

In harmony with nature

Susie Kearley talks to Anya Lautenbach whose home shows her love of gardening and chickens



A chicken cuddle for Anya

Anya Lautenbach from Buckinghamshire has a keen interest in nature, the environment, and sustainable living. She recently started keeping chickens, and her husband Richard has kept bees and butterflies for years.

Anya's had an interesting life and is well travelled. Originally from Poland, she lived in Germany for a few years and then moved to the Highlands of Scotland in 2006, where she enjoyed the wild environment, the amazing Highland landscapes, and all the delights of the natural world.

She moved south to Buckinghamshire in 2008, where with husband Richard, she had two sons, William and Edward, now aged 7 and 4. She teaches them the importance of nature, bees, butterflies, and flowers. She runs a business selling luxury items and antiques on behalf of clients, so she can fit her work around her children and the family's natural lifestyle.

Anya has an amazing garden, with a large vegetable plot, a wild flower meadow, and beehives. They've just started keeping chickens and currently have three hybrids. Anya says: "We are a very nature orientated family and I love gardening. I designed our garden myself and we had the Royal Horticultural Society pay us a visit last year. They were interested because I'd created the garden from nothing, and by sharing my experiences and my passion for gardening and nature, I've made connections with all sorts of people, so that's how they heard about it.

"Everyone was shocked when I decided to have hens, thinking they would destroy the garden and I'd be devastated, but they've been a delight. When we first got the hens, there were no problems at all. They wandered around the garden exploring their new home. They brought so much positive energy into our life and they look great with all my lovely flowers in the background. Our boys absolutely adore them.



Anya's beautiful garden

"After a few weeks, the hens did start scratching, making a mess of the grass, and digging up plants, so now we're building them a pen while I try to keep them away from the herbaceous borders! If I see a hen scratching, I'll shoo her away from the flowers! Once the new pen is finished, they'll still come into the garden, but they can spend more time in the chicken area, just while the plants are getting established. Then in the summer, when the plants are grown and everything's out, it's a jungle of flowers so they can go and lose themselves in it!

"The hybrid hens were 15 or 16 weeks old when we got them, and they're very sociable, which is just as well because the boys do like to handle them a lot! Fortunately, they don't mind all the attention and they still follow the boys around. When I was little we had chickens, so I'm not completely new to hen keeping. Now when I pick the boys up from school, they spend hours in the garden with the chickens. The whole experience is uplifting and positive - we even like the sound they make. We'll be getting a silver laced wyandotte soon. I'm tempted to get a silky hen too!

"We always put the chickens into their coop for the night. I've seen foxes in the garden in the winter, and a few of my friends have lost chickens to foxes, but we haven't had any problems. Some of the local farmers shoot foxes, which is sad."

A SUMMER GARDEN

"I've been working on the garden since we moved into this house five years ago," said Anya. "I designed and created it, growing everything from seeds and cuttings: 90% of the plants were grown from cuttings. It's a summer garden, with herbaceous borders, which are good for bees. I plant flowers for insects, including cosmos and verbena. Chickens eat the slugs and snails which is great for the flowerbeds and the vegetable plot. Richard is very environmentally friendly and prefers chickens to slug pellets, so in many different ways, introducing chickens felt like a natural progression.

"Keeping the whole family interested in nature is important to me. I've reduced the number of other activities we do because I believe too many extracurricular activities aren't good for you. We live in a society that focuses on achievement and sometimes kids struggle with pressure. We still do loads of things, but it's finding the right balance. Keeping it simple is good and the kids play with sticks and find their own entertainment. There's no need for me to constantly entertain them. The more they understand nature, the more they respect and appreciate it. If they don't have a passion for nature, they won't make the effort to avoid things that damage the environment. It's great that my kids get pleasure from beautiful views and from understanding the



Chickens in the garden

difference between a honey bee and a bumble bee."

BIRD KEEPING IS ADDICTIVE

"The decision to get chickens was triggered by a disappointing experience with a pheasant's egg. We'd found this pheasant's egg lying on the grass at Waterperry Gardens and bought it home to incubate it, but it wasn't fertilised, so it didn't hatch. We were all so disappointed that we went to buy some chickens instead! The chickens lay eggs and hang around the garden, while a pheasant would fly off, so it's a much better arrangement anyway!

