

Deep bedding for chickens

Our pasture experiments required us to build chicken coops for the first time, which meant dealing with chicken manure. There are four ways to handle the endless amounts of manure that build up in a chicken coop:

- **Ignore it.** This works best with a dirt floor, but still ends up being an unsightly and foul-smelling mess.
- **Put bedding on the floor of the coop and change it regularly.** If you really do clean out the coop regularly, this method can work, but most people end up putting the task off until you're pretty much using method 1.
- **Make a raised mesh floor so that the manure falls through onto the ground below.** This method sounds pretty cool, but in practice the manure tends to block up the holes, so you either have to clean the floor or go back to ignoring it. And then there's the manure on the ground to deal with.
- **Deep bedding.** Also known as deep litter, this method involves adding fresh bedding on top of the soiled bedding regularly. In essence, you're building a mini compost pile on the floor of your chicken coop, so you don't end up with bad odors. After about a year (or whenever the bedding gets so high that you're bumping your head on the ceiling), you shovel out the lower layers and use them on your garden.



I'd read that deep bedding is good for your chickens' health, but I have to admit that my early experience with deep bedding was less positive. This past winter two of our old hens came down with a lingering case of diarrhea - the first time we've had sick chickens on the farm. The problem could have just been caused by their advanced age, but it might also have been due to the flock being cooped up with their own waste all winter. On the other hand, the helpful microorganisms that counteract pathogens accumulate in deep litter as it ages, so hopefully we'll see disease resistance on our more mature deep bedding this winter.

On the bright side, the deep litter definitely did its job of making my life easier. As long as I remembered to add more leaves or straw frequently as our broilers grew up, the coops stayed clean and odor-free. And during the winter when the outside soil temperature was a chilly 27 degrees Fahrenheit, the composting litter on the floor of the chicken coop nearly reached 60 degrees. Surely that free warmth was appreciated!

To get best results, you're supposed to always keep your deep bedding at least six inches deep. As anyone who's worked with compost knows, rotting vegetation gets smaller and smaller, so deep litter doesn't get thick as fast as you'd think. I stole some deep bedding prematurely this past spring because I needed some rich mulch for a fruit tree, but I haven't harvested any of the compost I hope is on the bottom layer of our two coops currently. Maybe by spring, I'll have black gold to pitchfork into my wheelbarrow.