



WINTER POULTRY FEEDING EXPLAINED

MARRIAGE'S

Here's what you need to look out for in the winter months.

It is important that owners understand the main components of their poultry feed and what key ingredients are included to provide optimum nutrition over the winter months.

There is an essential nutrient in a chicken's diet that they cannot survive without and that is water. Half of a chicken's body is made up of water and eggs are made up of around 65% water. During the winter months it is important to check that water drinkers are not frozen and that a continuous supply of fresh water is available. Feeders should be emptied and cleaned regularly as the damp winter weather can encourage feed to go mouldy. If a hen is deprived of water for 24 hours, she may be staggering around, sitting hunched or lethargic. Fresh, clean water should be provided immediately. If she will not drink herself, dip her beak into the water to encourage her, if the problem persists seek veterinary advice.

The most notable thing about the winter months for the poultry keeper is the shortage of eggs. Most chickens will stop laying during the winter months. Even highly productive hybrid hens that are still laying when the day length is short may not have enough time to eat sufficient food to keep their energy high enough to keep warm and lay eggs.

Many chickens also completely cease laying during moulting as they need to channel all that energy and all available protein into growing out their feathers, which are almost purely protein. Eggs are also mostly protein so cutting back on rations or feeding cheaper feeds such as wheat, especially in winter is false economy.

A good quality layers feed for laying hens or a breeder feed for showing birds will usually be around 16-18% crude protein, while a chick crumb may be 18-20%. Most birds can be fed ad-lib as they will regulate their feed intake to meet their energy requirements. This may mean that it is more economical to feed what initially appears to be a more expensive higher specification feed as the birds will eat less of this than of a cheaper, lower specification product.

Birds need different levels of nutrients such as amino acids and vitamins and minerals depending on their type and age so it is important to feed a diet that is appropriate for individual birds. It may seem easier to buy only one product if you have a mixture of ages but late hatched birds who will come into lay in spring should be kept on a growers diet throughout the winter rather than a layers diet.

Many poultry feeds now contain genetically modified ingredients. If this is something that you wish to avoid Marriage's produce non-GM and Organic feeds. Check the declaration label on the bag carefully, if an ingredient is genetically modified it legally must be labelled as such.

Another big issue your birds will face during the winter months is the frozen ground. You might be surprised to find out that hens get a lot of nutrition from scratching and pecking at the ground. One of the most important minerals they get from foraging is grit. Chickens don't have any teeth so the grit they collect is used to break and grind down their food. However, during the winter months if the ground freezes over, your chickens won't be able to forage for grit, and this can cause issues. You need to make sure your hens are getting their grit supply from elsewhere instead. Normally this can either be from commercial feed, or you can just scatter crushed oyster shell in their run.



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The way you feed your birds during the winter is also worth considering in the summer months you can scatter pellets on the floor for foraging however in the winter using a feeder may be more appropriate and there are two main reasons for this; firstly the ground is nearly always wet over the winter months, so the pellets get soggy as soon as they hit the floor. Second, troughs and feeders are much easier to clean. Pellets that are mushed up from being placed on the ground are a nightmare to scrape up and can attract unwanted pests such as mice and rats.

Hanging greens up in the run provides a play toy for entertainment in the winter months and can help birds to relieve boredom. Treat blocks are another great way to provide extra stimulus and can help to amuse birds preventing them from pecking at each other.

An old favourite in the winter is to provide a warm mash in the mornings. This can help to keep your birds warm and increase their energy. The benefit of using a good quality layers mash over say porridge oats is that you will ensure the birds are receiving all their required vitamins & minerals essential for their basic nutritional requirements. To make a warm layers mash simply add warm water gradually to your mash and stir with a wooden spoon. Keep adding water slowly until you have the consistency of a thick crumble, if you add too much water the feed will become wet and sloppy and the chickens will not find it appealing. Ensure in the winter months that you keep an eye on your warm mash as if the temperature drops the mash will freeze solid relatively quickly and your birds will not be able to eat it.

Feeding treats such as a good quality mixed corn late in the afternoon is a great snack and it not only fills your chickens up but provides them with warmth during the cold winter nights. As the chickens digest the corn their digestive system gets to work and this produces heat inside the hens' body.

There are many additional supplements available for chickens on the market in winter in particular supplements can help to aid a nutritionally balanced diet. Apple Cider Vinegar has been proven to help chickens with stress which is one of the main contributors to their immune system lowering and letting in disease. In the winter months with snowfall this can be a very stressful environmental change apple cider vinegar can help to support your birds during this change.

Apple cider vinegar should be diluted at a rate of 2% in fresh drinking water. This is the same as saying 20ml in every litre. Make sure you are using plastic water containers as the vinegar is acidic and will corrode galvanised containers. It is still important to check that water drinkers have not frozen as adding apple cider vinegar will not prevent this.

For more information on feeding your poultry call us on 01245 612019.