"Now the kids are desperate to hatch more eggs, so when we get a broody hen we might buy some fertilised eggs. We saw some Indian runner ducks with a friend and are tempted to get runner ducks too. This bird keeping is addictive!

"The chickens have brought such life and vitality to our garden. I'm trying to live a life in harmony with nature and the environment, and I'm very conscious of my impact on the environment. We grow our own vegetables, so in the summer and autumn we try to be as self-sufficient as possible. Obviously the vegetable plot doesn't grow much over the colder months, but in the summer we grow tomatoes, cucumbers, a variety of vegetables and fruits. It's good for the kids to know where their food is coming from. I do their lunch boxes with fresh raspberries and blackberries from the garden. We had a big crop last year! We have blackcurrants, apples, pear trees and plum trees.

“In the summer, when we’re away on holidays, the chickens go to the chicken hotel in Marlow. The owner breeds chickens. She has loads of space and they have rows of plastic chicken coops for boarding chickens while their owners go on holiday. The chickens lay their eggs while we’re away and upon our return, we get our chickens back, plus their eggs. The owner keeps alpacas to scare away the foxes!”

“One of the other great things about living here is that we have purple emperor butterflies living in the trees. They are one of the rarest British butterflies. Once a year in summer, we put shrimp paste all around the garden to attract the butterflies and it’s a real treat to watch them all come down to feed.”

RICHARD’S BEES AND BUTTERFLIES

Anya’s husband, Richard, grew his own vegetables and kept bees as a teenager. Today he also breeds butterflies and moths, and keeps the caterpillars under nets so they don’t get taken by birds. He says, “I have black veined white butterflies, which are extinct in the UK. They’re a French species, so I breed them and keep them in cages. It means they have limited space to fly but they’re safe from birds. They pair up, produce eggs and the caterpillars munch all winter.

“We have a wild flower area for wild butterflies. We allow the grasses and flowers to grow and have orchids, knapweed and other wild flowers in that part of the garden. We don’t mow it until July or August.”

In the car port, Richard shows me



A net over the caterpillars to protect them from the birds



Anya’s hen house

some chrysalises. “Our oldest son William found these elephant hawk moth chrysalises in the soil, so we’ve put them in flower pots while they mature. They’re a year old now and due to hatch any time, so we’re watching intently. The chrysalises move quite a bit at this stage.

“I used to breed endangered species of native butterflies, such as large tortoiseshells and marsh fritillaries. I released them onto the common, but some of them didn’t do so well when the grass cutters moved in.

“We produce honey too. I’m production manager of the beehives and Anya’s the sales manager. She sells the honey to consumers directly online. I used to sell it to farm shops, but I got half the price that Anya gets for selling

it to consumers, so I let her do the selling now. We get 300 to 400 lbs of honey a year and the hives are doing really well.

“The Common, a large area of land adjacent to our garden, is a site of Special Scientific Interest, so it’s not spoilt by commercial interests or chemicals. There are also rape fields nearby, which is great for the bees and the butterflies.

“July is the most productive month for honey. The tap turns off after July until next spring! So the trick with bee-keeping is to have the hives stuffed with bees when the tap turns on, on 1st July, so the hive is ready when the honey flow comes.”

Walking through Richard and Anya’s garden is inspiring. The chickens are free, the landscape is glorious, the kitchen garden is planted with rows of vegetables, the wild flowers are starting to flower, and the summer flower beds are slowly getting ready for a glorious sunshine bloom. As a visitor, I’m struck by the family’s connection to nature, the children’s enjoyment of the natural world, and their remarkable relationships with the chickens who seem quite happy to tolerate any amount of handling - one was even presented with a collar made from a toilet roll tube. The collar was quickly removed by Anya who explained that hens don’t like collars!

There’s clearly a positive relationship between the whole family and the natural world. It’s quite charming and now that I’ve discovered there’s such a thing as a ‘chicken hotel’ for holidays, I’m quite tempted to get chickens myself!



Elephant hawk moth chrysalises