
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 138

Seasonal Backyard Chicken Care with Kathy Shea Mormino

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/138

- Announcer:** This is the Living Homegrown podcast, episode 138. Welcome to the Living Homegrown podcast where it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm, to help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host, national PBS TV producer and canning expert, Theresa Loe.
- Theresa:** Hey there everybody. Welcome to the podcast. I'm your host, Theresa Loe and this podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm. Now, that includes organic small space food growing, canning, and fermenting the harvest, and artisan food crafts like baking your own bread. It's all about the different ways that we can live closer to our food and take small delicious steps towards living a more sustainable lifestyle. If you want to learn more about any of these topics or any of my online courses, coaching, or my living homegrown membership, just visit LivingHomegrown.com.

Today we're gonna dive into year round backyard chicken care. Now, I'm not talking about the basics here like how do you raise baby chicks. I'm talking about once you have already established yourself with a flock in your backyard, some of the things that you need to consider with each of the seasons that is really important in taking care of your chickens properly. You know, a lot of us who have backyard chickens, we are raising them as pets and for the eggs, and so it's really important for them to live a really healthy life so that they have a long life even if they aren't giving us eggs. A lot of us just keep those chickens like I do so that they're part of the family.

So, if you are only thinking about raising backyard chickens and you're curious about some of the care, I thought this would be a great episode for you because some times episodes or even articles only talk about getting started, they don't talk about what happens after you get started. And if you are already raising backyard chickens, then this episode is definitely for you, because we're gonna dive into some of the things that you may not realize are important or you may be doing incorrectly. So, I think it'll be a really important episode all the way around.

The gist of it is that we are gonna talk about the most important things that you need to keep in mind, the seasonal considerations for winter, spring, summer, and fall. And the person that I brought on to help us talk about that is Kathy Shea Mormino. Now you may know her and not even realize that you know her because she's more commonly known as the Chicken Chick and she has a fantastic website and a very, very popular Facebook page as well as other social media, and she teaches people how to take care of their backyard chickens.

Now, I'm gonna talk about Kathy's background here in a second, but I wanted to tell you that a lot of what we talk about here with Kathy is myth busting. That's what she's known for. She takes a lot of common things that we hear on the Internet and she does the research to see if we really should be doing it. Now, some of these topics are controversial, surprisingly yes, there is controversial information when it comes to backyard chicken keeping, so we just hit it head on. We're gonna talk about diatomaceous earth, whether or not you should really heat your coop in the winter time, and even adding vinegar to water. And Kathy goes into all of this.

So, let me tell you a little bit about Kathy before we get started. Kathy Shea Mormino, also known affectionately internationally as the Chicken Chick, shares a fun loving informative style to raising backyard chickens. Her practical approach, down to earth style, and sense of humor allow her to connect, educate, and share an appreciation of chickens as pets with chicken enthusiasts everywhere. She's an attorney by trade, an accidental photographer, a backyard chicken keeper, and a bee keeper. And she's the founder of her blog, The Chicken Chick.

Now, Kathy has a brand new book out that's called The Chicken Chick's Guide to Backyard Chickens: Simple Steps for Healthy, Happy Hens. And what I liked about this book was that she really dives into care and even what to do in an emergency with a chicken as well as all the basics that you need to know to raise your chickens in a really healthy way. Now aside from her book, she has made contributions to Hobby Farms Chickens, Hobby Farms home magazines, and online you can find her work at Mother Earth News Magazine, Grit Magazine, and Manna Pro Poultry.

She has also been featured on numerous television shows and on various podcasts. She even has a regular Facebook Live on her Facebook page called Happy Hour with Hens Live, and she shows all of her chickens. It's kind of like Farm TV, but you get an education at the same time. So, I think you'd really enjoy that as well. There are a lot of great little tidbits in today's interview, so I think you're really gonna enjoy this. But before we dive into the interview, I just want to tell you that today's podcast episode is brought to you by my Living Homegrown Institute, which is my membership site, and I believe that living an organic farm fresh lifestyle is really a journey in learning, and as we learn the different skills such as food fermentation and food growing, and even critter keeping, there are three distinct stages of growth.

