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Introduction.

This report was written as a free giveaway for backyard chicken owners who are interested in using natural methods in the care of their flock.

As far as possible, I have ensured that all the information contained in it is factually correct and scientifically proven and where it has not been verified, I say so. The resources upon which I base each section are listed at the end of that section.

Before we begin, let me make this clear: nothing is ever cut and dried in the poultry world. People have very different views about what’s best for chickens in more or less every part of backyard chicken-keeping life. One of the best ways of learning is by keeping an open mind, taking all the differing views, considering their merits and making an individual decision.

The important thing is that you take all the available information and make your own informed decision about what will work best for you and for your flock. I can give my thoughts and perceptions, but that’s all they are – my personal views.

Everyone is entitled to their own.

And finally: this information is general guidance and not meant to take the place of advice from a qualified veterinarian. If you are at all worried about any of your chickens you should seek a consultation with an Avian Veterinarian as soon as possible.

Here’s to happy, healthy chickens!

Cath x
Section I:

Why cider can be good for your chickens.

Well, not cider exactly – but Apple Cider Vinegar (ACV) for sure.

What is Apple Cider Vinegar?

It’s originally made with apples left to ferment with yeast in much the same way alcohol is made from grapes (or other fruit) and yeast.

The process of fermentation increases the amount of probiotic enzymes and acetic acid in the vinegar.

What does it do?

In humans, studies conducted for more than a decade have proven that it helps with problems from weight loss to controlling cholesterol levels to stabilizing blood sugar levels \(^4\). There are also unsubstantiated claims that it gets rid of acne, bad breath and body odour.

In terms of chickens, lots of claims are made for ACV by many, many backyard chicken owners. It’s hailed as the cure-all for more or less every chicken ailment from worms to respiratory infections; it’s even, on some websites, said to cure infertility in roosters.

Is it really that good?

There are no scientific studies at all done specifically on the overall positive effects of ACV itself on chickens; the closest are studies looking at the effects of acetic acid (which is contained in ACV).

Research carried out in 2011 \(^2\) \(^3\) was inconclusive. One study found that adding acetic acid to water for ‘broiler’ chickens (chickens raised specifically for meat) actually slowed down their growth, although it did also decrease the incidence of salmonella bacteria found in their crop post-slaughter.

The second study found that ACV made no difference to either weight or bacteria levels.

A third study \(^1\) found that adding acetic acid in the summer months did increase both egg production and the weight and overall quality of the eggs.

This study concluded that adding any organic vinegar to water during hot weather can reduce heat stress and increase egg laying levels.
And a fourth \(^{(4)}\) concluded that “… acetic acid has the potential to be used as an alternative to chemotherapeutic drugs for *Eimeria Tenella* control” – *Eimeria Tenella* being the cause of the poultry disease *Avian Coccidiosis*, one of the most insidious of chicken diseases.

**What does all this mean?**

Despite claims often made for ACV that there are “many recorded benefits”, there are no studies of ACV itself and very few recording the results of acetic acid use with chickens.

What results there are suggest that:

- ACV may be helpful during hot periods to assist egg production
- ACV may make a difference in helping control harmful bacteria in chickens, and
- More research is needed.

**Can’t the beneficial effects on humans, which have been researched and properly documented, be applied to chickens automatically?**

No. Humans and chickens are two different species. It’s possible to assume that benefits such as helping positive bacteria to flourish in the gut will be the same – but it’s not proven.

**So – should we be using ACV with our chickens?**

Well, there is nothing at all to say it’s harmful and the studies which looked at salmonella and *Coccidiosis* levels suggest it could be helpful in bacteria reduction, so the possibility is that it can help.

It just shouldn’t be seen as a cure-all and it shouldn’t take the place of a visit to the veterinarian with a chicken who is obviously unwell.

There are a lot of reported findings and anecdotes from people who have used ACV for years and swear by it. That’s different to scientifically proven benefits, but it’s absolutely still worth bearing in mind.

I use it even for very young chicks and can say that it definitely doesn’t hurt – and there have been times when I’ve thought it’s helped my flock overcome, for example, bronchial problems without my having to resort to chemicals and antibiotic regimes.
But I have found no hard proof. It’s your call. It can’t hurt, and it may help.

Will any vinegar work just as well?

The findings are very mixed on this one. Certainly whichever vinegar you use must be unpasteurised – the ordinary brown or white table vinegar bought from supermarkets will not have any of the positive bacteria which give ACV its antibiotic properties.

