



AVELLINO FARMS / FIELD GUIDE NO. 019

WINTERIZING THE CHICKEN COOP

DRY BEATS WARM.

Ventilation, bedding, water, power, feed, snow, predators - and when supplemental heat actually makes sense.

HELP THEM KEEP THEMSELVES WARM.

01 The goal is not a warm coop.

The goal is a dry, ventilated, secure coop where healthy birds can regulate themselves.

Chickens already come with insulation: feathers, down, a high body temperature, and the instinct to roost together. Winter prep is mostly about protecting those systems from wet bedding, direct drafts, frozen water, poor nutrition, electrical failures, and predators.

- Cold and dry is usually easier on chickens than cold and damp.
- Ventilation and draft control are not opposites. Moist air should leave high without wind blowing directly across the roost.
- Water must remain liquid and accessible every day.
- Breed, age, health, comb size, body size, climate, and coop design all affect cold tolerance.

THE PRINCIPLE

Preparing chickens for winter is not about keeping the coop warm. It is about giving healthy birds the conditions they need to keep themselves warm.

MY COOP: 8 x 4 feet, wood and hardware cloth, no insulation, two 6-inch peak vents, no supplemental heat, and usually 8-12 cold-hardy chickens. Winter temperatures in the teens are normal.

02 Do the boring work before the ground freezes.

Winter problems are easier to fix before the first hard freeze than during an ice storm.

- Deep-clean the coop and inspect the roof, seams, hardware cloth, hinges, and locks.
- Change the automatic-door battery and test several open/close cycles.
- Dig out gates, thresholds, and doors that are being blocked by soil or plants before the ground freezes.
- Add wood chips or another suitable dry surface to muddy run areas.
- Clean and test waterers. Replace unreliable equipment before freezing weather.
- Install shutters or winter window covers while keeping protected ventilation available.
- Stock bedding, complete feed, grit, and a backup waterer.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WALK THE COOP LIKE A FAILURE INSPECTOR

Open every door. Pull every latch. Run the automatic door. Turn on the heated waterer. Look for leaks. Check the power. Imagine doing all of it in the dark at 15 degrees and fix what would annoy you now.

VENTILATION IS WINTER EQUIPMENT

If windows sweat, walls stay damp, bedding will not dry, or you can smell ammonia at bird height, the coop needs more air exchange and/or better moisture management.

03 Ventilation, insulation, and heat.

These are three separate decisions. Treating them as one is where winter advice gets messy.

Fresh air removes moisture and ammonia. Insulation slows heat transfer. Supplemental heat adds heat. A coop can be ventilated without being drafty, insulated without being airtight, and safely winterized without being heated.

VENTILATION

High vents are useful because warm, moist air rises. Protect openings with hardware cloth. Keep direct wind off sleeping birds.

INSULATION

Optional. It can reduce temperature swings, but exposed insulation must be protected from pecking, moisture, and rodents.

NO HEAT

Healthy cold-hardy adult birds in a dry, draft-protected coop often do well without supplemental heat. That is how I manage my flock.

HEAT WHEN APPROPRIATE

Small-bodied birds, illness, poor condition, molt, extreme cold, or inadequate housing can change the decision. Use purpose-built equipment and treat fire safety seriously.

DIFFERENT EXPERTS DRAW THE LINE DIFFERENTLY

Extension guidance is not perfectly uniform. That is another reason I would rather teach you how to assess the birds, moisture, wind, housing, and electrical risk than hand you one magic temperature.

04 Roosts, combs, and cold-hardy breeds.

Breed choice is winter preparation you make long before winter arrives.

Wooden roosts are a good winter choice because they do not conduct cold like metal. A wider roost also lets a bird settle its body over its feet. Large combs and wattles deserve closer monitoring because they leave more tissue exposed.

- Provide enough roost space that lower-ranking birds are not pushed away from the group.
- Keep the roost out of direct drafts.
- Heavier standard breeds and birds with smaller combs often tolerate cold better than small-bodied birds or birds with large exposed combs.
- Older, sick, underweight, molting, or lower-ranking birds deserve individual attention.

MY FLOCK

My birds roost on the wooden 2x4 roof supports. When 8-12 birds settle together you can physically feel the warmth they create. I intentionally keep cold-hardy breeds. Large-combed birds still make me more cautious, even though I have not had a frostbite problem.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WATCH THE BIRD, NOT JUST THE WEATHER APP

Huddling, persistent foot lifting, unusual lethargy, weight loss, a bird isolated from the flock, or visible comb/foot injury matter more than an internet argument about a single temperature.

05 Bedding: deep litter, frequent cleanout, or something between.

The winning system is the one that stays dry and keeps ammonia low.

There are several legitimate winter bedding systems. Some keepers remove manure and soiled bedding frequently. Others build a deeper bedding pack and add dry carbon as the surface becomes soiled. Neither works if moisture and ammonia are ignored.

- Deep bedding/litter: add dry material through winter, manage wet spots, and deep-clean seasonally. Some microbial activity can produce heat, but do not treat litter as your furnace.
- Frequent-clean system: remove soiled material more often and replace it with fresh bedding. This can work especially well in smaller coops.
- Common materials include pine/aspen shavings, hemp, chopped straw, and other poultry-safe absorbent bedding. Performance depends on the coop and management.
- Wet bedding around waterers should be removed immediately.

