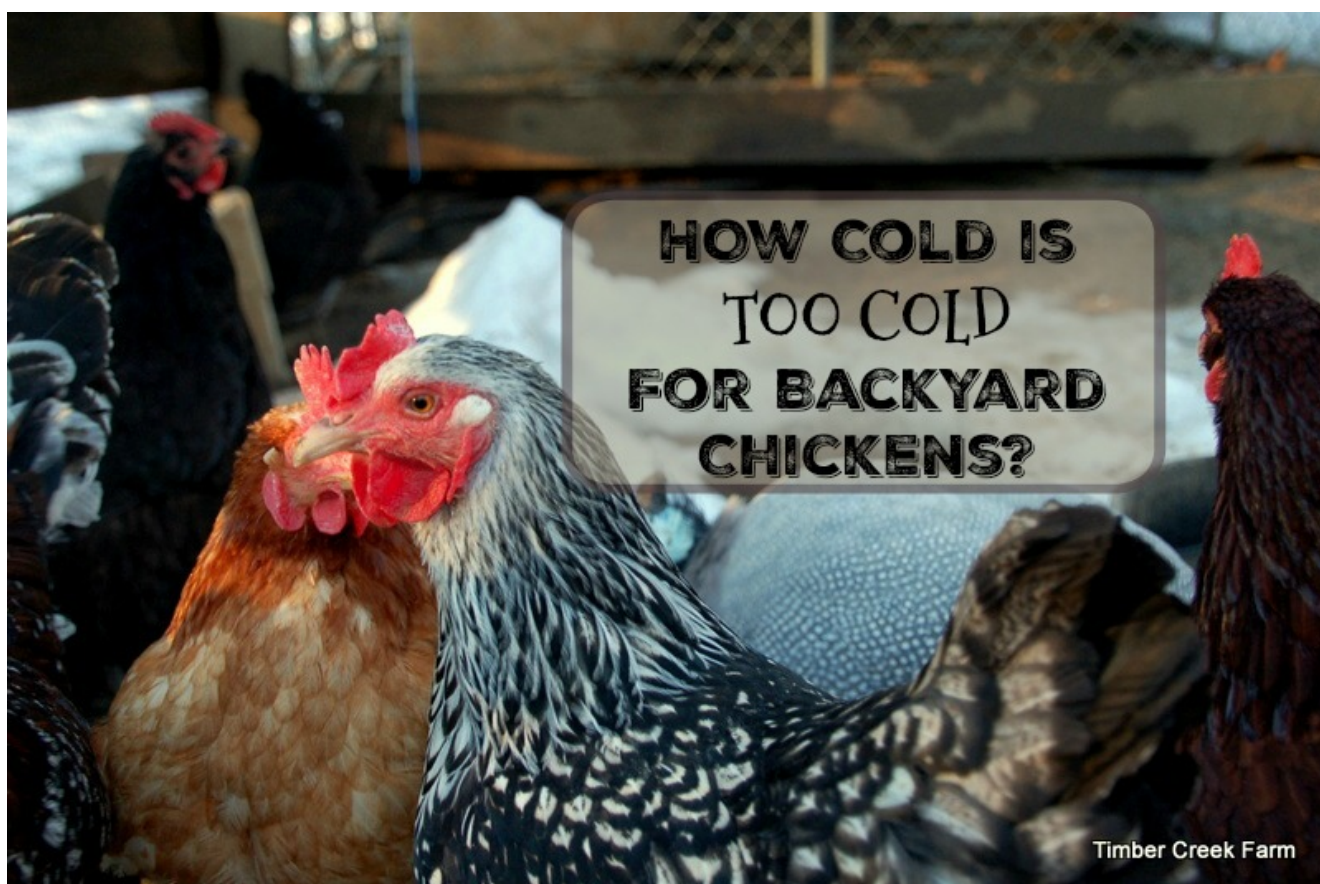


How Cold is Too Cold for Backyard Chickens



How cold is too cold for backyard chickens? Below freezing, below zero, when it feels too cold for me, are all answers I have heard mentioned. New chicken owners experiencing their first winter with chickens in a back yard coop can become concerned when the real winter weather arrives. I live in a fairly moderate area where winter is normally not too severe. We do get some winters that are colder than average and this often will bring questions about how to keep the chickens comfortable and thriving. I don't get too worried about my healthy flock members, during the winter. Chickens are much more cold hardy than heat tolerant. Yes, changes in weather can have an affect on the flock. But, if they are healthy and cared for properly, you should not have chickens dying from cold.

Signs of Cold Weather Stress

A chicken that is feeling stressed from the cold will look cold. It may be huddled and not moving around much. The feathers may be fluffed up considerably and the chicken may stand on one leg, keeping the other tucked up in the belly feathers, for warmth. This is past the time to take action. Chickens are designed to self regulate body temperature with their downy undercoat and increased food intake during cold weather. But there comes a point where they