Does it matter that it’s specifically ‘Apple Cider’ vinegar? Some would say yes, others, no.

The studies which have been done (see ‘Sources’ below) suggest that any organic vinegar with the ‘mother’ will work just as well as ACV.

How does it work?

The acetic acid content of the ACV makes the chicken’s gut acid and it’s known that harmful bacteria can’t flourish as well in an acidic environment.

Basically, it slows down the rate of growth of ‘bad’ bacteria and increases the growth rate of ‘good’ bacteria.

And as well as all that, AVC contains large amounts of potassium which is known to help good egg production, including increasing shell thickness, helps re-balance the intestines of chickens suffering from diarrhea and reduces mortality. (5)

What exactly is “the mother”?

The first time I heard this, I had no idea what it meant. I’ve since learned that the ‘mother’ is a mixture of thin strings of living bacteria and yeast which, given the right environment, will grow without any additives. As it grows, the bacteria multiply and the result is a compound full of healthy, ‘good’ bacteria.

What is it used for?

ACV acts as a mild antibiotic when diluted in water and due to that it helps control bacterial infections. Chicken-keepers generally recommend it for a range of ailments and cures including any kind of bronchial problems – coughing, wheezing or sneezing; stress, such as a change of coop or the addition of new chickens into the flock; shock following, for example, injury or a predator attack; and any kind of digestive problem.
As I’ve said in the introduction to this book, though, be careful not to rely on this as an alternative to seeing a veterinarian if your chickens seem unwell. I tend to use it as a preventative measure rather than a cure.

**How much?**

The proper solution is 2%. When I saw this, I had no idea what it meant – I’m not the best with figures.

Here’s what it means in real terms: around one tablespoon of ACV per gallon of water or in metric measures, 20ml to one litre.

Try to measure it out for the first few times you use it; once you’ve done it a few times you’ll be able to do what I do - I usually don’t measure it out as carefully as this – I keep it in a jug and just add “a dash”.

You’ll find that some suppliers and manufacturers recommend different amounts than this – I’ve seen some saying more than 20ml, and some saying less. That’s because it’s not set in stone.

**How often?**

You can either give it in a block of time – for example one week during a month – or in daily doses – for example two days in any week. I tend to go with the latter, simply because it’s easier for me to remember on the same two days each week.

**What to offer it in?**

An added bonus of using ACV in waterers is that it does keep the container clean – the acid makes sure no bacteria can spread in the water.

**However, whatever you do, don’t give it in metal containers.** The acid in the ACV will corrode the metal which is unhealthy for your flock. For the same reason don’t use any kind of plastic which may leech chemicals into the water.

**Where to buy ACV?**

Your local feed store may well carry it and is likely to be the most cost-effective place to buy. It’s often used by horse owners so it can also be found in horse stores.

Health food shops do sell it but it’s usually very expensive from those sources. You can also buy it online: click here to buy it from Amazon USA and Here to buy from Amazon UK.
It’s also possible to make your own which works out cheaper still, but takes time and practice – and is outside the scope of this book.

**Pasteurised ACV** does not have the bacteria which are the beneficial ingredient for chickens. It’s heated and filtered during the pasteurisation process which kills all the ‘good’ bacteria.

You need to make sure you buy the organic, *unpasteurised* ACV, also known as unpasteurised or raw. If you look closely you should be able to see a kind of cobweb of strands – that’s the mother.

**And finally …**

A lot of people swear by taking ACV themselves, for much the same reason as they give it to their chickens. It doesn’t taste great (although it can be sweetened with honey) but its health benefits are proven.

**Sources.**


Section II

Which plant can help soothe a wound?

In a word (well, two words) – Aloe Vera.

What is Aloe Vera?

You will probably have heard of Aloe Vera. It’s one species of the Aloe family – there are more than three hundred altogether. A succulent plant originally from north Africa, it’s now found growing naturally in many places, mainly in tropical climates.

It’s often cultivated as a decorative plant but there’s evidence of its use as a soothing, healing skin treatment by the Egyptians over 6,000 years ago, and as a medicine from the 1st Century A.D. So popular was it that Aloe plants have been found in the tombs of the Egyptian Pharaohs.

As well as being found in family homes it’s farmed commercially in many parts of China, Australia, India, Jamaica and Africa: those plants tend to supply the cosmetics industry.

But more and more frequently, Aloe is also being used as a treatment for poultry ailments.

