

Best practices help ensure your chickens survive winter

Chickens are considered by many to be the best type of livestock for small acre properties. Chickens are tough and hardy and can be managed in a small area.

Maybe the best thing about chickens is they work in a small setting with small numbers. When managed correctly, we can produce high-quality food and have a great life experience.

Nutrition, water, shelter, and adequate protection from predators help keep our birds healthy, happy, and producing during winter. We need to focus on the following four areas.

Feed – Poultry need to consume more calories during colder months because they burn more calories to stay warm. Birds have space to roam during summer and find extra available forage in the form of plants and insects, which are not available in colder months. There are really only three types of feed for egg laying chickens: starter, grower, and layer. Developing chickens will need a starter and a grower feed with no added calcium. Don't give calcium before they begin to lay eggs. Egg-laying chickens need a layer feed that has at least 4 percent

calcium. Hens produce their body weight and a half in egg shells in about 18 months, so we need to make sure they have the added calcium.

Water – Chickens need daily access to unfrozen water. It's pretty simple, but in many places in Wyoming can be a struggle to keep water available during winter. This can be done by using waterers with electric heaters or by providing fresh water each day.

Predators – Predators eventually could/will be a problem for your birds in your backyard no matter where you are in Wyoming. They may become more of a problem in winter depending on the predators. Cold and a lack of natural food sources may encourage some predators to visit your hen house. Producers will need a plan for predators all year long and should make sure in winter they have addressed any additional problems to keep their birds safe. There isn't any way to ruin a backyard project

Breeds

Picking the right breed can help you have success with your project. Some things to think about might be egg color, how far you want them to roam, and how winter hardy they might be. Some breeds are more winter hardy than others. In general, there are three characteristics that make a chicken hardier during winter: the size of their comb, having a larger-sized body, and from where the breed originates. Smaller combs don't freeze as easily, a larger body helps them keep warm, and of course some chicken breeds are more cold tolerant.



photo: Amy Kerkemeyer, Shutterstock

Winter Eggs

Believing their birds quit laying eggs because it is getting colder is a common mistake poultry enthusiasts make as winter approaches. Chickens quit laying eggs in the fall because the daylight hours get shorter. Chickens need a minimum of 14 hours of daylight to begin and continue laying eggs. Chickens go through a molting process as the daylight hours begin to get shorter. They will lose some feathers and stop laying eggs.

Putting a light on a timer to turn on early in morning and then shut off after sunrise is the best strategy if you want your chickens to continue to lay eggs. Chickens should get 14-plus hours a day when you combine timed light and sunlight.

faster than having a predator in your poultry.

Shelter – Having the right chicken house/coop is essential. Coops and houses come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. When selecting a coop or house, make sure there is plenty of space for the number of birds you intend to raise. The inside of the coop should provide about 3 square feet of space per bird and ideally will have a location that allows birds to run outside. Coops and houses need to be well-sealed to protect chickens from cold and windy conditions while also keeping them dry from rain or snow. A house or coop should have the ability to be shut at night to protect the chickens from predators. Finally, roosting space is critical for layer hens. Most birds generally need about 12 inches of space per bird. There are many commercial kits to build your own coop, coops that can be purchased that are

pre-assembled, or various designs for building your own coop.

Keep in mind chicks purchased or hatched during winter conditions require even more care and responsibility than adult chickens. If possible, try to avoid having chicks during these conditions.

While chickens can be a challenge to raise in Wyoming's harsh climatic conditions, providing birds with the correct environment will help them tough out the bitter cold and wind of Wyoming's winters. Chickens are great for producing food in a small space and provide the opportunity to raise an animal that all ages and family members can enjoy.

.....
We think **Hudson Hill** is egg-stra special. Hill is the University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Lincoln County and serving western Wyoming. He can be reached at (307) 885-3132 or hrhill@uwyo.edu.

