



Chickens on the Farm

Chickens are an integral part of the homestead. Find the perfect breed to suit your needs - whether it's eggs, meat or showing.

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When “chicken” comes to mind, most people think of cheap food, readily available at the grocery store or the fast-food restaurant. But it hasn’t always been that way.

Although chicken was common in farm country, to urban residents during the 19th and early 20th centuries, chicken was an expensive commodity. In fact, a campaign slogan used by Herbert Hoover in 1928 to emphasize coming prosperity was “a chicken in every pot.”

Although chicken is no longer considered a delicacy, it’s still important, with each American consuming almost 100 pounds of chicken meat and 250 eggs each year.

Government analysts estimate that there are 10 billion chickens in the world at any given time—more than one for every man, woman and child.

Many of these birds are raised in crowded, industrial systems and are regularly fed antibiotics and high levels of chlorine in their water.

While this production system has resulted in readily available and inexpensive meat, the good, old-fashioned taste of chicken—like Grandpa raised—has been sacrificed.

Since chickens are easy to raise (even in a small backyard), and are just plain fun to have around, they make an ideal candidate for increasing your food self-sufficiency. And, if you have more space and are looking for a small-scale commercial enterprise, chickens may be just the thing. Best of all, you can taste chicken that will remind you of Grandpa’s, and crack open an egg with a beautiful, golden yolk that speaks of sunshine and fresh air.

Domestication of Chickens

Chickens (*Gallus gallus*) are believed to have been domesticated from the red jungle fowl of India and Southeast Asia. Anthropologists believe they were first domesticated about 4,000 years ago. Because of their small size, chickens were often taken on ships by early explorers, and first came to North America with the Spaniards during the 1500s.

In the 1840s and 1850s, breeding poultry (chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys) for specific traits changed from a haphazard affair to a science. Breed societies began forming, and in 1873, the American Poultry Association (APA) was established to promote the raising, breeding, exhibition and judging of poultry. No one knows just how many breeds there are around the world today, but the APA lists over 100 that are raised in the United States.

Finding the Perfect Chicken Breed



Finding the perfect chicken breed depends on your goal for your flock: meat, eggs or showing.

The myriad breeds that are available today can be split into two categories, based on size—large breeds and bantam breeds. Bantams typically weigh only a pound or two, and can be a small version of a large breed (also known as a miniature), or a bird that has no large counterpart (usually referred to as a “true bantam”). Bantams are fun, but don’t produce much meat, and their eggs are quite small—often weighing about one half that of a large egg from the grocery store.

There are also four production categories: meat birds (raised for quick growth and large breast); egg birds (known for their prolific egg production); dual-purpose birds (good all-around providers of both meat and eggs); and ornamental birds (kept primarily for exhibition). In addition to these categories, you may hear chicken fanciers refer to breeds based on their “class” within the showworld. There are 11 classes in total, such as American, English or Mediterranean for the large breeds, and Game Bantam, Single Comb Clean Legged or Feather Legged for the bantam breeds.

The term “varieties” refers to one breed that exhibits two or more distinct traits, yet maintains all the other characteristics of the breed. Jersey Giants are a good example of a breed that comes in two varieties, a white variety that has all white feathering, and a black variety that has—you got it—all black feathers. The Wyandottes have nine varieties, based on color and pattern. Rhode Island Reds have two varieties, based not on color, but on comb configuration.

Heritage breeds are those that are no longer used in high-intensity, industrial agriculture. Many of these breeds were of major economic importance not too long ago, and still have important characteristics that shouldn’t be eradicated from the gene pool. Characteristics like hardiness, ability to forage, disease resistance and flavor may be especially important for small producers.

Meat Breeds of Chicken

Rapidly growing breeds are known for meat production. They have been bred for a large, meaty breast and light-colored skin and feathers (which make for a carcass that is easier to pluck clean).

Meat birds are classified based on their size upon butchering: Rock/Cornish hens (sometimes called game hens) are butchered between four- to six-weeks old, and weigh between one and two pounds. The most common butcher group, broilers, weigh four to five pounds when butchered, which is generally around 10 to 12 weeks old, and can be of either sex. Roasters, as the name implies, are the first size birds intended for roasting whole. These are larger birds, typically about seven pounds and four to five months old. The capon is a special class of roaster; whereas the general roasters can be either male or female, capons are de-sexed males that are allowed to grow anywhere from five to eight months.