What does it do?

In humans Aloe gel - the clear, thick substance extracted from its leaves - has been used for centuries as an external treatment for conditions including sunburn, frostbite and cold sores. Despite its popularity there are actually very few scientific studies demonstrating its effectiveness; one study actually suggests it may prevent the healing of sores.

Less frequently the latex of the plant, which is both the gel and the leaves crushed together, is taken medicinally for ailments ranging from the common cold to diabetes and multiple sclerosis.

However scientific evidence on taking Aloe orally is very mixed; current advice is to “use cautiously when taking by mouth”. (6)

Aloe Vera and chickens.

In parts of the world where farmers don’t have access to, don’t want, or can’t afford, conventional chemical medicines, Aloe has been used extensively and apparently successfully as a healing agent when applied externally.
Additionally, more and more evidence is now emerging about its use when given to poultry as a supplement to food and water.

And whereas the evidence about humans taking in Aloe is inconclusive, studies have shown conclusively that chickens ingesting – by either eating or drinking – Aloe extract are not only unharmed, they’re positively benefitted.

The growing incidence of some antibiotic-resistant strains of chicken diseases such as Marek’s, Newcastle disease and Coccidiosis has led to more research being carried out on the use of natural, as opposed to chemical, ways of fighting them – and feeding Aloe has been one of the major sources of study.

By extracting Aloe juice from its leaves and mixing it with poultry’s drinking water, one study found that:

“all animals subjected to this particular study became more active after receiving the aloe extracts” (3)

and also increased their weight. Other studies looked specifically at the potential effect of using Aloe to treat chickens with Coccidiosis and found that:

“… aqueous extract of Aloe Vera could be used as an alternative treatment for controlling avian coccidiosis” (4)

and a later follow-up study also found that:

“Aloe Vera may be a potential and valuable candidate to stimulate the immune responses and can be used successfully as an immunotherapeutic agent against Coccidiosis in industrial broiler chickens” (1)

- and the same, incidentally, was found of garlic.

This study is a particularly important one in the poultry world because it demonstrated that Aloe gel, when taken from the leaf of the plant and fed to chickens in their water, contains effective anti-bacterial, anti-parasitic, anti-viral and anti-fungal properties.

Any downsides?

Many studies on the effects of herbs on chickens have been carried out on birds destined for the table. Ways of commercial farms fighting disease other than illegal chemicals have been the stimulus for the investigations.

As a result, the studies listed below (1), (3) (4) and (5), and others like them, concentrated on the potential benefits of feeding Aloe gel to poultry from both a health and an increased productivity point of view.
What they all demonstrated is that chickens fed on Aloe Vera gel in their water or mixed with their feed ate more and put on more weight more quickly than chickens in control groups. It’s thought this happened simply because certain herbs, including this one, stimulate appetite.

Whilst that may be an advantage for commercially farmed poultry headed only for the table, it might not be quite the result backyard chicken keepers would want. Having chickens eat and put on additional weight can lead to different health problems including obesity and Sudden Chicken Death Syndrome \(^{(2)}\).

As with many of these issues, it’s a matter for each individual to decide whether the possible benefits for their flock outweigh the risks.

**When and how to give it.**

The benefits of using Aloe extract as an external gel or poultice are well documented and have demonstrated no adverse effects during any tests. Using it in this way certainly won’t harm your hens and may help them.

*However, as with any illness, using Aloe on any of the following complaints should only be done if you take the decision that you do not need, or cannot, take the advice of a qualified Veterinarian.*

Your chickens are unlikely actually to eat Aloe plants, so you can’t just throw them a leaf or two and expect them to get on with it. You’ll need to extract the juice by stripping back the outer, hard covering, chopping the leaf into chunks and using a pestle and mortar or a food processor to extract the gel.

Once you’ve done that, here are a few possible uses.

**Bumblefoot** : This is an unpleasant and painful disease seen in poultry feet. A callous grows on the bottom of the foot and can quickly turn into a more serious lesion, caused by infection getting into the original sore.

If the callous is a large one and / or infected it’s often necessary to remove it surgically and use antibiotics, but if it’s not gone too far it may be possible to use an Aloe poultice.

Make up a poultice with these ingredients and apply directly to the foot :

- 2 tablespoons Aloe gel
- 1 tablespoon water
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon tea tree oil.