WHAT WORKS FOR ME

I do a major cleanout in fall and spring, then add hemp bedding through winter as needed. I also use Revitalime. I still change the aspen nesting pads even when egg production slows. Straw was one of my early mistakes in this particular setup; hemp has been more absorbent, less dusty, easier to manage, and better suited to my compost system.

Paid partner / affiliate link: [Eaton Pet & Pasture - hemp bedding + Revitalime](#)

06 Water, power, and winter calories.

If winter exposes one weak piece of equipment, it is usually the water system.

Birds still need constant access to clean, unfrozen water. Heated waterers, heated bases, manually rotated waterers, and flexible rubber bowls can all work. The requirement is liquid water - not a particular gadget.

- Own a backup waterer.
- Keep electrical connections protected from water, birds, bedding, and weather.
- Permanent coop power should be safely installed and GFCI-protected; extension cords are not permanent infrastructure.
- Check heated equipment regularly. Plugged in does not mean working.
- Keeping water outside when conditions allow can reduce humidity inside the coop.

MY SYSTEM

I use a heated waterer on a GFCI-protected outlet. When temperatures are above roughly 30°F, the water generally stays outside. On especially cold or windy days I move it inside. I keep a spare waterer ready.

Cold birds may eat more, but the complete ration still needs to be the foundation. Winter extras in my flock include black soldier fly larvae, hemp seed, black oil sunflower seed, and some cracked corn. I add dried red pepper to feed as part of my own rodent/raccoon routine, not as a replacement for secure feed storage, traps, hardware cloth, or real predator locks.

07 Winter egg production is not the same thing as winter welfare.

Artificial light is optional. Rest is a valid management choice.

Hens naturally reduce laying as day length shortens. Some flock owners add controlled morning light to maintain a longer photoperiod and sustain production. Others allow the seasonal slowdown. The important part is understanding what the light is doing and why you are using it.

- If you add light, use a timer and a low-heat light source.
- Birds still need a dark period for normal rest.
- Do not confuse a lighting program with a heating program.
- If production is not your priority, there is no requirement to push winter laying.

MY CHOICE

I do not add supplemental light. Everyone deserves a season to rest. The hens are already using energy to keep themselves warm; I am not interested in pushing production at the same time.

Older hens do what the rest of the flock does: live their lives. They contribute body heat on the roost, teach new birds how the flock works, and apparently explain that snow is not, in fact, the end of the world.

08 The run still matters when the garden is frozen.

Winter chickens need choices, dry footing, and somewhere to get out of one another's way.

A dry, partially protected run gives birds somewhere to move, scratch, sun themselves, and get away from the crowd. Wind protection and footing often matter more than trying to make the run warm.

- Cover part of the run where possible to create a dry zone.
- Use wood chips, leaves, straw, or another suitable material to improve muddy or icy footing.
- Do not completely seal a run with plastic; air exchange still matters.
- Keep access under raised coops open if it provides useful wind and snow shelter.
- Add simple enrichment: hanging greens, scattered scratch, logs, perches, or a dry dust-bathing area.

FIRST SNOW IS ALWAYS A PERSONALITY TEST

My main run is partially covered and the coop is raised, so the birds can hide underneath. When snow gets deep, I snow-blow a path and clear an area for them to walk. Once the surface freezes they usually venture farther. The first snow of the season is always interesting: some birds march out, others act like I personally ruined the planet.

09 Predators and rodents do not take winter off.

A cold, hungry animal has every reason to test your coop.

Winter security is structural. Hardware cloth, good hinges, secure feed storage, and locks matter more than gimmicks. Raccoons in particular can manipulate surprisingly simple latches.

- Cover non-glass window openings with hardware cloth behind shutters.
- Use two-step or genuinely secure latches on doors and nest boxes. My rule: a toddler should not be able to open it.
- Inspect staples, screws, hinges, corners, roof transitions, and apron/buried barriers.
- Store feed in durable rodent-resistant containers and clean up spilled grain.
- Use traps only where chickens, pets, children, and non-target wildlife cannot reach them.
- Avoid secondary-poisoning problems from rodenticides when you are also trying to support hawks, owls, and other predators.

MY WINTER PRESSURE

Raccoons, hawks, and rodents are the big concerns. I use a CO₂-powered rodent trap as another layer. Since raising a rooster I have not had another hawk attack, but I still treat overhead predation as real. Raccoons are why every opening and every latch gets inspected.

10 Anything mechanical will eventually choose the worst day to fail.

Automatic doors, shutters, gates, outlets, and waterers all need a backup plan.

- Replace automatic-door batteries proactively and test several cycles.
- Clean tracks and make sure snow or bedding cannot pile into the closing path.
- Know how to open and close the door manually.
- Dig out gates and thresholds before the ground freezes.
- Install and test shutters while you can still work comfortably.
- Keep a flashlight or headlamp near the coop.
- Keep a backup waterer, extra bedding, complete feed, grit, and a safe plan for a power outage.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

SIMULATE THE FAILURE

Turn off the automatic door. Unplug the heated waterer. Imagine the gate frozen shut. If you cannot immediately explain the backup plan, winter has found the weak point for you.

