

UNH Cooperative Extension Info Line Question of the Week

Chickens



Question. What do my chickens need in winter to keep them healthy?

Answer. Nights are cold, days are short, and snow has covered the ground in many locations. Cold is the biggest concern for chickens because extended exposure to freezing temperatures can lead to frozen combs, wattles and feet. This means that coops need to be well-constructed with good ventilation and no drafts, especially in the roosting area.

Drafts will carry away the warm air trapped in chicken feathers. Insulation or a small heater can solve this problem, but both need to be protected. Ventilation is critical because high humidity can chill chickens by drawing body heat to the surface where it can vaporize. Temperatures less than 15 degrees usually cause egg production to slow down or even stop.

Short days also slow egg production. For peak production, layers need 14 to 16 hours of light each day. Lights can be installed and put on a timer to encourage egg laying. "Light" can be added in the morning and evening to reach the desired day length.

Access to unfrozen water is extremely important. Either use a heated bowl to prevent freezing, or provide fresh, clean water in both the morning and evening.

During cold weather chickens tend to eat less, just when they need plenty of feed to stay warm. Feeding a little scratch in the morning can help kindle body warmth, especially on cloudy days when there's no warmth from the sun. Feeding chickens in late afternoon allows them to fill up their crops before they nest, giving them plenty of feed to digest through the night. Or feed a little scratch at nightfall: the extra protein will increase body warmth during nighttime perching. Your chickens will also appreciate any scraps or greens you can provide.

Got questions? UNH Cooperative Extension Education Center's Info Line offers practical help finding answers for your lawn and garden questions. Call toll free at 1-877-398-4769, M-F, 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., or e-mail us at answers@unh.edu