**Coccidiosis** : The correct ratio of Aloe gel, extracted from the leaf, to water was found to be around 3 teaspoons to a gallon, given in drinking water.
**External injuries**: Including cuts and abrasions: Extract the gel from the leaf and apply directly onto the injury.

**Where to get Aloe Vera plants from.**

Of course, it’s possible to buy Aloe already made up but sprays will tend to have some form of additives to preserve the shelf life. If you would prefer to be completely natural, here’s how to find it.

Aloe Vera plants are widely available in garden centres. In areas which have a hot, dry climate they’ll grow well outside – you’ll often see massive plants in desert areas – but they don’t do well in cold, damp conditions.

All is not lost though. If your climate just isn’t right to grow them outside, Aloe will grow very well in a pot inside the house. Although they don’t grow as quickly indoors, the pot needs to have plenty of room for the root ball to grow.

Make sure the soil is well drained: a cactus soil is good or, if you don’t have access to that, mix some ordinary compost with sand and gravel.

Feed twice a month and water it regularly between April and the end of September. For the rest of the year hold off on the feed, and add water only when the soil becomes dry.

**Sources.**


Section III

How to stop your flock from itching – the natural way.

Mites. Ugh. Sooner or later they can become the bane of a backyard chicken-keeper’s life.


You’ll be able to tell if your chickens have them. They’ll itch. They’ll try to stop the itching so they’ll constantly peck at their feathers. Because of that they’ll develop bald spots (nothing to do with moulting).

They may lose blood. Some of these little blighters suck blood. Your hens will become tired, listless and, if their blood were to be tested, you’d find they were anaemic.

They’ll become more and more miserable. Noticed your hens sitting all huddled up? Feathers ruffled? Seen loose droppings? Pale combs?

Has your girls’ egg production fallen off when it wouldn’t otherwise do? In other words, were they laying as usual for the time of year but all of a sudden they’re not any more?

By the time you see any of these signs, you may well have an infestation. Once you have an infestation then you have trouble. Mites and lice can kill.

What are mites?

There are several different types of mites and lice; the common denominator is that none of them are helpful to your chickens’ health. They’re tiny, microscopic parasites, members of the spider family.

The most common varieties for chickens are the dreaded Red Mite, and lice.

Lice can generally be seen around the chicken’s vent: watch out for tiny, light brown, fast moving creatures about two to three millimetres long. If they lay eggs they’ll do so at the base of feathers and you’ll be able to see a white clump. Happily, lice don’t live for long when they don’t have a chicken to live on, so you won’t find them living in bedding or crawling between nest boxes.

Red mites or Dermanyssus gallinae are far more difficult both to see and to get rid of. The female mite needs blood in order to be able to reproduce, so they survive by sucking on the blood of their host.
They only feed between dusk and dawn, making them very difficult to spot, and they can survive for up to a year even if they don’t have a chicken’s blood to suck, so they are notoriously hard to get rid of from coops.

The best time to see them is at night. When not on the chicken they spend their time hiding in any nooks and crannies they can find. You'll possibly be able to see them by inspecting your flock with a torch once they’re roosted – but that can be difficult.

In the daytime the best way to spot them is to wipe some white paper underneath the bottom of roosts, perches and nest boxes. Seeing blotches of a dark red substance? That’s your chickens’ blood. You’ve got red mite.

**How do mites come to be around chickens in the first place?**

Do you see birds in your run eating your chickens’ food? Mites are carried by wild birds, particularly pigeons, sparrows and starlings. They can also be carried into an existing flock by chickens introduced from outside.

**Lesson on mites and lice over! Now – how to prevent them?**

Keeping your chicken coop and run clean is clearly an important part of any good husbandry programme and will in itself help prevent the spread of parasites.

It’s also important just to keep your eyes open – spotting an infestation before it takes a hold can prevent a lot of heartache and the possible need to use chemical products for a really bad infestation.

Because wild birds are a major source of mites, keeping your chicken feed in a container birds can’t access will help massively.

And then there’s dust baths.

**What does ‘dust-bathing’ mean?**

If you’ve owned chickens you won’t need to ask this; if you haven’t, just keep an eye open. You’ll see it soon enough.

Dust bathing is the means by which chickens keep themselves clean and free from parasites such as mites, fleas and lice. It involves them flicking dust over themselves using wings, legs, head or just rolling around in it – usually a mixture of all three.
It’s a kind of chicken spa, and there are many scientific research projects which have sought to understand exactly why, where, when and using what chickens do it.

