes, you get the odd weed seed germinating as well, but 100% leaf mould is perfectly viable to use as a home-made peat alternative. Apparently, you can also use woodchip that has rotted down for about four years as it has the right consistency to gently nurture seeds into life and slow growth.



GROWING UNDER COVER: MAKING THE BEST USE OF SPACE



Kim planting seedlings

Right now, things will be getting exciting under the precious protection of your polytunnel or greenhouse, with seedlings merrily growing away. It can well and truly feel like spring is in the air. Your potting bench can fill up quickly at this time of year and it's easy to get carried away with planting, yet the temperature can still dip rather dramatically, so added protection may be required. Here are my recommendations for effective and greater threat-resilient planting.

Perfect potting-bench protection

I used to have a much bigger potting bench in one of my tunnels, but

it took up a lot of space that could otherwise be used for planting beds. Now I have a relatively small bench which I use for seedlings that might need protection — such as more temperature-sensitive Mediterranean plants like tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and aubergines — and I use an old window to cover them should the need arise.

The bench is also useful if you have a problem with mice, who can overwinter in tunnels and cause a lot of damage to seedlings by pulling out their favoured beans and corn, devastating your collection of small plants in the space of a single night of naughtiness. While these plucky rodents can still climb up a bench, if it is covered with a glass frame, they

can't get in, affording you time to issue a sharp eviction notice in the process.

Down-to-earth seedbeds

The reason I don't need a lot of potting space is that I use areas of my polytunnel beds for seed sowing as well. By planting in rows, I can nurture less-sensitive plants — such as herbs, salad leaves and brassicas — in the ground for planting out elsewhere as and when required. Slugs are much less likely to be an issue inside, too. However, if you're worried, just ensure that there is nowhere nearby for these 'slipper suckers' to hide. Apply a layer of high-quality seed compost and away you grow.

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Wool is a super fibre. It has clothed kings and paupers and has been used to make everything from Mongolian yurts to loft insulation. It's natural; there are no micro-plastics released into the environment when you wash it and, if you have your own sheep, you can have the pleasure of using a home-grown resource.

Not only is wool an environmentally friendly by-product, but working with it is the perfect way to be creative and mindful.

There is nothing quite so relaxing as passing a shuttle through a loom and watching the warp and weft take shape. There is nothing so gratifying as watching a jumper form in your lap which you know will be treasured by a friend.

There are also endless ways in which you can use your wool, from spindles and spinning wheels to peg looms and pom-poms. Interested? Well, read on to discover how to set yourself up for your first attempt at using wool.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Different sorts of fleeces are suited to various applications. Wool from different breeds of sheep have varying properties which will make them better for one use and less so for another.

For instance, the wool of a Herdwick sheep is extremely durable. This makes it perfect for keeping the sheep warm during those blustery Lake District nights, but is perhaps not the sort of wool you would welcome wearing close to your skin. However, you might find that its coarse fibres felt together very well, or that its tougher properties are ideal for a rug.

Equally, merino wool is sumptuously soft and would feel wonderful

against skin, but you might find that its fine quality is not so good for socks that require a more robust sheep fibre.

Knowing the sort of fibre you're dealing with will help you to find the correct project.

Many people are unaware of their fleece's quality, but these simple tips will help:

- The younger the sheep, the better. A 'shearling', or the first time your young sheep is sheared, will produce the best quality wool of your sheep's career. Shearling wool is luxurious and, while the quality of the fleece depends on the breed, a shearling fleece of any variety will always be the best of the best. This isn't to say that older fleeces can't be lovely too, but, for that

touch of sumptuousness, younger is better. Equally, a healthy sheep makes a healthy fleece. If all of the needs of the sheep are being met and they are happy and healthy then so will their fleece be, even if your sheep are in their twilight years.

