

# CONCERNING POULTRY

## FEEDING YOUR CHICKENS: BERRIES



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I like to feed my Orpingtons herbs and vegetables, as well as and berries and nuts. The greater the variety, the better, so I am always looking for something extra. During the second half of the year, especially berries and hips can be collected anywhere for free. (Note: I use the term 'berries' although some are actually fruit/pomes). I feed them rose hip and berries of rowan, hawthorn, elder berry, firethorn, blackthorn and sea-buckthorn. In the season – August to November – often 1 to 2 buckets a day, that is for 40 to 50 mature chickens. The rose hips, firethorn and sea-buckthorn are their favourites. Most of these berries contain carotene and lots of vitamins.

**Right: Berries of the common hawthorn.**

In our region, people of a Nature Organization have planted a lot of berry trees and shrubs in projects that had to ensure that again hedges and hedgerows



would occur in natural environments, for birds and other small creatures. In early fall, those hedgerows bulge with chicken feed, such as the many hawthorns with thick reddish brown berries. They are happily eaten by my Orpingtons and also the leaves that come along when picking are eagerly eaten.



There are many Blackthorns too. The berries are dark blue, about 1 cm thick, with a large stone inside. They are very bitter but the chickens eat all that I provide. Blackthorn berries in gin make a tasty alcoholic drink, in case you picked too many for the chickens to eat.

**Left: Blackthorn / sloe berries.**

The small hard hips of the eglantine and dog rose are the hardest to pick, but they are well worth the trouble, because the birds really enjoy eating them. Because the flesh is so hard, they don't spoil, you can easily stock up more than a week and provide a handful every now and then.

**Below, right and left: Rose hips of the dog rose and Rugosa rose.**

Rose hips of the Rugosa rose are softer and thicker, making them ideal to feed. The chickens are completely addicted to the many small seeds that are inside and when the last seed has disappeared, they eat all the fruit flesh too. That is also very good for us, it is full of vitamin C.



You can keep on feeding rose hips straight from the bush until far in winter, unless there are many wild birds in your garden, as they will feed on it too.

Rowan berries are very easy to pick. They hang in bunches and there are no thorns in the way. If you know where to find some not too high rowan trees, you will have a bucket full of berries in 5 minutes.



**Right: European Rowan loaded with berries.**

Elder berries are also great. They are black, very soft and contain lots of blue juice. Super healthy, although the picking can turn into a mess. Therefore I usually simply break a twig and put it on the ground in the run, or bind them to the netting. The chickens eat the berries from the twigs and also eat the leaves.



**Above: Twigs with sea-buckthorn (yellowish) - and elder berries (black).**

By the way, I have noticed that my Orpingtons also like to eat the bark of the elder. In my runs are several quite old elders who have trunks of more than 10 cm thick and the chickens peck it up to accessible height. The elder berries may give somewhat bluish black diarrhea, same as the thrushes, but that will not do much harm. As with all supplements it is better not to overdo. A lot of variation in the offered stuff prevents that kind of problems. Even if they are not actually

berries, the small fruits of the black cherry tree are also good for feeding the birds. In some places they proliferate like weeds, and chickens really like to eat the bitter mini cherries.

There really ought to be a Firethorn or Pyracantha in the ornamental garden of every breeder. You can prune it in all shapes and the berries are super. Of course this is again a bush with vicious thorns, so you have to be willing to take the trouble. These are fairly hard and dry berries that are very suitable for freezing, same as the blackthorn and rowan berries.



**Left: Blackthorn with berries.**

If I can find some, I also like to feed sea-buckthorn berries. A few years ago I planted some sea-buckthorn shrubs but they carry no berries. As it turns out there are male and female plants, and apparently the ones I have are all of the same sex.

Meanwhile I have planted some new ones and I hope that the problem is solved. I intended to plant sea-buckthorn for a long time, but I did not know where to buy them from. I could experiment several times, as I was allowed to harvest at a friend's. Especially in coastal areas these berries are very common and if you have the chance you should definitely make the effort to feed them.