**Why?**

It’s believed that chickens dust-bathe for three main reasons.

**Firstly, to get rid of parasites** and make their feathers inhospitable places for mites and lice to set up home. Bear in mind that although dust-bathing will get rid of mites and lice, it will not get rid of their eggs.

For that reason you’ll need to make sure your flock has access to a dust bath all the time so that the bugs are killed before they have the chance to lay more eggs. For the same reason, it doesn’t prevent the need for the coop and run to be thoroughly cleaned if mites have been a problem.

**Secondly, dust-bathing spreads around the ‘lipids’,** or greasy deposits, of feathers which increases their insulation and allows the bird to protect itself from the cold.

To understand this, think of a bird you may have seen caught in an oil slick. It can’t keep warm and it can’t move around properly. Chickens are getting rid of the oil naturally.

**And thirdly, for stress reduction:** Many chicken keepers will also say, simply from watching their chickens dust-bathing routine, that it’s also a very social behavior. Chickens just like to hang out together in their spa.

Well – which girl doesn’t?’

And that perception is backed up by science: chickens who were able to dust-bathe were found to have a less stressed response to anxiety than caged birds (4).

**When should chickens dust-bathe?**

Research has shown that, left to their own devices, chickens – whether wild or domesticated – will choose to dust-bathe at least once every two days (2). If they don’t get the chance to do that, once they do get the chance they will make up for lost time by dust bathing as often as they can.

The behavior will change according to various factors such as weather – they tend to dust-bathe more often when it’s hot – and time of day: chickens seem to prefer to take their spa treatment in the middle of the day.
Where?

Chickens will make their own dust-baths if they can. Wherever there is loose soil you’ll find them shoveling using their feet and head until they have a satisfactory hollow with dirt they can flick over themselves.

They will also choose areas which are warm; plantpots – either plastic or ceramic – will do nicely. These are my chickens’ particular favourite – never mind the cost to my lovely geranium plants.

If you don’t have an area where your flock can do that and you don’t want your plantpots ruined, use something like a child’s sandpit, some wooden blocks formed into a square, a cat litter tray (although it’s a bit shallow and the hens will tend to knock the earth outside it) or even a plastic washing-up bowl.

If you’re keeping it outside and it has a solid base, make sure your drill holes in the base so that water can drain out. Mine has a lid so it can be closed at night and when it rains, which keeps it dry and makes it unavailable to unwanted guests such as rodents, or even the dog who enjoys a good dig.

Using what?

A study in 1993\(^{(3)}\) found that, when given a choice between various things (feathers, straw, wood shavings and sand) in which to dust-bathe, young chicks – perhaps not surprisingly - preferred sand. A follow-up report in 2013 \(^{(4)}\) found that adult hens similarly preferred sand.

Subsequent reports (e.g. \(^{(5)}\)) have found that the ideal mix is sand with a fine soil – so my chickens got it right. Potting compost for bedding plants is the ideal dust-bathing material.

Any downsides?

There are no downsides to dustbathing itself, in fact the research projects showed that downsides will only come if your flock can’t do it. The issue here is which dust-bathing material you should provide for your flock to use.

Sand: This was what chickens seemed to prefer most of all if they were left to their own devices to choose. Many people now use sand not just for dust bathing areas but also as a floor covering for their coop and run.

As long as you choose the right grade of sand, it doesn’t seem to have any drawbacks: it’s cool in summer, keeps some heat in winter and it’s very easy to clean – just use a poop-scoop and the job’s done in a matter of minutes.
Look for a coarse grade, often known as river sand, builders’ sand or sharp sand. The finer children’s play sand is not as effective in controlling mites because its grains don’t have the same sharp edges.

**Wood ash**: There’s a lot of information on the internet about the use of wood ash for dust-baths. Many people swear by it, especially if it’s mixed with a coarse sand so it doesn’t just blow away. Some people also use it to dust each individual chicken each month to keep mites at bay.

I use wood ash from our pizza oven for my flock’s inside dust-bath. It’s effective, it’s inexpensive, and it’s a great way of using the leftovers of your fire. But whilst this is a good material when it’s dry, wood ash combined with water becomes caustic and can actually harm your chickens.

So, if that’s what you’re going to use, make sure it can be covered as soon as rain starts and make sure it’s wood only, not any old burned stuff.

**Diatomaceous Earth (DE)**.

This is another area where there are differing opinions. Some people love it, some won’t touch it.

