

INTRODUCING NEW HENS

It is possible to introduce new hens to your flock, but it can be a very stressful time for them - not for nothing is it called the pecking order! Follow the rules below and try some of the suggestions to minimise any stress. Most of the time introductions are simple and apart from some minor squabbles they settle quickly, but it pays to be prepared. It can take a few weeks for the pecking order to settle especially if you have two hens fighting for the same position. Some ex-batts can be particularly mean to newcomers, possibly because they are ex-jailbirds and used to fighting for everything they get. They have to be quite tough to survive in a battery cage, so I don't blame them for protecting their wonderful new territory, but just supervise them carefully.

WHAT TO TRY	WHY
Always introduce a minimum of 2 hens.	Safety in numbers. An established flock will attack a single hen and make her life misery, whereas 2 hens will stick together and have each other for company.
Ideally have the newcomers in a separate house and run alongside the old hens for a couple of weeks. New birds should ideally be isolated for a few weeks to ensure they are healthy & strong and give them time to build immunity to the new pathogens they will be exposed to.	The new hens can get used to the old hens without being attacked. They will have a chance to settle in without becoming too stressed. Stress is the biggest cause of health problems in chickens - immunity is lowered & any diseases they have that are lying dormant will surface & they will show symptoms. New birds to the flock will be exposed to many pathogens on the new site that they will have no immunity to, by isolating them they have a chance to settle in, acclimatise & build immunity without the added stress of meeting new hens.
Try to introduce similar age/size birds.	Putting young, immature birds in with bossy old hens is not ideal. Not only could they be on different feed, the older birds will sense vulnerability and weakness very easily.
If you don't have 2 houses and runs do not put the newcomers in with the old hens until it is dark at night.	If you put the new hens straight into the run during the day, they are likely to be attacked immediately by the other hens who see them as a threat to their territory.
If they can't be split but you can let your old hens into the garden then let the hens sleep in the same house at night. In the morning let your old hens out into the garden but keep the new hens in the run. Repeat this for a few days.	This will give the new hens a break from the old hens and allow them to settle and explore without being threatened. You will need to provide food and water for your old hens (and perhaps a box on its side for them to lay in) by the door to the run for a few days and be on hand to let your old hens back in at dusk.
Try putting all the hens in the house at night and spraying them with dilute vinegar.	The smell is thought to mask the scent of each hen. As hens recognise each other by scent, it can help things settle if they all smell the same.
When first letting the hens together during the day give them plenty of space - ideally let them free range in the garden.	If you introduce them in a small run they can't escape from each other. If they are out in the garden they can all have their own space and run away if they are attacked.
If you can't let the hens free range when introducing them, but have a moveable run then put the run in a new area of the garden when first letting them together.	No one will be as territorial over the run if it is a new place and they will be surprised by the new position which will help distract them.
When they are very first together add lots of new distractions such as hanging CD's, hang up cabbages or bird feeders stuffed with food.	Any distraction will take the focus off the new hens.
Put 2 or 3 feeders and drinkers around the house and run.	If the newcomers are too scared to venture out or go near the older hens they will still be able to eat and drink.
Observe the birds carefully for a few weeks. Make sure new birds are eating and drinking plenty and not just snatching mouthfuls when they dare.	If you have a timid newcomer in the group she may be too frightened to eat and drink enough. She will gradually get weaker and weaker and will be more prone to infection due to lowered immunity.