



Guinea Pigs In Winter

This is a subject I have shied away from in pretty much all the years I've been advising on guinea pig care. From day one, my guineas have always lived indoors. It was a personal choice I made as a 14 year old; despite having bought an outdoor hutch it just made no sense to me to put my pet outside. None of my 30+ pigs have spent so much as one night outdoors or even in an outdoor shed/garage. I'm not resolutely for or against housing piggies either indoors or outdoors, I believe everyone does the best with the resources and information and support they have, and I don't judge anyone based on whether they keep their pigs inside or out. I do however have an interest in trying to help provide solutions to known problems and questions.

While I feel distinctly unqualified to offer advice on how to "overwinter" your guinea pigs due to my own personal experience of outdoor living being so limited, I can no longer ignore the fact that it is frequently asked. I find it hard to answer as I prefer to offer a full selection of options, rather than to just say "Do X and Y and avoid Z". Anyone who knows me knows that is not how I work. I have been wanting to link to an article that explains everything I've seen asked, and everything I would want to know, along with those niggly little extra things that pop up once in a while. I have as yet not found a satisfactory article anywhere online which I believe covers **EVERYTHING** you should know: whether you keep your pigs indoors, outdoors or somewhere in between. So I decided to bite the nugget and write it myself.

So, in my own words, but as a direct result of some very wide research, tips gleaned from clients with outdoor setups I've personally been around, and collating the hottest tips offered by multiple trusted resources, I bring you my best understanding on what options you have with your guinea pigs in winter. I won't be offended if there are elements you don't agree with, although I would swiftly dispute anyone suggesting my advice is bad or dangerous given I have already made sure it is in fact commonly used and safely executed. I do ask that you consider sharing this among your guinea pig owning friends as there is every chance there might be one piece of advice here which could make someone's – and somepig's – life so much more comfortable this winter.

First things first...WHEN do you start looking at taking some winter precautions for piggies? (And indeed any other pets you may be housing outdoors, such as rabbits.) The answer is more to do with temperature than an exact date or time of year...in the context of needing to decide whether to move them indoors or whether to beef up the housing conditions, here in the UK it tends to average October to April. Using months as a guide isn't hugely reliable: 2022 was unseasonably warm until December, we had an extremely mild autumn, which is why it is more useful to go by actual temperature trends as a more useful guide.

My advice and belief has always been that 10 degrees celsius is a good threshold. Guinea pigs are at their ideal temperature between around 15 and 18 degrees; they have a little bit of leeway a few degrees either way where most can and do manage quite comfortably, but beyond that - and particularly with babies, seniors, pregnant and sick piggies - you need to intervene to help them regulate their body temperature, whether that's cooling them in hot weather or keeping them protected from cold weather.



I recommend activating your Winter Action Plan when:

- either daytime or nighttime temperatures are 10 degrees or lower;
- the difference between daytime and nighttime temperatures is more than 3 degrees;
- you need to put on a coat to go out and see to the piggies.

At 5 degrees or lower, hypothermia is a threat. At freezing or sub-zero temperatures, life-threatening hypothermia and death is a very serious and real danger and begins being reported if not enough action is taken. Make sure you plan for mild, severe and variable winters, so you have different levels of intervention prepared and you can put them in place quickly.

INDOOR PIGS

It's unlikely you will need to change much if your piggies already live indoors year-round. That's not to say that indoor piggies don't notice the change in season, however. It's a good idea to double-check the following:

- **Install a max-min thermometer in the room they are in.** This will indicate the temperature ranges your guineas are subject to and allows you the opportunity to minimise the temperature differences by adjusting the heating system or timings for their room.
- **Use a dehumidifier if you encounter condensation on the windows of your home.** Clearing the windows every morning helps but is not a solution. Moisture instantly sets into microscopic cracks and pores in the infrastructure and leads to mould – not healthy for humans let alone piggies.
- **Make sure they are not housed directly next to a radiator.** While it might be nice and cosy for you to snuggle up to a warm radiator when feeling cold, piggies in their cages are not able to move away if they are too warm. Keep a sensible distance between radiators and cages.
- **If your piggies are free-range, or their permanent floor area includes a radiator, make sure the pipes are covered and if possible block off the radiator itself too.** Pigs will have an experimental nibble and lick of almost anything, hot pipes included, and you can avoid the risk of tiny burnt tongues simply by preventing them from accessing the heat source in the first place.
- **Don't assume that just being indoors automatically makes it warm enough for them.** Most of us can't afford to keep our central heating on 24/7. While your house should still remain a perfectly acceptable temperature when your heating is off, your pigs will feel any temperature drop and they will look to keep themselves at the temperature their bodies are used to. So if your house is normally 20 degrees but drops to 17, they will probably notice. This is very easily remedied by giving extra hay to burrow in, a pigloo or two to "shelter" in, plus of course the multitude of fleece beds that are available. If you'd rather not put pigloos in or fill their cage space up too much with beds, consider draping a blanket over two-thirds of their cage (given most cages are open-sided this is surprisingly effective)!