**What is it?**: DE is made up of tiny particles of Diatoms (hence the name) which are microscopic algae with a hard, silicon-type shell found in lakes, rivers, streams and oceans from where they are mined and ground into a dust.

It is not a chemical pesticide – it contains no poisons. It works by absorbing the oily fats from the insects’ external skeletons while its sharp edges speed the process up. Mites, lice, fleas and other crawling insects basically dehydrate and die.

**Is it harmful?** : As long as you make sure to use food grade DE, it is not poisonous. Pool grade DE is heat treated which alters its composition and should be used only for pool filtration systems.

DE is a natural product and certainly not poisonous. Whether or not it’s harmful depends largely on who you read and what you choose to believe.

The potential problems with DE relate mainly to its dusty format. Studies have shown that inhaling it can cause silicosis in humans and guinea pigs but the amount of dust involved was more than chickens are likely to come into contact with.

**Is it effective?** A study carried out in 2012 showed definitively that exposure to DE killed chicken lice and northern fowl mites and the strong likelihood is that red mite would fall into the same category.

So yes, it’s effective when used externally in dust baths to control parasites.
There’s one further issue which has arisen fairly recently in respect of DE : it’s found to be harmful to the already declining bee population because, when it lands on their bodies it can dehydrate them – despite their fluffy coats.

What can we learn from all this about our own chickens?

Firstly, that chickens need to dust-bathe. It’s an instinct from a very early age – as early as a week old. So your flock needs to have a spa they can call their own.

Secondly, that dust-bathing seems to be a chicken’s way of controlling mites and other parasites, and of keeping itself properly insulated, naturally.

Thirdly, that the best thing for chickens to dust-bathe in is a mixture of dirt, sand and either Diatomaceous earth or wood ash.

And finally …

- **If you use sand**, use a builders’ sand, not play sand which isn’t sharp enough to have any effect on parasites.

- **If you use ash**, make sure it’s only wood, not general rubbish and make sure it is kept dry so it doesn’t turn caustic.

- **If you use DE**, make sure it’s food and not pool grade.

- To prevent the dust from blowing around and creating any kind of hazard either for you or for your flock, don’t use it in isolation. Mix it in with earth or sand for your flock’s dust-bathing areas.

- When you’re working with it, an extra precaution would be to wear an inexpensive mask such as those to be found in do-it-yourself stores.

- Keep DE well away from blossoms so that bees aren’t affected.

Sources.


Section IV

Why are weeds to be encouraged in your chicken run?

Traditionally, everybody hates this weed although others see it as an herb. But many plants we consider to be weeds have the most amazing health benefits – and this is one of them.

**Which weed would that be?** You may hate it spoiling your lawn, you may despise the seed heads that parachute off in the air and get everywhere, you may groan at the thought of pulling up yet another patch of them from your veggie patch …

But I grow this ‘weed’ in my chicken coop, in the run and in all sorts of nooks and crannies, just because my chickens love them so much and because they’re so good for my flock.

You may be surprised to know the weed I’m talking about is a member of the Sunflower family - it’s the common **dandelion**.

**History of dandelions for human use.**

It’s only cultural convention that makes us unwilling to try it for ourselves. The dandelion has been used for centuries in Chinese herbal medicines and in Italy they’re sold along with other plants on the shelves of local plant stores under ‘herbs’. The leaves are also sold in supermarkets for human consumption in salads – and they fly off the shelves as soon as they’re put out.

In fact the brothers who owned our house before we bought it come to see us every year to pick the best of the crop. They describe it as a peppery, very slightly bitter flavour which they love to use in salads.

Many people believe in the use of dandelion leaves and roots for the treatment of illnesses from eczema to arthritis to cancer, and for digestive ailments like upset stomachs and constipation, but there have been insufficient scientific studies for its benefits to be proven for human use.

**What benefits do dandelions have for chickens?**

Many plants we might consider to be ‘weeds’ have amazing health benefits for chickens too. This particular weed has over seven times the amount of Vitamin ‘K’ as broccoli, more Vitamin ‘A’ than a carrot and provides the bulk of a chicken’s daily requirement of Vitamins ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘E’.

Vitamin ‘E’ is particularly important to the health of breeding hens and their chicks – a lack of it can lead to chicks developing wry neck. If you have a
chick with this problem you’ll need to treat with immediate Vitamin ‘E’ and, once the chick is in recovery, offering a few fresh dandelion leaves will aid their rehabilitation.