We all start out with curiosity. We move into experimentation, and eventually we grow into mastery of these skills. Now, if you're working at creating your own farm fresh lifestyle and you're curious where you may fall on that growth scale, well I've got a free resource for you. It's a PDF that I call my farm fresh success path, and it's actually what my students use inside my learning institute. And it'll help you decide where you are on your journey, the characteristics of that particular stage, and some action steps and information that can get you to the next level. So, to get the success path PDF, all you have to do is go to LivingHomegrown.com/path and you can download it there for free.

Okay. So, I think we're all set to go. Here is my interview with Kathy Shea Mormino, the author of *The Chicken Chick's Guide to Backyard Chickens*.

Hey, Kathy. Thank you so much for coming on the show today.

Kathy: My pleasure, Theresa. Thanks for having me.

Theresa: Well, I've been a follower of your blog and your brand for so many years and you're known to most people as, affectionately as the Chicken Chick and that is your brand. So, could you tell everyone some of the topics that you cover on your website? Because you cover everything chickens. What are some of the things that you cover?

Kathy: Right. So, it's probably easier to enumerate the things that I don't cover about chickens. I cover anything that pertains to keeping backyard chickens for eggs and pets. I don't cover raising chickens for processing. I don't cover meat birds. I don't cover 4H or showing. So, it's all about small flock management. And by small flock, I mean fewer than a couple hundred. Like for pets and for eggs.

Theresa: Okay. Perfect. Yes. Before we get started into talking today, 'cause we're really gonna be talking more about if you already have chickens, not just starting out with baby chicks. We're not gonna cover baby chicks today, but if you already have chickens, we're gonna cover some of the seasonal considerations that you have to have. But before we do that, I would love to know what really got you started with chickens.

Kathy: Well, I hadn't any experience in keeping animals outdoors prior to building a house in our town with my husband. And our town is a farm town and our neighbor had horses and chickens, and she asked me to collect eggs for her one summer while she and her husband were on vacation. And that sort of planted the seed. I thought it was really fun to have fresh eggs and to visit the birds and watch their little peculiar ways a couple times a day. I know I only needed to go once, but I found them fascinating and I found that I was visiting more than once a day.

So, that planted the seed and about a year later after doing my homework and trying to talk my husband into it, which is a whole different issue, we got, we planned to get six chickens and we ended up getting a dozen, and that is the start of the backyard chicken keeping adventure, which took on a life of its own not long thereafter. So, when my first birds started laying eggs, I wanted custom labels to put on the egg cartons that I would share with my friends and family. And I wanted pictures of my small children on the labels with the chickens and pictures of the chickens to show people these unique looking birds that were responsible for these gorgeous eggs. And no one was offering that product. No one was offering custom labels like that.

So, I started making my own and I had extra supply and started making them for other people, which turned into a teeny tiny cottage industry that I'm running away from now because more people are doing it and I just don't have the time anymore. But in marketing the labels business on Facebook, I started the Facebook page and the blog to market the labels, and that turned into what the Chicken Chick is today, just by doing what I do, which is sharing pictures of my birds online, talking about my chickening day to people, and researching and writing about chicken care topics.

So, I would reply to Facebook fans' questions and I would find that there would be frequently asked questions, so I'd write a blog article that pertained to that, and then I'd just be able to share the link when it was asked again. So, that is just the organic evolution of the Chicken Chick and it was completely unintended and just, it spun out from a hobby, a hobby that was also unintended. So, that's it in a nutshell, if you will.

Theresa: Yeah. And it's really massive now. You have like, I don't know, like 800,000 followers on Facebook. It's really, really big. You're very beloved because you are always a great resource for all the chicken keeping information out there and I really appreciate all the information that you put out there, because when someone comes to me for a question, I send them over to you.

Kathy: I appreciate the referrals.

Theresa: Yeah, absolutely.

Kathy: You know what, the truth is the numbers are pretty irrelevant to me. I just want to share what I know about best practices and the best practices for keeping chickens the way that we do today, which is completely different from the way and the purposes chickens have been kept historically. Chickens have historically been kept in backyards since the dawn of time to feed families and they were not kept as pets. So, they were kept for the eggs and they were kept for the meat, so if the birds got sick or injured, they were processed and that's ... or if they stopped laying eggs, they were processed, too, and the family had them for dinner.