OUTDOOR PIGS

Many guinea pigs live outdoors. It is a lot more common in the UK than in other territories, although I've not quite figured out why, other than a lack of education at the base level – it's often presumed that outdoors is the standard and that indoors is, shall we say, a "treat", so education is offered on outdoor housing but does not extend to the practicalities, or to the multitude of other options available. A topic for another day!

When it comes to overwintering outdoor piggies, there are in fact a few very differing setups which the term "outdoor" encompasses. Thus I have broken it down into smaller increments. If you have outdoor guinea pigs:

- Move your guineas indoors, if you can.
- If you can't move them indoors, move them to a sheltered garage or outbuilding.
- If you have a lean-to, moving them underneath it should offer a little extra protection.
- If you can't move them into a sheltered building or under a lean-to, then move the hutch to the safest place you can find which is as far out of the wind and rain as possible. Secure it with bricks or other heavy objects, or attach the hutch to the wall somehow, to ensure it cannot be blown over.

PURPOSE-BUILT SHEDS, WENDY HOUSES, OUTBUILDINGS

If they are in a purpose-built shed, wendy house or outbuilding then they should already be living in an insulated – or even better, a temperature controlled – environment. You should be able to treat them near enough the same as indoor piggies. Just remember that every time you open the door, that cold air outside will rush in with you, so close the door behind you and provide ventilation with cracked windows instead!

If you have a shed/wendy house/outbuilding you would *like* to move your guinea pigs into for the winter, insulating is essential. You need to ensure the roofing felt is intact and not letting in unwanted rainwater or frost, and be proactive about insulating the structure itself internally to prevent damp and drafts, and to stop heat escaping through the walls, floor and roof. This can be done by lining the inside walls and roof of the structure with suitable insulation (the shiny, thick, foil-looking stuff you find in hardware shops like B&Q is noted to be very effective). If at all possible, lining the floor with linoleum or vinyl or even floorboards or gym flooring will all help to keep the floor comfortable and cosy, and most importantly dry. Do also use a good thick layer of your chosen bedding on the floor, if your pigs have access to the floor, to prevent tiny toes feeling the cold seeping up from the ground.

GARAGES

Garages tend to come with minimal insulation and are often prone to drafts. However, it is far preferable to move your guinea pigs in their hutch into a garage to shelter them from the worst of the winter weather, than to leave them out in the elements with only their hutch to protect them. Daylight is one of the big problems with garages, given most garages are built without windows; as it would be unreasonable to expect your guinea pigs to live in the dark for 6 months of the year, you will need to consider placing the hutch as far away from the door as possible to allow you to leave the door open for several hours



whilst still keeping them sheltered. The most important thing is to make sure the garage is not in active use – no vehicles should ever be started up or run in the garage, as with such poor air circulation, toxic fumes build up very quickly and will overwhelm small animals in no time. Make sure the hutch is kept off the ground (garage floors are typically concrete and get extremely cold in winter) and make sure to block off all drafts with draft excluders and with other remedial DIY stuff. You will also need to ensure the hutch itself is kept warm, as the garage itself will be unheated and concrete/brickwork tends to let cold air hang around.

HUTCHES

Hutches offer some protection to guineas, but not enough. Whilst wood is generally considered a reasonable insulator, on its own it has a lot of flaws. The build design, the ventilation requirement, the fact wood absorbs moisture which in turn encourages mould, mildew and fungal growth...there are a lot of reasons why a hutch in its “raw” state is not going to be enough. **To make the hutch suitable for winter weather, you essentially need to consider all of the above measures in one form or another, and follow the advice below.**

If you absolutely cannot bring your guinea pigs inside, and your only option is to shelter the hutch somewhere outside or in a garage or unheated outbuilding, then you need to take the following steps to winter-proof the hutch:

- **Check the structure of the hutch to ensure there are no breaks in the wood, torn roof felt, or signs of damp or mould.** If you find problems, you can likely fix very minor ones, but any major defects or damp will require a hutch replacement.
- **Elevate the hutch off the ground.** Most hutches nowadays have legs built in, but some are still sold without. Pigs need to be at least 6 inches or so off the floor when they are living outdoors to protect them not just from weather, but from pests as well. Not to mention it's a lot easier to clean out an elevated hutch than it is to kneel on an icy path trying to reach all 4 corners for a refresh.
- **An insulated hutch cover is essential.** Tarpaulins are useful at helping keep the worst of the wind and rain out, and heavy blankets or old duvets are certainly better than nothing. But you will find that tarps can be hard to fit to the exact shape, they are prone to getting blown out of position and they don't offer the much-needed ventilation with the weather protection...and blankets will freeze if the temperature drops low enough. Hutch covers are designed to be snugly fitted to the hutch, shutting out all drafts and keeping any inclement weather firmly outside the hutch without cutting off ventilation. Many frequently bought hutches have covers made specifically to fit them, and it is a necessary investment if the pigs are to live in that hutch through the entire winter.
- **Insulate/line the hutch internally.** Insulate internal walls if it is safe and possible to do so – at the very least, aim to insulate the roof and to cover the floor of the hutch with a waterproof material such as linoleum, vinyl, or correx. Not only does this help retain heat, but it protects the wood against damp (increasing its longevity), and makes hutch cleans so much easier.