Very importantly for hens’ health, dandelions also provide even more iron and calcium than feeding your chickens a recognized healthy treat such as kale or spinach. Its protein content is as high as parsley’s, which I recommend as one of the high protein foods for chickens; dandelions contain as much as 1.5 grammes of protein per cup.

Additionally, a study in 2011(2) found that dandelions also act as a safe, organic way of controlling parasites and are an efficient and cost-effective alternative to antibiotics.

Any downsides?

You need to make sure that your dandelions have not been sprayed with any pesticides or weed killers. Helping your chickens ingest those chemicals is not a good idea.

Older plants tend to become very bitter and I’ve found my chickens won’t touch them. They prefer the leaves when the plant is very young, if possible before the flowers come out.

You’ll see some information on the internet saying the dandelions are a natural way to worm chickens. While they have many health benefits, this has never been proven to be one of them. They won’t hurt your hens, of course – quite the opposite – but if your flock has worms you will need to look further afield.

When and where to find them.

This is an easy one. One of the great advantages of dandelions – as well as their being free and easily propagated – is that they’re available from February right through until November, when many other plants are scarce.

Just have a look for some roots in your garden – you’re bound to have some – dig them up and cultivate them in a large pot. Once they’ve multiplied, divide them and plant in your chicken run, or wherever you allow your chickens to roam where you don’t mind having ‘weeds’.

Then, just leave them to it. The chickens will help themselves and the dandelions will regenerate each year, even when the plants look as though there’s nothing left of them.

I personally grow them in my chicken run and, of course, my girls gobble them up until there’s nothing left but a tiny stump. At which point, they venture out into our fields to search for more.
Some hens seem to prefer the leaves only, some will eat the flower heads as well and some will eat the entire plant. Whichever is your chickens’ choice it’s fine – there’s no part of this plant which is harmful to chickens.

If you don’t have any dandelions in your own garden you’re likely to be able to find them at farmer’s markets – or ask your friends who do have them if they can spare a few roots, and watch them bite your hand off!

And finally …

As well as being good for your chickens, the flower of the dandelion is one of the best sources of pollen for bees. So as well as keeping your flock healthy and happy, by growing them you’ll be helping the declining bee population too.

Sources.


4. For a table of the comparative nutrients of different leaves, this website is a good source.
Section V

Which herbs can help your flock chill out?

Chickens are not known for their love of change - in fact they hate it. They’re creatures of habit and they like everything to be “just so”. Anything different immediately becomes a threat – and no amount of reassurance will convince them otherwise.

But herbs just might.

Which herbs work well to reduce stress in chickens?

Perhaps not too surprisingly, the same herbs that work well to reduce anxiety in humans have a similar effect on chickens. The two I’m going to concentrate on here are easy to find and easy to grow: lavender – not surprisingly – and passionflower, which may come as more of a surprise.

If you’re wanting to create a kind of pot-pourri of herbs, these others also work well to give your chickens a bit of stress relief: catnip, which is additionally a good insect repellant; dill, which is also good for any respiratory illnesses; lemon balm, which is anti-bacterial and rosemary which is an excellent antidote to respiratory problems.

Part A : Lavender.

What is it?

Is there anyone who doesn’t know and love the lavender? Originally from the dry, stony regions of the Mediterranean it now grows worldwide in dozens of different varieties.

It is an evergreen plant which grows as a shrub and carries deep purple flowers on spikes waving high above the leaves. The smell of lavender wafting on the summer breeze is one of the great pleasures of living in a Mediterranean climate.

What does it do?

Lavender is mentioned in ancient Greek and Roman texts as a relaxing herb when crushed and burned – the forerunner of our incense burners. In mediaeval times it was used as a flavouring in cooking, and in World War I essential oil from lavender was used as a relaxant and anti-inflammatory for soldiers injured in battle.
It's also used as an insecticidal agent and to treat ailments from dandruff to insomnia and fatigue; its anti-inflammatory properties calm itchy skin and it's been used since time immemorial as a scent for soaps, creams and perfumes.

Scientific research has found that the effects of lavender are not in the mind but are physical: inhaling the scent lowers both heart rate and blood pressure. It has also been found to increase concentration, help with depression and lower ‘agitation’.

**Is it safe for chickens?**

Yes. It's a herb considered safe for human use and there is no record of it having had any kind of harmful side effect on animals or birds, including chickens. Chickens don’t eat lavender plants – they're too woody – so there are no worries about them ingesting anything harmful.