So, there wasn't the pet aspect in the way that we view backyard chickens as pets today. So, we have different management practices. There are best management practices and it's all very new to this new population of chicken keepers. So, it's important to understand why we do the things for these unique pets that we do in order to keep them optimally healthy, and you want your pets to be happy of course, but you want to be able to enjoy them as long as possible. But they won't live as long as your cat or dog, and they are very sensitive to certain practices, in particular their diet. They're very sensitive to omissions in their diet, so it's important to understand the best practices for them, and that's always at the heart of what I am trying to share with my readers, my viewers, my peeps, my fans.

Theresa: No, that's an excellent point. We are keeping them differently. Mine are pets and I have several who don't lay eggs anymore, but I would never dream of getting rid of them because it would be like getting rid of my dog because she got old. That just would never happen. So, no, I'm with you 100%. I'm curious, though, how many chickens do you currently have right now?

Kathy: Probably around 30. I never really count anymore because I'm just always sort of hatching or acquiring new birds. And of course, there's a natural attrition that occurs. So around 30. We'll go with that.

Theresa: Yeah. 'Cause I know I've seen on your Facebook Lives you have a lot of different breeds, so I was just curious how many you have. I would love to dive into some of those seasonal considerations when we already have older birds or just not, I don't mean older like elderly, but birds that are laying eggs and we now have chickens. So, I guess since we're starting right now, this is coming out at the end of winter, I'd love to talk to you about winter issues, because I live in Los Angeles, so I don't deal with winter issues here. But I know there are some very important considerations if you live in a colder climate. So, what are some of the things that we need to pay attention to when we have chickens?

Kathy: So, probably the most important consideration that I want people to bear in mind, the most important fact when dealing with chickens in any climate any season is that chickens have a completely different anatomy and physiology from humans or even from your dog or your other pets. They have a core body temperature that ranges in the 104 to 107 degree range. So, they are already super warm inside. That is their normal temperature. So, in summer, it's difficult for them to maintain that core body temperature without meeting harm when it's hot outside, and in the winter they are uniquely suited to maintain that core body temperature and retain the warmth to keep themselves warm.

So, I want people to remember that chickens have a very high body temperature, and in addition to that in the winter time, they have, they're wearing down jackets. So, their feathers are helping them to retain the heat that they generate. They will generate more heat from consuming feed and burning calories. So, those calories generate heat that radiates up through their skin that they trap against their bodies with their feathers. So, it's important to remember when thinking about issues like how comfortable they are that our level of comfort walking into their chicken coop or sticking our heads into their chicken coop is not the same as their level of comfort.

So, what they need in the winter time is the same things that they need in the summer. That is a clean, dry living space with adequate ventilation because there's a lot of moisture generated from respiration. So, when they're breathing and they're pooping, all of the moisture that comes from that needs a place to escape. So, you need adequate ventilation in all seasons. But more importantly even is that they need a draft free living space, because we just talked about the manner in which they retain their body heat is with their feathers and if their feathers are ruffled by a breeze, a draft coming in through their coop walls somehow, they can't keep themselves warm, they can't retain that heat. So, they need a clean, dry living space without drafts.

Theresa: No, I'm sure that's super important and I know that when they're huddled together, they're like little incubators. When I reach in under them if there's a couple of them in one spot to get an egg, man, it's really warm under there.

Kathy: It is.

Theresa: And it's always surprising.

Kathy: It is. So, don't think that you need necessarily to make any heat additions to the chicken coop. Only in the most severely cold areas where it stays in the negative digits for protracted periods of time might you consider adding a few degrees of heat to the coop, but you never want it to be 40 degrees in the chicken coop in the middle of winter if you live in say Canada. You just want, if you have breeds that have large combs for instance, your concern is going to be frostbite. So, you're concerned about the birds being protected from frostbite, and you don't need to add a heat source necessarily most of the time.

So, be judicious and be cognizant about the fact that they're able to keep themselves warm and they just need you to make their environment safe. So, never, never, never a heat lamp in the chicken coop. If you feel you must add a few degrees to the coop to get it to the 32 degree mark, 33 degree mark, that's okay, but do it in the safe way. Heat lamps are never safe with flying animals. So, you will hear about people tethering, tether your heat lamp with your baby chicks or with your adult birds, six different ways to Sunday so they can't fall down.