MINE IS NOT GLAMOROUS

A spare waterer, lots of bedding, plenty of complete feed and winter snacks, a fresh automatic-door battery, and basic tools solve far more problems than a pile of fancy winter products.

11 There is more than one good winter system.

Copy the reasoning - not somebody else's exact coop.

SYSTEM	OPTION A	OPTION B	WHAT MATTERS
BEDDING	Deep bedding	Frequent cleanout	Dry + low ammonia
INSULATION	Insulated	Uninsulated	Climate + birds + structure
HEAT	No supplemental heat	Purpose-built heater	Bird condition + fire risk
WATER	Heated system	Manual rotation	Unfrozen clean water
EGGS	Natural slowdown	Supplemental light	Management goal
RUN	Covered / wind-blocked	Open + dry shelters	Dry footing + choice

THE IMPORTANT PART

A system that works for 8-12 cold-hardy hens in a dry wooden coop may be a bad fit for bantams, sick birds, a tiny plastic coop, an enormous drafty barn, or a radically colder climate.

Two mistakes I learned from early: straw bedding did not work well for the way I manage my coop, and cheap waterers became expensive the minute reliability mattered. Winter has a way of exposing every "good enough" decision.

12 My five things before the first hard freeze.

If I only had one afternoon, this is where I would spend it.

1 CLEAN THE COOP.

Start winter dry. Inspect bedding, roof, vents, windows, hardware cloth, and the areas under the roost.

2 TEST THE AUTOMATIC DOOR.

Replace the battery, clean the mechanism, and make sure there is a manual backup.

3 FIX ACCESS.

Dig out gates, thresholds, doors, and overgrown edges before frozen ground makes the job miserable.

4 PREPARE WATER AND POWER.

Clean the heated waterer, test the GFCI, inspect the cord and outlet, and locate the spare waterer.

5 BUILD THE DRY ZONE.

Install shutters, add wood chips to the run, stock bedding, and make sure the flock has somewhere protected from wind and precipitation.

THEN LEAVE THE CHICKENS ALONE ENOUGH TO BE CHICKENS

Watch them. Keep them dry. Keep water liquid. Keep complete feed available. Keep predators out. Winter management is mostly consistency, not heroics.

13 What to watch once winter is actually here.

The flock tells you whether the system is working.

A winterized coop is not a set-it-and-forget-it project. Conditions change with wind, precipitation, power outages, flock dynamics, molt, and individual health.

- **DAILY:** confirm liquid water, complete feed, automatic-door operation, and that every bird is moving and eating normally.
- **AFTER STORMS:** clear doors, vents, and paths; check roof leaks and wind damage; confirm the run still has a dry zone.
- **WEEKLY:** smell the coop at bird height, inspect bedding for damp areas, check feet/comb condition, look for rodent evidence, and inspect electrical equipment.
- **INDIVIDUAL BIRDS:** pay extra attention to molting, older, underweight, injured, low-ranking, bantam, or large-combed birds.
- **EGGS:** collect more frequently in freezing weather so eggs do not freeze and crack.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WHEN THE PLAN SHOULD CHANGE

If a bird cannot maintain body condition, stays persistently lethargic, shows respiratory signs, develops significant frostbite, cannot access food/water, or the coop stays wet despite management, stop defending the system and change it. Veterinary help may be appropriate.

14 Sources & further reading.

Clickable references for the husbandry recommendations in this guide.

University of Minnesota Extension - Caring for chickens in cold weather

extension.umn.edu ->

University of New Hampshire Extension - Backyard chickens in winter

extension.unh.edu ->

Penn State Extension - Small Scale Poultry Housing

extension.psu.edu ->

University of Maryland Extension - Winter Weather and Small Flocks

extension.umd.edu ->

University of Maine Cooperative Extension - Lighting for Small-Scale Flocks

extension.umaine.edu ->

ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES IN HEAT ADVICE

University guidance is not identical. Minnesota Extension recommends supplemental heat below 35°F, while New Hampshire and Maryland guidance generally advises that properly housed healthy adult birds do not need supplemental heat in most circumstances. That disagreement is why this guide emphasizes assessing the bird, housing, moisture, wind, and risk rather than pretending there is one universal cutoff.

KEEP THEM DRY. KEEP THEM FED. LET THEM BE CHICKENS.

THE WHOLE GUIDE IN EIGHT LINES

- Block direct wind without sealing away ventilation.
- Start winter with dry bedding and keep it that way.
- Keep liquid water available every day.
- Make complete feed the foundation and winter extras the extras.
- Choose heat based on birds and conditions - not internet arguments.
- Maintain doors, power, latches, and predator barriers before weather tests them.
- Give the flock dry outdoor options, even if they complain about the snow.
- Watch individual birds. The flock average can hide the one that is struggling.

Winter care is not about defeating winter. It is about building a system reliable enough that the birds can do what healthy chickens already know how to do.

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