

episode 52 show notes and advice

In today's episode Arthur is joined by fellow poultry fancier, Sabina Richardson who runs Feather & Egg, an incredible poultry breeding company which rears and sells hundreds of pure and rare breed chicks and ducklings.

In this episode, discover:

The breeds Sabina loves and recommends for domestic keeping.

Why we should all be thinking about keeping more pure and rare breeds of poultry.

What to consider when choosing hens.

Chicken run tips – how to protect against rats and foxes.

Episode 52 advice sheet

Starting out

Sabina grew up with animals, mostly horses and hens, and as a child she loved caring for them. She started out keeping a small number of hens for their eggs – nothing tastes better than home-produced eggs. She then got interested in specific breeds and started breeding hens but as a hobby.

Things got more serious in 2014, she began to put breeding groups of hens together and now sells over 50 different pure and rare breed chickens, ducks and geese, with stable blocks full of chicks, from freshly hatched to 6 weeks. That's when her birds go into grassy pastures for sunlight and fresh air. This is something Sabina feels passionate about, hens should be reared outside and on grass. It is amazing how quickly their natural characteristics develop instinctively when they are moved outside.

Sabina's priority is to raise healthy chicks that are strong enough to be reared outdoors. She works with the seasons and the weather so they hatch in spring through to midsummer then they stop because they need daylight and sunshine for successful hatching. For the hens indoors space, Sabina looks at different ways of keeping the hens' environment healthy, experimenting with different bedding or drinking solutions. It quite something going from being responsible for 5 chicks to being responsible for 100 chicks but Sabina says it's great fun too.

Chicken run tips

Sabina uses fencing panels, traditionally used with pheasants, for fox proofing. She moves these around so her birds continually have access to fresh ground. Sabina's breeding pens are not dissimilar to what people may have in their garden, with 5 or 6 bantams in a 10ft by 20ft space. These breeding flocks are in a sheltered area surrounded by woodland but lacking the good quality grass of her other enclosures so she woodchips twice a year and uses ground sanitising powders to help keep the ground nice, fresh and not muddy.

Mud bath

Arthur feels that mud puts people off keeping ducks. He kept ducks at the Emma Bridgewater factory and says he was lucky as they were on gravel and had galvanised tin baths - duck baths – and no mud. Arthur asks Sabina if she prefers ducks over chickens. She loves the duckling phase and finds it amazing how quickly they grow, many are fully grown by 5 weeks. But hens are still up there for her as they have such strong and distinctive characters.

What to consider when choosing hens

Sabina flies the flag for rare breed [Faverolles](#) – they are kind natured, social, gentle hens – great for families with young children. Quieter birds with a lovely temperament. It is important to her to offer a variety of different bantams, light, standard size or heavy, as each breed has a slightly different purpose and they all have vastly different personalities. While there are lots of common hens that are easy to choose from, Sabina is passionate about preserving rare and pure breeds for future generations. She really enjoys teaching people more about these breeds and they do have the most wonderful characters.

Pecking order politics

Sabina purposefully chooses to rear different breeds together. This helps them develop a natural pecking order and means less problems when introducing a hen into a new flock. She wants to make it possible for someone to have a blue [Pekin Bantam](#) with a [Frizzle Polish](#) and a [Faverolle](#), even some enormous [Cochins](#) or [Brahmas](#), and to ensure that this dynamic will work because they have been reared together. There will be natural squabbles but her hens can be mixed and matched.

Flightiness is also something to consider. Arthur has been trying to teach half a dozen [Cream Legbars](#) to roost in a henhouse not on top of a mulberry tree. Heavy hens with

smaller wings, [like Copper Black Marans](#), [Cochins](#) with feathered feet, [Brahmas](#), are more suited to a domestic setting.

If keeping hens on a farmyard or in an orchard, lighter Mediterranean breeds like [Legbars](#), [Araucanas](#) or [Marans](#), are more suitable. They won't be the type to sit on your lap or look after your lawn but they are hardier, happy to roost in trees and lay plenty of eggs.

Hens on hols

Sabina's breeding flocks get time off and stop hatching in autumn and early winter. Her cockerels become bachelors and her hens go on holiday.

Pure breeds do need a break – some go into moult to grow new feathers in preparation for the winter months. Sabina takes all her hens, bantams, medium-sized and the heavies and puts them all together in a big grassy field with a large shed for some well-deserved R&R until after Christmas. The cockerels get grouped by size and put into bachelor pens, they get along fine with no wives around to compete for.

Hen houses

Feather & Egg use hen houses made of recycled plastic, using different models for different breeds. The plastic is very hardwearing, easy to clean and makes it easy to manage if there are outbreaks of red mite. All houses are raised to prevent vermin, although some are lower than others to suit certain breeds that don't like climbing ladders.

Vermin control – top tips

To stop poultry palaces becoming infested with rats, prevention is key. Keep food out of the way, put feeders away after feeding, use rat-proof metal bins with lids and raise hen houses so there is no nice warm habitat for rats to nest in.

For foxes, Sabina uses electric netting which she runs off a solar panel as her farm is off grid. She uses netting around the perimeter of her land and a single strand at the bottom and a double strand at the top of her 6ft pens. See also fencing panels, mentioned above.

Protecting against bird flu

The UK is currently experiencing an outbreak of avian influenza that is being monitored by the Government, with measures being enforced to contain the outbreak. At Sabina's home

everything is netted to prevent wild birds who may be carrying avian flu having access to hens. At the farm she is in preparation phase, netting on a larger scale, so if the government orders hens to be moved under cover, this can be done quickly. If hens have to move inside this means under netting or roofed hen runs. The government has the latest information and guidance on [avian flu online](#).

Other measures Sabina has put in place include using boot dips for people to disinfect shoes and customers are only allowed in certain areas. She has no feeders in fields, feeding only indoors in sheds, also to prevent wild birds, which Arthur also strongly recommends.

Feather & Egg's most popular hen

[Faverolle Bantams](#) are very popular and often sell out in certain colours.

Sabina likes choosing and changing up the different colours to breed from. She enjoys teaching people about rare breeds and promoting them.

Using goats and geese instead of pesticides

Sabina has started using goats to help prepare pens. She always wants to work with nature and not use pesticides. The land they have is covered by woodland with lots of thistles, nettles and brambles. The goats go in and eat these down - they are not so keen on the nettles – and do a great job clearing space. After the goats are finished, Sabina sends in her geese to mow the grass and the result is a naturally prepared pen ready for birds.

Her advice for people with a few chickens at home is that strip grazing is fantastic and free ranging is great. You shouldn't have to reseed as grass is resilient but space is key here.

Birds by Special Delivery

A unique feature of Feather & Egg is that birds can be delivered by their courier service anywhere in the UK, beautifully packaged in Feather & Egg boxes with herbs and dried flowers. Sabina wants to make it as easy as possible to buy her pure and rare breeds. When she started out, she found it very difficult to source breeds and would often have to drive directly to breeder who invariably lived far away. Pure breeds are such lovely creatures, she wanted to make it as easy as possible for people to buy them.

Why you should consider owning pure and rare breed hens

- We should all do our bit to preserve pure breeds.

- Pure breeds have less ailments and medical issues - they preserve themselves by resting in winter.
- They are hardier creatures, tending to live happier and longer lives.
- They are totally beautiful!

If you are interested in finding out more, check out Feather & Egg [Instagram](#) and [website](#). As well as over 50 pure and rare breed chickens, ducks and geese for sale, either collected at the farm or delivered via courier, Feather & Egg also run chicken keeping courses and stock all the essential supplies needed for keeping poultry.