

Preparing the Animals for winter
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When I told my husband Michael I was intending to write an article on this subject he described in detail how I might do this. “First, begin with the pigs. Sit down in the pasture and explain the situation. Say *look guys it’s gonna get cold, real cold*. Then hold up some ice cubes and continue, *Its gonna get **this** cold*. Then they will be prepared for things to come.” All joking aside, the animals *should* be fully prepared for the seasons change, both mentally and physically. Only nature can really prepare them mentally, slowly changing their environment, but their human caretakers can surely help prepare them physically. It is our responsibility to make sure they enter the most difficult season fully able to cope with the harsh weather, lack of sunshine, change in food quality, and perhaps even a shift in their social structure.



Mira is ready for winter; good flesh, thick coat, and abundant health.

I believe the best preparation for winter is robust health. An animal that goes into winter in marginal health will only deteriorate over the cold months and take longer to recover in the spring. Therefore it is critical that all livestock begin the winter with a strong immune system, good flesh, a layer of fat, a thick coat or good plumage, and solid feet. After a season on pasture livestock should be in the peak of health and condition; this is why many animals are butchered in the fall, they are at their best. They should have good flesh over their bones with no ribs showing (this can be difficult with high producing dairy cows, lactating sows, or laying hens), and a glossy thick coat of hair or feathers. Look for bright, alert eyes, perky ears, clear nostrils, and an active tail. Hoofed animals need solid, well shaped feet for rough winter footing and poultry need roosts to keep their feet up off the frozen ground. In addition, animals like horses and mules should have their teeth floated (filed) so they can grind coarser food efficiently and without discomfort.



Hogs enjoying the snow and the deep straw bedding of the barn.

The second preparation for winter we can provide is good housing. I like to keep my winter housing to a minimum because I think animals do better outdoors, but there are a few things I like to have in place. All livestock should be provided with access to a shelter from the wind. Many animals like cattle, horses, and sheep are perfectly content to live outdoors all winter, but will fair much better if they can get in out of the wind during storms. My Highland cattle and work horses have a simple three-sided run-in shed which serves as their shelter for the winter. Sometimes I bring in the older horses or milk cows during really harsh weather, but this is rare. The sows and hogs have barns and sheds with a deep bedded pack for nesting on those long winter nights. I only provide heat if piglets are born on a particularly cold day. The laying hens also have structure with deep bedded pack, but theirs is a green house that allows for collecting heat and light during sunny days and helps maintain winter production. I believe the critical element in all these housing situations is the reduction of drafts. Most animals cope well with very cold temperatures, but a draft can chill them quickly. This is particularly true of poultry whose feathers create a wonderful “down comforter” effect which can easily be disrupted by a focused draft that parts the protecting feathers. Even open air housing like sheds should be tight and draft-free around the sleeping quarters.



Sunny, draft-free housing for the winter layers.

Traditionally managing food quality and quantity for livestock over the winter has mainly focused on feeding a balanced ration that not only keeps condition on the animal, but

might even provide for active growth. While this is the critical basis of feeding for the winter, I don't think it's complete. Whether cooped up for the winter or standing out in the snow, eating is the highlight of the day for most animals and food choices are very limited for the season. Most livestock is completely dependent on their caretaker for food in the winter, and dry hay or the same feed mix every day becomes monotonous fast. I liken it to having oatmeal every meal, every day, for five months. With this in mind I endeavor to provide my animals with a little variety in their meals. For the horses and cattle we keep a stash of super green, rich, hay for very cold days and a variety of treats in the cellar (apples, carrots, and beets). Some of the older horses also receive a richer grain ration to help them keep condition. I also know of some farmers who sprout grains for their animals, thus giving them some fresh greens when they want it the most. We have done this for our laying hens and found that they covet sprouted oats along with their leafy dry alfalfa hay. We also provide our hogs with extra feed stuffs like apples, mangel beets, turnips, and pumpkins which we store in our cellar and dole out as needed. All these treats not only add to their diets nutritionally, but also bring joy to their day.



Silkie chickens and kittens prepare by cuddling and Highland cows are always ready.

One of the most intense changes that farm animals face in the coming months is a disruption of social structure. Many things change on a farm as it prepares for winter and some of the biggest are weaning and butchering. Now is when many calves, colts, and piglets are weaned from their mothers. Now is when many steers, hogs, and lambs are taken to the butcher. Now is when herds and flocks are brought in from pasture, mixed, separated, rearranged, and forced to change their social structure. This is very stressful to all involved, including the farmer, and all efforts should be made to ease these transitions carefully. When moving animals back to the barn for the winter consider social structure, territory, aggression, and watch for those animals that might be on the low end of the hierarchy. Reducing stress during these changes will also help keep up an animals health and well being as the seasons change.

And finally, providing well for your animals is good for you too. It eases your mind and allows you to sit by the fire on a stormy night with the assurance that the animals under your care are comfortable. That's good for everyone.