will need some shelter even during the day. Heavy snow, wind, and below freezing temperatures will require a few modifications in order to keep the flock healthy and happy. Don't wait too long, wondering [how cold is too cold for chickens.](#)



A Well Designed Coop

A coop designed for your area's weather patterns is the most

important step you can take to prepare for keeping chickens in cold weather. The coop can be insulated during construction or insulation can be added after. Wrapping the coop in Tyvek homewrap or even attaching tarps to the outside to break the wind, will help. The trick is to keep cold wind and rain out of the coop but allowing water vapor to ventilate. Ventilation is so important. Do not make the coop air tight. Allowing for good ventilation while still providing insulation is key and will keep the chickens comfortable while in the coop during extremely cold weather.

Keeping the interior dry also prevents [frost bite on combs, wattles and feet](#). Applying a salve such as [Waxlene](#), on the combs and wattles will keep frostbite from forming. Ammonia build up will be controlled by keeping the coop dry, too. Clean up any spills promptly. Imagine being in the coop during a storm with ammonia odor build up! Not very pleasant for any living being.



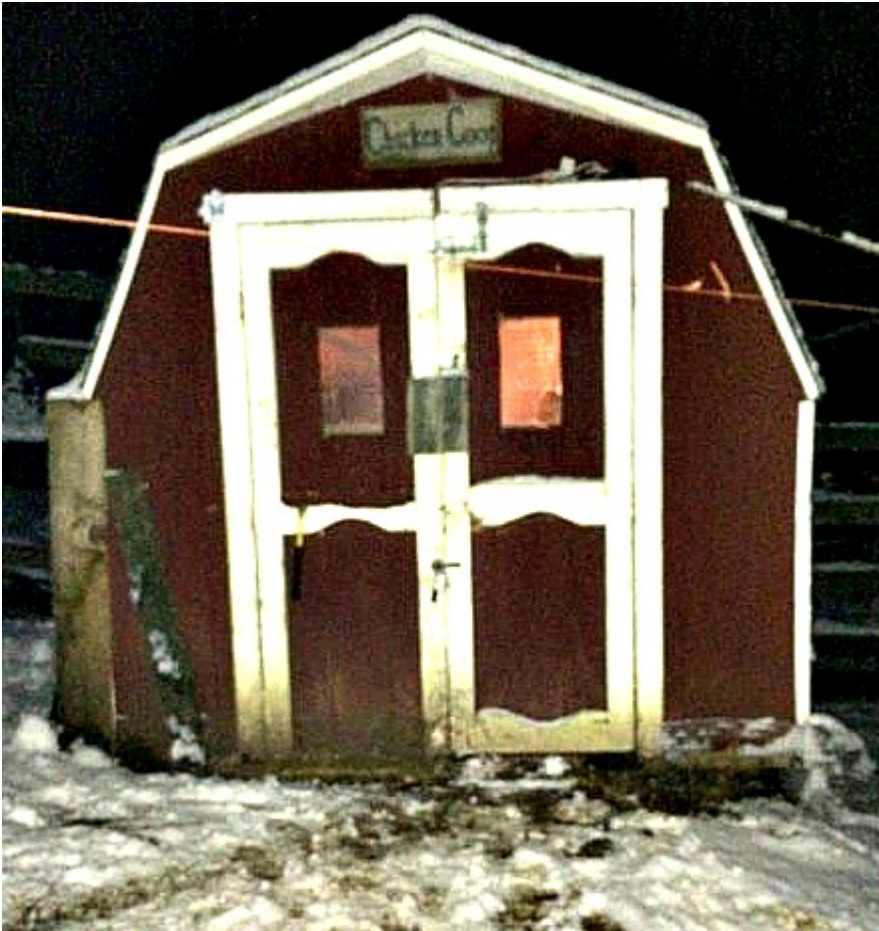
Should You Insulate the Coop?