Well, falling down isn't the end of the fire hazard story for chickens. Heat lamps are inherently dangerous with flying animals. Not only can a bird get spooked and fly up into the 500 degree surface of a 250 watt heat lamp, but their feathers can fly, dust can fly. Chicken coops and brooders are very dusty areas. So, heat lamps are inherently dangerous. There are much safer ways to provide warmth to chicks and adult chickens when they need that. So, there are radiant heat sources for chicks and adults, and there are, in terms of a chicken coop in the winter time if you need to take the edge off, you can either use a radiant heat source such as a cozy coop heater or you can use an oil filled radiator.

But if you live in a really cold climate like Alaska or Canada, go ahead and make sure you have insulation on your coops.

-
- Theresa: Right. No, of course, right. We should totally insulate it if you're gonna be in a really, really cold climate like that. That would make perfect sense because once they generate the heat of huddling together, that little coop would stay pretty warm if it was insulated.
- Kathy: Warm to them, it won't feel warm to you.
- Theresa: No. Right.
- Kathy: That's an important distinction.
- Theresa: Yeah. Okay. Really good. Okay. So, let's move, I know you could talk about winter forever, so we're just gonna touch on the different times of year. So, let's talk about springtime, because one of the things that happens every springtime with my little silky is she goes broody. So, I know you have tips for handling a broody chicken. What are some of those things that we can do?
- Kathy: Right. So, for the uninitiated who may not know what a broody hen is, a broody hen is one who is inspired by her genetics, her hormones, lighting conditions, time of year, variety of factors, to sit in a nest of her choosing to hatch eggs. And she doesn't care if there are eggs underneath her or not. It's the sitting that she is motivated by. So, she thinks she's going to be hatching chicks. Whether she is or not, completely irrelevant. So, if you want her to hatch chicks, then that's a totally different conversation.
- But if you don't want her to hatch chicks, it's important for her health to stop her from behaving in this broody way. So, a broody hen will sit on a nest all day and all night, leaving it only once a day, maybe twice to poop, to eat, and to drink. And she may spend 15, 20 minutes off the nest, but she will hightail it back after she's taken care of her essential needs. But while being broody, she will consume approximately 80% less chicken feed in a day than she ordinarily does and she will lose weight. As a result of that, she may become dehydrated. So, she's just sitting in this nest doing nothing, not burning any calories, but certainly not consuming enough calories to maintain her fighting weight. So, it's very important that chickens that are broody that are not going to be allowed to hatch eggs and to see chicks within three weeks that they are what we call broken up.

So, you want to break her up. And there are a lot of crazy suggestions for how to break up a broody hen that you don't want to go with because they're ineffective or unkind, but the essence of breaking up a broody hen has to do with changing her mindset, altering her hormones, and giving her a different perspective on the world. So, broodies like a dark, quiet location where they can hide their eggs from predators in the wild. So, that's what motivates them to sit in a nest. So, you want to get a broody hen out of the chicken coop, physically pick her up out of the chicken coop, bring her into a well lit location such as a garage or a ... it has to be predator proof. It has to be some place where she is going to be safe at night away from the flock and away from predators.

So, I keep my, I call it the Broody Breaker, my facility in the garage. It's just a rabbit hutch. Now, you want it to be wire bottomed and the reason for that is because broody hens have a highly vascularized patch of skin on their abdomen area that they pluck free of feathers so they can apply the warmth and humidity of their body directly through their skin to the eggs to hatch them. And so the wire bottomed necessity in a broody breaker is intended to promote air flow up under there to cool that area off.

Now, you'll read all kinds of crazy things about dunking hens in water, etc. etc. to break them up, but those are unkind and ineffective, and it's not even a quick fix. It's just a bad idea. It's just unkind. So, provide the wire bottomed floor, cage, unit, whatever for your hen, and keep her in there until she is walking around, eating, drinking normally. And then you could put her back in the flock. If she runs right back to the flock with wild abandon and high tails it back to her nest, she's not broken up yet. She needs to go back in. But the wire bottom floor needs to be raised up off the ground to provide her with adequate ventilation to try to cool off those broody hormones.

Theresa: I love that idea because it's so simple and yet very, very humane. I've read about the whole dunking of the chicken thing and I never wanted to do that, so I'm glad I didn't. So, typically does it just take a few days of this?

Kathy: Well, it depends how long she's been broody.

Theresa: Okay.