This makes lavender a great plant to grow in your run (or wherever your chickens forage) without fear of them destroying the plant – although mine do try to dust-bathe at the roots.

As with everything, don’t use plants which have been chemically treated with pesticides or insecticides.

**Part B : Passionflower (Passiflora).**

**What is it?**

There are about 500 different species of Passionflower and although they are native to the hot climates of central and South America, changes in global temperatures have seen them spread through Mediterranean regions and other less hospitable areas of North America, Europe and Australia.

It’s a plant of the vine family, using tendrils to aid its climbing habit, and has the most beautiful flowers throughout summer to the first frosts in a variety of colours ranging from cream to pink, purple to an almost blue colour.

It enjoys warm weather but can’t tolerate anything other than a very light frost.

**What does it do?**

Like the lavender, passionflower has been shown in medical research (for example (1),(3)) to be an agent able to lower blood pressure, improve levels of depression and increase the quality and length of sleep for people suffering from insomnia (4).
In animals it has equally been shown to reduce both blood pressure and levels of anxiety and aggression. There have been no studies specific to the use of the passionflower with poultry but it is known not to have any side effects.

Is it safe for chickens?

Yes. It’s considered to be a very safe, gentle herb which has calming effects without affecting the central nervous system. So your chickens should be calmed by it without becoming fuzzy-headed.

It grows as a woody vine which is far too hard for chickens to eat. The flowers tend to grow on the higher stems and are usually out of reach but in any event aren’t harmful.

When the flowers have finished a fruit grows which, when ripe (it becomes a dark purple colour and very wrinkly) is tasty to eat. Don’t try to pick it from the vine though – it will taste quite bitter – wait until it falls from the tree and then eat it – unless your chickens get there first, of course. Chickens love them.

When and how to administer lavender and passionflower.

For humans the essential oil is the most popular way of using lavender: a few drops in a diffuser or in some boiling water will quickly create a relaxing, blood-pressure-lowering environment.

For chickens, though, it’s not advisable to use the essential oils; better to use the plant as it grows naturally.

So, grow these two, or a mixture of these and other relaxing herbs, in or near your chicken run; hang them in the coop; dry them and put into cute little pouches to hang near your nest boxes and decorate your coop at the same time; or use the dried flowers to sprinkle directly in your nest boxes.

Lavender as a coop air freshener!

Use lavender, too, as a way of persuading flies to keep away from your coop. Crush a couple of handfuls of the flowers in a pestle and mortar, add to a bottle of white vinegar, shake and leave for about four weeks. At the end of that time put it in a spray bottle and use it to clean and freshen your coop.

You can add a handful of mint and/or rosemary to the mix – they are also natural fly repellants, although personally I prefer the single note of the lavender.

Chickens love it and flies hate it – what could be better?
Where to get them from.

Garden centres everywhere stock lavender – it's become one of the most popular plants in the world. Make sure you plant it in a sunny position and in well drained soil. Remember, it grows naturally in very rocky places so it doesn’t need rich soil.

Be aware, though, that the roots of the lavender plant are quite invasive – one of our neighbours had to have her drains replaced because the lavender roots had gone through them. Plant well away from any underground pipes or buildings wherever possible.

Passionflower plants should also be easy to come by at your local nursery or garden centre, or are available online. It prefers hot climates and is not good at overwintering where there are very harsh winters.

Look for ‘Passiflora Incarnata’ which is one of the hardier varieties and the most common in North America. Its fruits are among the most succulent.

Outside, the passionflower requires full sun, a well-drained soil and something to climb up. I like to use it to scramble up my effective but not very pretty chain-link fence – the tendrils love it.

If your climate and soil type doesn’t fit don’t worry : it will also grow inside in a pot. Once the frosts have passed it can be moved outside – next to your coop door is a great place (although your pot may well be in danger of being used as a dust-bath!).

And, once it's grown and flowered, start picking those beautiful petals!

Sources.


6. The [Passiflora Society International](website) (website) has information about the Passionflower and, in its links section, information about where to buy them worldwide.

Thank You!

For taking the time to download and read my book. I have enjoyed writing it and I hope you’ve both enjoyed it and found it useful.

If you haven’t already, don’t forget to have a look at my website which is full of information about caring for chickens from egg to adult.

Once again, thank you for being here. I have enjoyed your company!

Cath x