- Consider the diameter and 'crimp' of the wool. What separates a fine wool from a coarse one is the natural form the wool takes. The reason merino wool is so soft is because it has a tight crimp and small diameter. The opposite is true for more heavy-duty breeds. The more you work with different wools, the better you will become at discerning the diameter and crimp. My advice would be to pop along to a local

county show and have a look at the different sheep. Look at their fleeces, feel them and get a sense of where the wool you own sits on the spectrum. Some shows even have fleece competitions where you can feel the fleeces from a variety of breeds. Once you know what you're working with, you're ready to get started.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHEEP'S BACK

You have a fleece, straight from the sheep's back, ready to be processed. Part of the magic of sheep's wool is that it is rich in a wonder product known as lanolin (you may have seen it listed on hand cream ingredients). This is an oil present in sheep's wool which helps to water-proof the animal's coat. It is ▶

Dyed in the wool

Continuing her new series, craft expert **Marcella Craven** offers a beginner's guide to using fleece, explaining how to wash and card it in readiness for exciting projects ahead



After you have washed your wool, you can start to card it

very soft and makes your skin feel luxurious after a few minutes of handling wool. Many fleece-workers choose to use their wool 'in the grease', ie, unwashed. Personally, I like to clean my fleeces first, and this is the method I use:

1. Begin with 'skirting'. Skirting is the act of removing the undesirable bits of fleece. Start by cutting out any dags, discoloured wool, or vegetation as these will cause the wool to decompose and smell – and that is certainly not a quality you will be looking for in your knitwear!

2. Half fill a large container with hot water and add a generous dose of pet shampoo. I do this outside in an old tin bathtub. Mix the pet shampoo in 70-degree water before you add the fleece. Wool is easily felted when its fibres are agitated and damp, with the end result being dreadlocks if you're not careful.

3. Gently lower the fleece into the warm water, making sure that it is submerged.

4. Let the fleece sit in the water for 30 minutes until the hot water becomes tepid. You mustn't let it become completely cold as this will cause the lanolin to re-deposit into the fleece. Pour half of the water away, keeping your fleece submerged, as you want to remove the top layer of water (so you don't pass your fleece back through the floating lanolin).

5. Repeat this process once more, but only leaving the wool in the water for two minutes to draw out the worst of the grease.

6. Leave the wool to cool outside the water and give it two or three cold rinses, submerging the fleece as you did before and not agitating it in any way.

7. Drain the tub and squeeze as much water out of your wool as possible.

8. Hang the wool somewhere to dry. I use a convenient bush outside, or an airing rack.

CARDING

Your next step is to get carding. I recommend buying two standard hand carders. There are many varieties and different ways to produce carded wool, but this is a good place to start.

1. Simply rest carder one on your lap with the teeth facing upwards. Lay a small amount of wool on top of the hooked carder teeth.

2. Keep carder one where it is and grip the handle firmly. Take carder two teeth downwards, facing carder one and begin stroking carder two against one very gently in one direction. You want the fibre to be brushed out smoothly without embedding the two sets of teeth together.

3. After several strokes you should find that the fibre which was on carder one has now been transferred to carder two.

4. Gently remove the fibre from carder two and replace it onto carder one again and repeat the process. Continue to repeat these steps until the fibre is sufficiently uniform, and pick out any reluctant tangles by hand as you do so. Finish with all of the wool transferred back onto carder one.

5. Use the teeth of carder two to lift your carded wool free from carder one. Place the fibres on the smooth back of carder two. Use the smooth back of carder one and your hand to roll the fibres into a cigar shape. This is known as a rolag.

6. This process has to be done again and again until you have enough uniform rolags to get started on a project.



Marcella Craven is a smallholder who lives in West Sussex and works as an outdoor work technician at Bedales School. She is a member of the Sussex Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers, plus she also keeps her own bees.

MATCH THE FIBRE TO THE PROJECT



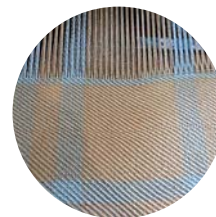
Luxury projects (shawls, super-soft socks, projects for people who think they can't wear wool)

Gotland lamb • Merino •
Teeswater • Corriedale •
Alpaca*



Sturdy wool (carpets, handbags, hard-wearing jumpers)

Zwartbles • Texel •
Welsh Mountain • Herdwick •
Dorset Horn



Versatile wool projects (hats, socks, mittens, blankets)

Bluefaced Leicester • Soay •
Kerry Hill • Jacob •
Southdown

* (OK, not a sheep but found ever more frequently on smallholdings!)