Kathy: So, your best bet and for her sanity and yours, it's best to break up a broody hen as soon as you notice that she's not leaving that nest. So, you should be able to recognize. If you have silkies, if you have Cochins, you know that these are broody breed, they're predisposed to broodiness, and keep an eye on them. If they set up shop in a nest and they plan on staying there overnight, they're broody. So, get them out of there and put them right in your broody breaker as soon as possible, because the longer you wait to break them up, the longer it's gonna take to get them back to egg laying.

Theresa: Yeah. That makes perfect sense. Well, another thing I wanted to ask you about within the springtime arena was something that you talk about a lot. You talk about it on Facebook, you talk about it in your blog, and that is the use of diatomaceous earth. And this was something that I learned about when I was first starting chickens and I see it over and over and I know you are not a proponent of it. And I want to know, I want you to talk about that 'cause I think it's such important information.

Kathy: So, I am adamantly opposed to the use of food grade diatomaceous earth with backyard chickens. And for those who don't know, food grade diatomaceous earth or DE is a naturally occurring fossilized mineral dust with microscopic razor sharp edges. And the way that it works on an insect is to cut into the waxy outer skeleton of an insect's body and dry it out. So, it cuts and dries. And the problems with the use of diatomaceous earth in a chicken coop are many.

First, DE is a known carcinogen in occupational environments over time. So, we know it causes cancer in humans over time. Now, your chickens may not live long enough to get lung cancer, but they certainly in breathing this stuff are going to have scarring on their lungs and damage to their bodies in other ways. Because people who are putting the DE in their chicken coops, whether it's in the litter, on top of the litter, in the nest boxes, under the nesting material, heaven forbid in the dust bath, are creating an environment where these microscopic particles, these dusty particles are in the air constantly. So, you may apply it very carefully, but it's always in the environment.

If anyone moves in the chicken coop, you're stirring that stuff up, and it's in the air. And you're breathing it. Now, manufacturers of DE have warnings on the label that indicate that users should wear respirators. Not dust masks, respirators when applying DE. Now, I don't know about your, but my chickens don't have respirators their size, so why would you leave your pet in an environment that is a breathing hazard to you that the manufacturer warns about when you wouldn't stay in there with, knowing those hazards?

So, I think most people don't realize the hazards, because DE is a naturally occurring substance in the earth and it has its uses in certain applications, but chicken coops with pet chickens are not a good use or a safe use of the product. Now, the other problems, besides being a carcinogen with DE is that the razor sharp edges of this product cut into the mucus membranes of anything it touches. So, if you pick it up with your hands, you'll feel it's very, very drying. And that's what it's supposed to do. So, it's cutting into your skin and it's drying the lipids, the oils out of your skin. It's doing the same thing to chickens.

Now, their mucus membranes are their, and their skin is their first line of defense against pathogens entering their body. So, rolling in DE if you're putting it in the dust bath, or having it in the air if it's in the coop anywhere, is an assault on their mucus membranes. It's cutting into their mucus membranes with microscopic cuts. That's unhealthy for them. So, we don't want to assault their immune system, and most people don't think of it that way. It is an assault on their immune system to have DE on their bodies.

So, don't ... my overarching message to backyard chicken keepers is do not fear the cooties. Do not fear mites and lice. Our birds' commercial cousins do not have the benefit of being exposed to the great outdoors. They don't get mites and lice because they don't have wild birds. They don't have squirrels. They don't have insert animal name here, wild animal name here, running through or flying over their habitat. Ours do. So, I think of mites and lice as a badge of honor if my birds get them. They're living the good life outside with other wildlife and that's where mites and lice come from. So, if your birds get an infestation, you treat it when it happens. But you don't need to put a dangerous insecticide in their environment 24/7, 365 because you're afraid of mites and lice.

So, let's think about why we're doing the things that we do for backyard chickens critically and adjust accordingly. Because I think a lot of these tactics such as sprinkling DE sound innocuous enough to backyard chicken keepers, but they're not and they don't have a good basis in integrated pest management. So, this is not the way we should be managing our chicken coops for our pet chickens, because it's unhealthy for them. And it's unhealthy for us. Look up the MSDS safety sheets for the use of these products and you will see ... frightening. It's really frightening.

Theresa: Yeah. Absolutely. You're so right. And I love what you're saying here, because it's very similar to how we always talk on this show about approaching our garden. You're not gonna keep spraying your garden to prevent every little insect and bug that comes along because you're gonna end up messing up the immune system of the plants, your immune system, and the whole ecosystem. It's so much better to wait until the problem happens and then deal with it one by one and that's really what you're saying, is the way we should handle this, which is a much smarter approach and a more holistic approach, which is, I love that. I think it's great. Perfect.