A good coop structure will provide shelter from the wind, wet weather and drafts. Insulation can be added to the inside or outside of the coop. Hay bales are often used for insulation, and can be stacked on the inside or outside of the coop against the walls. Pay particular attention to the north and west sides of the building.



Building insulation can also be added during coop construction. Building a double layer wall, which traps air between the layer, is one method. Another is to use conventional insulation covered by plywood to keep the chickens from pecking at the filling.

I am not in favor of adding electrical heating appliances and heat lamps to the coop. Keep in mind that there are risks associated with using a heat lamp in a structure full of straw. If you insist on doing so, secure the lamp 18" away from any flammable material. Don't hang the lamp by the cord, and check the lamp frequently. I hesitate to even discuss it because each year many farm families lose their entire flock and coop to a fire started by hanging a heat lamp in the coop. We have a regular light bulb in our coop as a convenience for counting chickens before lock up at night.



What About Sick or Injured Chickens and the Cold Weather?

It might be the best idea to transfer the weak members of the flock to a warmer area for the duration of a cold snap. Weakened birds need TLC to maintain their strength and start to heal. Using a crate in a laundry area or garage might be warmer and keep the chicken from using so much energy to keep warm. I have brought a sick bird home during a cold snap to keep an eye on it. I am sure many others have done the same.

When transferring the chicken back to the coop, once it is well, do so on a warmer day. Getting acclimated to the change in temperature will be easier if the day is warmer.

Keeping the Drinking Water from

Freezing

This is an issue for many of us during the winter. If you aren't home enough to bring thawed water to the flock during the day, they won't be able to get a drink once the water freezes up. There are a couple of tricks you can try to use.

Using a small utility bucket, bury it at least half way with straw and sawdust. This will act as an insulating barrier and will keep the water from freezing for a longer time. Placing the bucket or rubber feed tub into an old tire will also insulate the water.

During the day, use a heated dog water bowl if you have electricity available near the coop. Empty it out and unplug at night so the bowl can be refilled easily in the morning. For outside water containers, putting ping pong balls in the water will help the breeze keep the water from freezing the water solid. The movement of the ping pong balls will prevent the ice from forming.

How Cold is Too Cold for Backyard Chickens?

It is tough to know exactly how cold is too cold for backyard chickens. I believe it has much to do with the combination of proper housing, and the overall health and fitness of your flock. There are people who raise chickens in extreme cold without using electrical forms of heat. I am surprised at the amount of heat inside the coop on cold days just from the chickens being inside.

For those of you who have extreme winter weather for months at a time, follow these simple methods to keep your flock healthy and content. Be vigilant and watch your flock members carefully, checking for frostbite and signs of cold weather stress.



Read more on keeping chickens through the winter in [The Winter Chicken Coop](#).

This post was first published on [BackyardPoultryMag.com](#), where I also contribute articles. Please stop by and visit and consider signing up for a membership to the forums. How Cold Is Too Cold For Backyard Chickens on Backyard Poultry Mag.com