**Right: Rose hips, frozen on the bush.**

The berries are very sour and the branches are full of thorns, but for the animals it is a perfect success. Most twigs I braid in the mesh of the runs and within a few days they are expertly plucked by the animals. I always put a part in the freezer. Due to the thorns it is not easy to pick the berries from the branches but that is also the case with firethorn, hawthorn, blackthorn and rosehips.

Most important is how the berries are when thawed and that works perfectly with buckthorn; they look as if they were freshly picked. Hawthorn berries for example, immediately become brown as they thaw.

It was to expect that it would go well with sea buckthorn, because in nature the berries remain still good even after the frost. It is even so that the birds can get

drunk when eating of the orange, oval berries after frosts, because due to the frost the starch is partially turned into sugars which is then converted into alcohol.

The berries are in clusters close to the branches and twigs, and they taste extremely sour. They contain a whole range of phytochemical constituents that may have preventive or positive effects on your health, vitamin A, B1, B2 and E and in particular a high vitamin C content, much more than in oranges.

It is always stated that chickens are able to synthesize vitamin C by themselves and so by lack of vitamin C they may not be as sick as people (you know, the men of Columbus on the long voyages that died of scurvy). But I feel there is an important factor overlooked, namely that vitamin C may be helpful in curing various winter ailments and to the chickens it will be much easier and thus more efficient to get it than to 'make' it.

**Right: Sea-buckthorn twigs full of berries.**



**Left: Sea-buckthorn berries and leaves, ready to put in the fridge.**

In herb shops, syrups based on berries are sold as a dietary supplement and a medicinal oil is extracted from the seeds.

Finches, such as green-finches, ignore the fruit flesh and eat only the seeds, thrushes and starlings eat the whole berry.

That the berries are so acid makes them more interesting for me, because it can do no harm to create an acidic environment in the intestines of our chickens from time to time, quite the contrary. In our hobby - and also in the homing pigeon hobby - the drinking water of the birds is often acidified a bit, mainly with apple vinegar. With a generous portion of sea buckthorn berries you can achieve the same effect in a completely natural way, and completely free.

Sea Buckthorn, fresh or preserved in the freezer, is perfect to feed in the middle of winter, in preparation of the breeding season and to provide extra vitality in the exhibition season. The leaves of sea buckthorn can also be fed, as they come automatically with the berries if you pick for the freezer, in a rush. Just pay

attention that you carefully remove all thorns; also at the base of each shoot is usually a thorn!

When my own bushes carry fruits, I will have fresh berries at hand from August to January; I will probably not pick them, but just cut a branch full of berries and let the chickens do all the work, easy.

Having your own berries in the garden is always the easiest. Immediately at hand, fresh from the bush, little waste of time. Many of the aforementioned species need little pruning, so do not need lots of space. And they do also fine in the chicken run, providing some shade at the same time. Elderberry for example is ideal to serve as a shade plant. Elderberry tolerates everything. You can prune and saw as much as you like, so it is always exactly the size you prefer, even when it is 20 years old. In the spring you can also feed the blossoms, or make yourself elderflower tea.



Rose hips of all types of roses can be fed to the chickens, so a beautiful flower garden makes excellent food for later. The hips of many ornamental roses are very hard, the best is to first grind them into smaller pieces with a solid kitchen grinder or the shredder for garden waste. When cut smaller, all rose hips are eagerly eaten.

**Left:**  
**Flowering Rugosa rose.**

I would also like to feed blueberries, but they don't want to grow in my garden. The soil is too dry, I think; moreover, since my hobby is breeding Orpingtons, I have no time for gardening, only plants that grow naturally have a chance with me. That gives more than enough variety, especially if you eventually get to know all the places where you can find the berries in nature.

So keep your eyes open when you are out walking!