Kathy: And think of our pollinators. I'm a bee keeper and I know that DE is hazardous to bees as well as other beneficial insects in the yard. So, don't think that just, the DE is going to stay where you put it. It is constantly in the air once you have applied it to your chicken yard anywhere, and it's dangerous to the beneficial insects who are in charge of beating down the bad bugs. So, it sounds counterintuitive, but it's actually, DE yes, it's natural, but no, it's not a good holistic chicken keeping practice to use it in your coops.

Theresa: Perfect. Okay. Great. I'm so glad I asked you about that, 'cause I really think that's important information 'cause I see it everywhere. Good. I'm glad we tackled it.

Kathy: And you know what, and that is sort of emblematic of our society today who doesn't really understand the best management practices of backyard chickens because we've never kept chickens as pets before. We've only ever kept them as families to feed ourselves, so families historically have kept chickens for the eggs and for the meat. So, when the birds became unproductive or got sick or injured, they were simply processed for dinner. They were meat birds as well as egg birds. So, they didn't live long lives. So, longevity wasn't something you needed to consider when keeping birds because they were utility animals.

So, I'm not saying they never named their birds as we do back in the day, but they did not keep them for the same purposes that we keep them today. We keep our birds not only as egg producers, but as valued family companion animals, and we name them and we want them to live as long and healthy a life as possible. But we don't understand what the best management practices of them are because we haven't kept them for longevity before.

Theresa: Right. Exactly. And that's, this is so good. That's exactly what we're doing now, and they are a valued part of my whole garden backyard. They are eating the scraps and helping me make compost, which then goes into the garden, which feeds my family. So, they are a very integral part of my whole ecosystem and I want them to live happy lives as much as possible. So, excellent, excellent information.

So, let's move on to summer. Now, in summer, I know there's a lot of considerations with water. You talked about their body heat, which I had never realized really why they always felt warm to me, but I know here in Los Angeles, we get heat waves, so when we have a lot of heat, that's what I'm watching for with my chickens is heat stress and making sure that they're hydrated and giving them things like watermelon and things like that. Is that still a good thing to do? Is water in the heat one of the most important things?

Kathy: It is. And because their body temperatures are already so high, when the mercury hits 85 which is just a nice day in LA, right? When it hits 85, chickens begin to struggle with keeping their body temperature consistent and not overheating. And heat stress can kill chickens very quickly. And most people don't want to hear this, but the truth is we're over treating, over feeding our chickens with scraps. Kitchen scraps, vegetables, fruits. I call treats anything we give to our birds in addition to their commercial complete chicken feed.

So, any treats that we give them are interfering with their diet and we are making our birds fat. Most backyard chickens, and I glean this information from a poultry nutritionist that I work with, Dr. Anika McKillip who sees chicken flocks, flocks of chickens in their backyards, she tells me that most of her clients' birds are obese. And you won't recognize that your chickens are obese unless you're a poultry veterinarian, because they put their fat weight on around their liver first. And so it's not like you can feel their keel bone, that's a popular thing that you'll hear people saying, "Feel their keel bone, I feel it. They're not fat." Well, you're not going to.

And in the summer time when the birds begin panting, that's one of the ways that they keep themselves cool or try to regulate their body temperature, that's altering their blood chemistry and they are at risk for a condition known as fatty liver hemorrhagic syndrome and basically what that is is when they have fat around their liver and their body chemistry changes from panting, their livers literally explode and they die from heat stress put on them when they're overweight in the heat. So, it's really important to not only feed our birds correctly but provide the other best management practices for them in the summer time which is yes, plenty of clean water in clean containers.

Theresa: Yeah, you talk about this a lot. It's important to make sure that the water is clean every single day, and something that I wanted to ask you about, because it's another thing that I see a lot is adding vinegar to the water. And I'd love for you to talk about that, because I know that that's not something that you recommend.

Kathy: No, but I'll tell you, when I was a new chicken keeper, I thought that I needed to put apple cider vinegar with the mother in their water to keep their digestive tracts healthy. But when you dig into the science of these things and you understand them better, you will realize that not only is that not a best practice, it can be a harmful practice in the summer time when their blood chemistry is changing because it contributes to heat stress.

