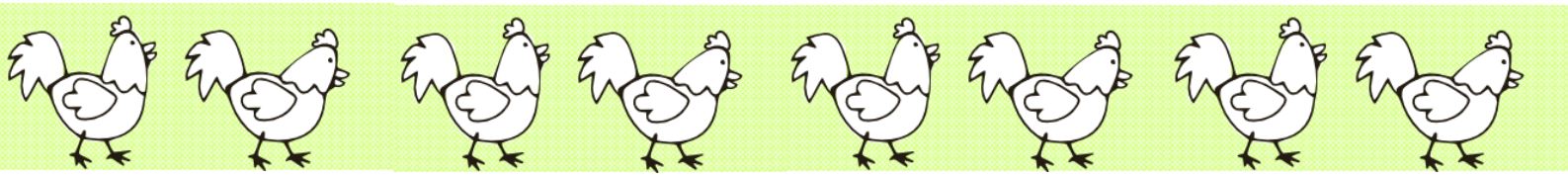


THE CHICKEN KEEPER'S YEAR

A Blue House Guide



Of course chickens require daily care throughout the year, come rain or shine – but there are some tasks that require more attention at certain times of the year. Different seasons bring with them changes in the weather and different husbandry challenges.

All year round

Worming

When?

- Chickens should be wormed every 3-6 months as a routine measure.
- They also need worming whenever new birds are added to the flock or if worms are seen in the droppings.

What with?

We advise a prescription-strength wormer – we use Flubenvet 1%. This is a powder mixed into the feed for 7 consecutive days. One 60g pot costs around £20 and will treat 25-30 hens for the 7 days.

What else can be done to protect against worm infestations?

Clean out chicken houses regularly to remove worm eggs.

If your chickens are kept in an enclosed run, move it as frequently as possible to prevent a build up of worm eggs on the pasture.



Apple Cider Vinegar (ACV)

ACV has been used for thousands of years for its antibacterial, antifungal and detoxifying properties. It is a natural supplement that can promote good health in the flock. *Do not use ACV in birds suffering from intestinal disease as the acid can exacerbate inflammation and diarrhoea.*

Use 10ml of ACV per litre of drinking water, and give this to the birds every fourth week. Only use plastic or stainless steel drinkers with ACV as it will damage the galvanised finish.

SPRING

Prepare the housing for summer

Give the house and enclosure a thorough deep clean and check over to prepare it for summer.

- Make sure the birds have access to shade – move the enclosure next to a hedge or bush if possible, or cover part of the pen.
- Make sure you have a sufficient number of good-sized drinkers for your birds – ideally a 10-12 litre drinker for every six hens. Birds can become dehydrated rapidly and they cannot sweat, so constant access during the day to clean, cool water is essential. Keep the drinkers in the shade so the water does not become too warm.
- Decrease litter volume – too much will trap heat as the weather becomes warmer.

Dust baths

Chickens love a good dust bath – it removes scale from their feathers and can help protect against lice. If the chickens haven't already found their own bath (i.e. your flowerbeds!) then provide one using sand or loose soil in a large, shallow tray.

Hens love a dust bath in the greenhouse so be careful not to shut any in by mistake.



Keeping chickens cool in the summer

- A constant supply of cool, fresh water is important – change it regularly, or put a few ice cubes into the drinkers to help keep the water cooler for longer.
- Try misting the house (and the birds' combs, if you can catch them!) with cool water in a spray bottle.
- Providing some wet sand will allow chickens to cool their legs and feet as they walk through it.
- In very hot weather consider a fan in the hen house, but make sure it is installed securely and safely out of their reach. If this isn't viable, try putting ice packs inside the house.

Signs of heat stress include excessive panting and holding the wings away from the body. Badly affected birds may lie down with their wings and legs outstretched. They will go off lay if the problem is ongoing. Take affected birds inside and dampen their combs with cool (NOT COLD) water, then call the vet for advice.

Broody hens

These require extra special attention in warm weather, as their increased body temperature and failure to leave the nest to drink makes them more susceptible to overheating and dehydration.

It is important to remove the hen from the nest a couple of times a day to make sure she eats, drinks and stretches her legs. If you are out all day, don't just shut a broody hen in the house with the others as she will get bullied.

Pest control

Mites and other parasites can be more of a problem in summer, so keeping on top of parasite control is important. Check our factsheet on parasite control in chickens for more information.



Moulting

The annual moult is a normal bodily process, but can appear alarming as the birds lose all their feathers! It can happen at any time of year, but late summer and autumn are the most common, before the cold weather sets in. If you have a flock, don't expect them to moult all at once.

The whole process is usually complete within 3-4 weeks, but may take up to 2 months (especially in pure breeds).

Egg production will decrease and stop during the moult as the body diverts all of its energy and protein into new feather production. Some birds can appear lethargic or unwell, and during this time they are more vulnerable to infection so require special observation.

- Monitor weight and appetite, but be careful when handling chickens in moult as the new feathers can bleed if they are broken.
- Look closely for any signs of feather-pecking. You may witness this directly; otherwise look out for bare skin on the vent or neck, or dull, broken feathers. Separate any victims of this promptly before cannibalism progresses.
- Remember to re-clip the wings after the moult as the feathers will have regrown.

Prepare the housing for winter

Give the house and enclosure a thorough deep clean and check up before the cold weather sets in.

- Check roofing for holes or damage.
- Block out any draughts, but do not compromise ventilation in an effort to 'keep the chickens warm' as a stuffy environment will predispose to respiratory disease.
- Make sure all fastenings and locks are working well and free of rust.
- Double check fox-proofing, as the winter months will see a shortage of food and foxes are more likely to come hunting for a meal.
- Look out for signs of vermin (droppings, chewed wood).



Daily checks are always essential, but especially so during the winter months!

Drinking water

Drinking water can freeze or become inaccessible due to heavy snow. Leave drinkers empty overnight and refill them in the morning to avoid the frost, and be prepared to break the ice during the day if it is very cold. You may need to clear snow away to allow access.

Frostbite

Check the birds' combs, wattles and feet daily for signs of frostbite (blackened or grey tips). Applying a coat of Vaseline every 1-2 days will protect these sensitive areas against extreme cold. Making sure the birds have access to a dry area of ground away from snow will protect their feet.

Bedtime

It gets dark earlier in the winter, so the chickens will need to be locked up earlier to ensure they stay safe from predators. Pay special attention to litter and bedding – add extra bedding and ensure it is always dry, as damp bedding can harbour dangerous moulds and predispose to bumblefoot. Don't be tempted to keep your chickens in all the time – exercise is important and they won't eat properly if they are not exposed to adequate light levels during the day.