EXPLORING PROJECTS

Once you know what kind of wool you have and once it is cleaned and carded, you will be in a position to explore any variety of woolly project that takes your fancy. There are many simple ways to start wool work which can lead onto bigger projects once mastered. If you're interested in learning to weave, peg looms can be purchased inexpensively from hobby shops and set up on your kitchen table (or they even can be home-made).

If you'd love to learn to use a spinning wheel, buy a spindle online and start getting a feel for teasing out the wool. I would recommend contacting your local Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers. These clubs exist up and down the country and there is probably a parish hall near you filled with knowledgeable people who would love to pass on their skills and advice. Working with wool is a love affair for me, and I hope that you too will fall under its spell. ■



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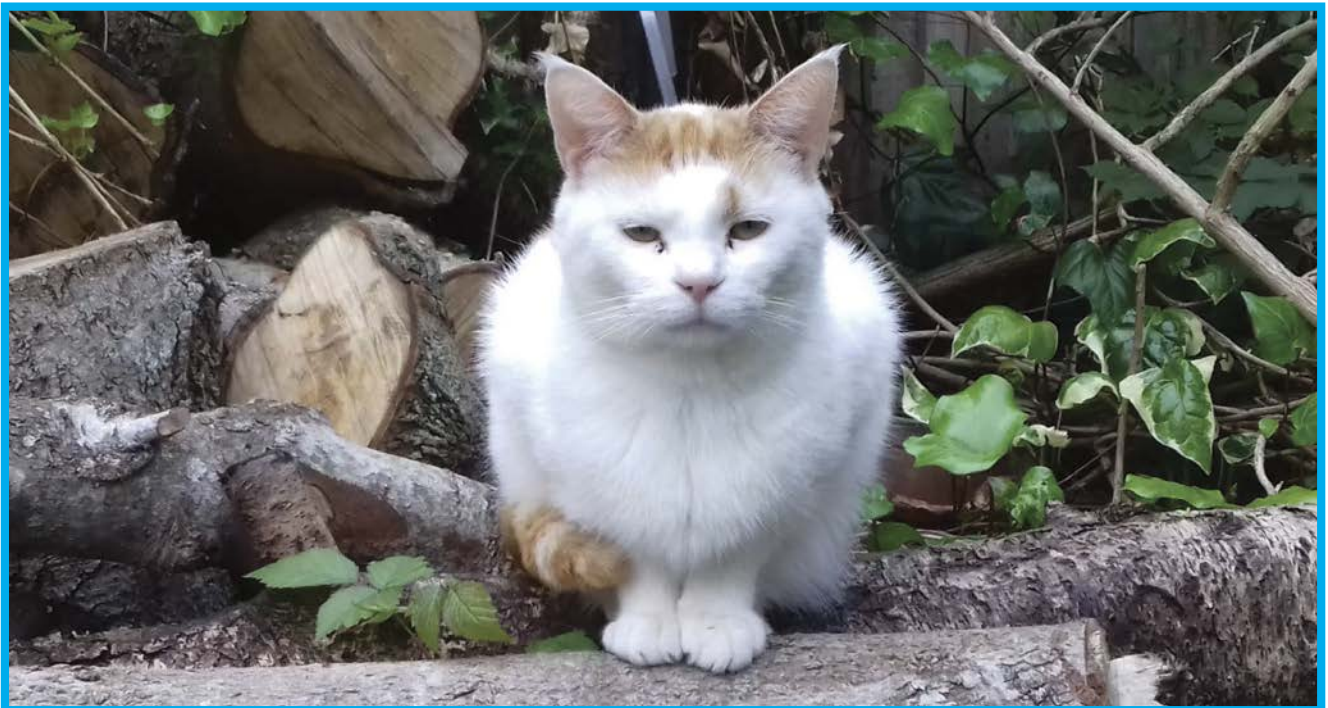
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