Putting vinegar in the water is completely unnecessary. It does not improve the gut health of your chickens, as you will read commonly around the blogosphere. The gut of a chicken, the digestive tract of a chicken is already more acidic than vinegar. So, putting a tablespoon of vinegar or even two tablespoons of vinegar in their drinking water has a negligible effect. It has no effect on their digestive health. So, a completely useless recommendation.

You want to understand also that, some people will say, "Well, I'm putting it in the drinkers to keep the bio slime down." And my response to that is, "What bio slime?" If these are your, are you letting Fido's dog water bowl get bio slime in it? Your birds cannot be optimally healthy if they are drinking sewage out of their drinkers. So, it makes no sense to be putting vinegar in the water to keep bio slime or beat back bacteria if you're feeding your birds water that has fecal matter in it and bacteria from that and litter in it. You can very easily provide fresh water, clean water to your birds 100% of the time by using poultry nipple drinkers. Open sources of water are so 1970. Forget about the bowls-

Theresa: That's so good. I love that. I love that comment. That is really good. "That's so 1970." Okay. Keep going. I'm sorry, I just had to, that was a really good one. Go ahead.

Kathy: We have to think progressively. If we want these pets to live a long time, they cannot be healthy without the essential element in their diet, which is water. So, how healthy would you be, Theresa, if I offered you a bottle of, or let's say a glass of water that has been sitting in the middle of, I don't know, the mall. We're at the mall together, I offer you the glass of water to drink out of knowing that not only has everybody who has gone past it taken a sip of it during flu season, but some times they're putting their cigarette butts out in it and maybe somebody just changed their baby's diaper and they need to use it to wash their hands. How healthy are you going to be drinking out of that water glass?

- Theresa: Not too healthy.
- Kathy: How about if I put a teaspoon of vinegar in that water for you? Are you gonna feel any better about it?
- Theresa: No.
- Kathy: No, you're still not gonna want to drink it.
- Theresa: No.
- Kathy: So, why would we assume that our chickens are better off with vinegar in their drinking water when their drinking water is dirty to begin with? They're not. So, that's another complete fallacy. There is no role, no benefit to vinegar in chicken water. Give them clean water in clean containers all day every day and your birds are off to a good start being optimally healthy.
- Theresa: So good. I love how you just cut to the chase. This is so good. Excellent.
- Kathy: [crosstalk 00:41:33] no nonsense girl. I do want to mention with respect to summer, too, that water isn't the end of the story. You want to make sure to provide your birds with lots of shade and tons of ventilation. Make whatever modifications you have to make to your chicken coop to keep these birds alive. Chickens have a difficult time staying alive in hot weather. So, I know you guys in, are you considered southern California, LA?
- Theresa: Oh yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yep.
- Kathy: You guys have your work cut out for you. It's much more difficult to keep chickens alive in the heat than it is in the cold. So, it makes me crazy to see these chicken coops with no windows or ventilation that are just three inch holes with hardware cloth on them. Cut holes, make rudimentary windows in your coops on all four sides. Your birds need to have ventilation, breezes. Think breezes in the summer time, not just holes in the coop. Do what you have to do to give your birds light and air flow, circulation in the summer time.

Now, this is one time when I invite you to consider the temperature in your chicken coop and how comfortable it is to you. You only have a 98.6 degree Fahrenheit body temperature. If it feels hot in their chicken coop to you, you know that your birds are struggling to stay alive. So, put fans in, but do what you have to do to keep that air moving, because at night, they are waiting to be victims of the heat.

Theresa: Yes. yes. That's really, the ventilation and a breeze flowing through is so, so important. That's really good. Great. Well, okay. So, the very last weather thing or season thing that we're gonna talk about here is fall. And I know my chickens every fall are molting, and you have some tips for how to handle a molt with our chickens. So, what is that?

Kathy: So, a couple things. With respect to molting, you want to increase the protein intake of your birds at the time they begin to molt. So, while they're on a layer feed, you're always offering oyster shell on the side, right? Just for the birds who are gonna continue to lay. And you can have birds that will continue laying eggs while they're molting, but most will slow down or stop. So, you have the oyster shells in a separate dish, not mixed into the chicken feed, and that's always true. But you also, when most of your birds are molting, want to switch over your chicken feed from a layer ration to a, either a starter or a starter grower like a Purina flock raiser.