- **Water bottles need to be checked a minimum of twice daily and must be wrapped in a bottle insulator/thermal water bottle cover to prevent the water from freezing.** When you check the water bottles, don't just give it a wiggle to make sure it's still liquid: you need to test the nozzle/ball bearing/spout. Being metal, the drops of water that sit in the drinking mechanism are far more likely to freeze and block the water altogether. Don't just check the water, check the bottle itself!
- **Extra bedding** – be sure to provide a deep layer of bedding, both for thermal and hygiene purposes. Suitable beddings include a thick layer of newspaper topped with Aubiose, Equisorb, Back-2-Nature, short-chopped straw (NOT long strand straw) and of course hay.
- **Extra hay** – did I mention hay? Hay is the number one insulator for piggies inside their hutches, but remember they also wee in their hay and they eat a lot of it too, so it needs to be replenished at least twice a day. If they are feeling cold, they will instinctively want to burrow for warmth. Having huge piles of long strand hay not only allows for this key behaviour, but also allows them to eat more to help keep their calorie intake up – which in turn helps their bodies generate heat.
- **Extra clean-outs.** Damp bedding is miserable at any time of year but imagine sitting in a damp patch in the winter? All your other efforts will be reduced in their efficacy if your pigs are sitting in damp bedding. So again, a minimum of once every day, you must remove all damp bedding and hay and replace it with fresh. Expect your bedding and hay bills to rise substantially in the winter...if you are able to buy in bulk, it'll work out a lot cheaper and save you the petrol money of going back and forth to the pet shop every few days!
- **Use heat pads.** Microwavable heat pads with a fleece cover designed specifically for small pets, including guinea pigs, are widely available at an affordable price tag. The most widely known is the Snugglesafe; a few minutes in the microwave provides up to 8 hours of gentle heat if the piggies want, or need, to source extra warmth. Note that not all piggies will use a heat pad, and the heat pad doesn't radiate heat exactly, but it is always worth a try if you can maintain the routine of ensuring a warm heat pad at the same time every day. With a fleece bed or a bundle of hay on top, most piggies will discover the comfort of one. And another benefit of a heat pad is that it's big enough and warm enough for a pig to sit on or lean against, but not so big that they can't get away from it if they don't need the extra heat.
- **Extra dry food/nuggets.** Normally you would want to limit the amount of dry food offered each day in order to prevent bingeing and unhealthy weight gain. In the winter however, if your guineas are outdoors, you will want to help them maintain their body temperature by increasing their calorie intake. The easiest way to do this is by increasing the amount of dry food offered, as well as the amount of hay.
- **Quality not quantity when it comes to veg.** You don't want to overfeed veg for many reasons, but in winter the things you really need to think about are ensuring there are no leftovers – frozen spoiled veg is really not that great to eat – and ensuring they are getting extra Vitamin C. They will get the extra calories from their dry stuff to provide their bodies with more energy to keep them warm, but their



bodies are still working harder than they would be if they were sitting pretty at their ideal temperature (15-18 degrees). This means their immune systems are a little more susceptible, and illness is more likely to occur and to hit them harder. You can help to prevent this by making sure you are feeding fresh veg rich in Vitamin C. Bell peppers (capsicum) are a great source of both Vitamin C and natural sugars – a chunk of pepper each day should on its own provide more than enough of their daily Vitamin C, and when you include tidbits of two or three other fresh goodies – like celery, cucumber, carrot, parsley, coriander, babycorn etc. – they should be not only pretty healthy piggies, but pretty happy piggies too. Just don't forget to scout their hutch for any leftovers around an hour after feeding them; you don't want them lying around uneaten.

OTHER IMPORTANT NOTES

Baldwins/Werewolf/Skinny Pig – **any hairless breeds should never live outside.** Not even in summer. A sheltered, climate-controlled outbuilding is fine, but never ever in just a hutch.

Similarly, any guineas with known medical conditions are probably best kept indoors. If they need medicating it's a lot less faff to medicate a pig who is already in the house with you, and you don't want to keep bringing chronically ill pigs in and out of doors. It goes without saying – but I will say it anyway – pigs who are acutely ill need to be kept under supervision and may require round the clock care, which means they will need to stay indoors for the rest of the winter.