That will give them the added protein that they need to build feathers and they'll get back to, they'll get through their molt faster and they'll get back to egg laying faster and just more easily with the addition of that protein source. So, you don't need to jump through all kinds of hoops in finding treats that are high in protein to feed to them. You just need to give them a different chicken feed.

So, limit the treats, that's a big, big thing of mine. No more than two tablespoons of any treat per chicken per day and not every day. Moderation is the key. If you are giving your birds everything that comes out of your kitchen every day, you are diluting their diet. So, even if you're giving your birds healthy chicken scraps, you want to limit them. Birds need the 38 plus nutrients in a specific balance that poultry nutritionists have worked out to keep these birds optimally healthy. If you're adding lots of stuff to their diet, you're diluting it and they cannot be optimally productive, optimally healthy, and cannot live as long as you want them to.

So, that's super important all times of year, feed them correctly. Poultry nutritionists get paid handsome salaries to research, there's about 100 years of poultry nutrition research that comes to us from the commercial poultry industry who has the profit incentive to make sure these birds are 100% healthy because sick birds don't lay eggs, right?

Malnourished birds don't lay eggs. So, the commercial industry has done all the work for us in terms of poultry nutrition. We know what they need. Don't screw it up.

Theresa: Right. And I have a question on the grower feed. So, the grower feed has more protein in it and that helps them in creating the new feathers. Is that what's happening?

Kathy: Correct. And it's not even, I use the word protein, but it's more amino acids, the building blocks of the protein that they need in certain amounts, in certain ... So, not all proteins are created equally.

Theresa: Okay. Really important, yeah.

Kathy: [crosstalk 00:46:25] important.

Theresa: Yeah. So then they'll be more comfortable and it'll be a faster process 'cause they're not struggling to get the nutrients that they need to make their new feathers.

Kathy: Right. That's the essence of it. But keep it simple, you guys. We're reading too much about what amateurs are writing, and I consider myself an amateur right along with you guys. I've made all the silly mistakes with the DE and with the vinegar and with the silly nonsense you read on blogs about what we should be doing about chickens, written by people who are just repeating what they've heard from somebody else who invented it from a grain of truth. Keep it simple. If you keep it simple, your birds will get exactly what they need.

So, I talk about there's four pillars of healthy chickens in my book, *The Chicken Chick's Guide to Backyard Chickens*. One, clean water and clean containers all day every day. Two, a complete commercial layer feed and limited treats. And three is a clean, dry living space and the fourth is good bio security. And that is, bio security is the way we keep disease out of our flocks. And there are lots of ways, but the biggest one we run afoul of as backyard chicken keepers is bringing grown birds into our flock from other sources. That's a major no. So, I've done it. We've all done it. But it is a major risk factor for bringing disease into your yard. Don't share equipment with a fellow chicken keeper. Don't let a fellow chicken keeper wear their chicken yard shoes into your backyard.

Theresa: Good information, 'cause I've been guilty of that for sure. So that, really good. Well, Kathy, thank you so much for this information. This is all so, so important for us as backyard keepers of our chickens and I just really appreciate you sharing all of this with my listeners. So, thank you for coming on the show today.

Kathy: My pleasure. I could talk about chickens all day and I love the opportunity to be able to share what I've learned with folks who are open to receiving the information and I'm happy to have had the opportunity. Thank you.

Theresa: Well, I hope you enjoyed that episode with Kathy Shea Mormino, also known as the Chicken Chick. And as always, I will have all the information that she talked about in the show notes for today's episode. And to get to the show notes, you just go to LivingHomegrown.com/138. I will have information about her website, her book, and some links to some really informative articles that are directly related to what she talked about today.

I hope this helped you if you are already a backyard chicken keeper, and it may have inspired you to want to have backyard chickens if you are even considering it. I'll tell you, I have loved every moment of having my backyard chickens. The eggs are incredible and they are the cutest pets. I really do love my chickens and I love seeing other people start having backyard chickens as well.

So, today's episode was brought to you by my Living Homegrown Institute, and if you're interested in getting a free copy of the success path to your own living farm fresh lifestyle, then just go to LivingHomegrown.com/path and you can download it there for free. So, that's it for this week. I'll see you next time. And until next time, just try to live a little more local, seasonal, and homegrown. Take care, everybody.

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. Visit LivingHomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown podcast.