Older piggies can often be viewed as being very hardy and seem more able if anything to handle anything, but don't take them for granted. A mild winter might be manageable for a 7 year old, but a single cold snap might be enough to kill an 8 year old. Not every winter will be the same and each year your guinea pig is older and physiologically less hardy. Be sensible and take your guineas overall health, weight and demeanour into account when deciding whether sheltering and warming is enough, or whether indoors would be best. Don't just look at how they are right now, but see how they have trended throughout the year. If they've started losing a bit of weight, or they had a couple of illnesses back in the summer, take those as a warning sign that they do need extra protection. This almost always means they will benefit from being kept out of the cold.

Bringing pigs indoors temporarily/just to see through a "cold snap" is not a good idea. Once your pigs are indoors, their bodies work hard to adapt to the temperature change. This affects them in a lot of ways, including on a biological level. To then put them back outside where it might be as much as 10 or 15 degrees colder will almost certainly lead to malaise and illness, if not death. If you bring your piggies in during a cold snap, they will then need to stay in until Spring when the lowest nighttime temperature outdoors sits consistently at a minimum of 10 degrees. It is frequently overlooked that it's often the big temperature fluctuations in short spaces of time that are so devastating to a guinea pig.

Along the same lines, **cuddles need to be outdoors or in an unheated room indoors.** For the same reason as above: temperature fluctuations are not good for them. Don't bring them into a nice warm house and then expect them to be able to cope with going back out into a hutch that's less than half the temperature they've just got used to.



Don't put a damp guinea pig into an outdoor hutch. Not only are the temperature fluctuations in the environment a factor, but a damp guinea pig is already working harder to stay warm as they dry off. A damp guinea pig in the cold is vulnerable to the risk of freezing to death. The only way to safely bath an outdoor pig in winter is to bring them into an unheated room first thing, bath them in warm but not too warm water, towel dry them and then use a hairdryer on them. When they are dry return them to the unheated indoor room to allow them to adjust to the temperature before returning them to their hutch with adequate amounts of hay and other warming tools. Under no circumstances should you return them to their hutch if they are not fully dry from head to toe. If it is possible to avoid bathing outdoor pigs in winter, then I strongly recommend holding off until temperatures are at least in double figures. And I'm saying that as a professional groomer who baths guinea pigs. There is a reason I ask if your pigs live indoors or outdoors when you bring them to me for a groom, and this is one of the major ones. Sometimes baths in winter are unavoidable; if this is the case, please ensure someone highly experienced (either yourself if applicable, or a professional) does the job to reduce the risk to your pig. If repeated baths are needed to treat a medical condition, then I have to recommend finding a way to bring the pig and any of their cagemates in for the entire winter, as more often than not these pigs will also have repressed immune systems and/or hair loss, which alongside the treatment needed will make them exceptionally vulnerable to cold weather.

Floor/exercise time is still good for them in winter, so if you usually permit it then continue to do so. Outdoors? Not so much. I cannot, hand on heart or in my logical brain, suggest cold paths or cold damp earth are a good idea. Getting exercise and roaming time in is important to their health and wellbeing, but it shouldn't be at an unnecessary risk to their health. When there are dry and warmer options available, there is no real argument for insisting that time outside in a run on the grass must continue throughout winter. Grass substitutes are available, you can grow fresh grass indoors on a windowsill, or you can go out every day and cut them some grass. Vitamin D is supplemented in their diets but if you're still worried and you're concerned the windows are blocking the UV rays that encourage Vitamin D development, then wrap them up in a blanket or snuggle sack and cuddle them just outside the back door for ten minutes.

FINISHING THOUGHTS

In no way do I mean to shame anyone or to judge anyone who keeps their pigs outdoors. There are many benefits to outdoor living for guinea pigs, just as there are to keeping them indoors whether just for winter or year-round. I'm not here to deride anyone whose pigs are in a hutch in the garden because the narrative that this is the normal thing to do has been long-held and it's hard to break when a lot of keepers successfully house their pigs outdoors. My approach is to offer options, to lay out the pros and cons and to show people alternatives. It isn't my job to go to anyone and tell them they're doing something right or wrong, it's my job to let them see solutions to the problems they are finding and to help them work through those solutions until something sticks, something that is better than it was before not just for the owner, but for the piggies.

You can take this article with a pinch of salt, you can cherry pick the bits that are practical to you, or you can do a big chunk of it. The important thing is that you see that there are many options and solutions, whether you are able to bring your piggies indoors or if you have no choice (for whatever reason) but to keep them in their hutch in the garden. Wherever they



end up this winter, I just want to make sure you know that there's more than one way to make the situation as comfortable as possible for them, and at least one or two of these options are accessible to everyone and could be the difference between life and death.

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