Most commercial-broiler operations breed Rock-Cornish hybrids. These are the prominent crossbreeds in the industry because they grow very quickly and convert commercial feed to meat with high efficiency.

For backyard or small-scale production, some excellent breeds to consider if broiler/roaster production is your main objective include the Brahma, the New Hampshire, the Cornish or the Cochin.

Laying Breeds of Chickens

All hens lay eggs, but “laying breeds” produce eggs earlier, more frequently and longer. Layers average about 250 eggs per year, but top performers can lay more than 300. They tend to have smaller bodies with light breasts, and have high-strung personalities. It seems counterintuitive, but as a rule, the breeds that are known for high egg production aren’t very maternal. Layers won’t go broody (sit on eggs until they hatch), and if by some chance a hen does, she doesn’t seem to have a clue what to do with the chicks after they hatch.

In the industrial agriculture sector, most layers are from a commercial strain of white Leghorns. These birds begin laying eggs at 18 to 22 weeks of age. The eggs at this age are small, and the young hens may lay one egg every three or four days. Within about 10 weeks from when a young hen lays her first eggs, her eggs will reach full size, and she’ll average two eggs every three days. Layers “wear out” after about three years, with production dropping dramatically. They simply reach an age when they don’t have enough energy left to continue their high production.

Regardless of shell color, eggs have the same nutritional value, though many consumers prefer brown eggs. Shell color is a breed-dependent trait, and though it is typically white or brown, some breeds, like the Araucana, lay a bluish-green egg, and some, like the Ancona, lay a pink-tinted egg.

Dual-purpose Chicken Breeds

Dual-purpose birds are perfect for the backyard or homestead flock. Like meat birds, they are large bodied, but they



lay a reasonable number of eggs per hen. They are usually hardy, and hens often go broody, raising the next generation for you (if you keep a rooster). Many of the dual-purpose breeds are also heritage breeds; some being on the brink of extinction. But the good news is that many small-scale breeders around the country are working to preserve these breeds.

Nancy Niero, director of the Clear Creek History Park in Golden, Colo., is one such breeder. Nancy and the park staff have made a commitment to breed Dominiques. “The heritage breeds tell a great story about our past,” she explains. “I find it enriching to tell children visiting the park that Dominiques were the first American chicken, and that they played a large part in our country’s history.

“During our summer season (the park is open Wednesday through Sunday, from mid-May through mid-October), we integrate food, animals and history in a powerful message: We have these chickens, we collect and cook their eggs on a wood-burning stove, but if we don’t take care of them they’ll become extinct. Once they’re gone, they’re gone.”

Although they are called dual-purpose breeds, there can be differences: Some may make slightly better meat birds (like the New Hampshire), and some better egg birds (like the Rhode Island Red). The Plymouth Barred Rock is an excellent all-around, general-purpose bird with an easy-going personality.

Ornamental Chicken Breeds

Ornamental breeds are kept primarily for exhibition. These birds have a wide assortment of colors and patterns, ranging from solid colors to multi-colored patterns. The Lakenvelder has striking black and white markings; Silkies have plumage that is soft, and almost hair-like; and Frizzles have a distinctly curly-haired appearance.

Many have strange “feather-dos,” like the Polish and Houdans with feathers puffing out from their heads, or the Brahmas and Cochins with feathers covering their legs.

Those who keep birds for show are called fanciers, and they take showing quite seriously. Show birds are judged on a 100-point scale that assesses shape, color, patterning, comb configuration, number of toes and even the shape of the earlobe. For each breed, the specifics are described in *The American Standard of Perfection*, a book published by the American Poultry Association. The Standard is the ultimate authority for poultry fanciers and judges.

Starting a Flock

Although you can occasionally find a producer who is willing to part with some mature birds, the most common approach to starting a flock is to purchase day-old chicks from a hatchery. You can either order directly from the hatchery, which will ship the babies (via the mail) right after they are born, or purchase from a feed or farm supply store that works with a hatchery. People are often surprised that chicks can be shipped around the country, but chicks draw the yolk of the egg into their abdomen just before birth as a food source, so most newborn chicks arrive alive.

Brooding chicks at home isn’t difficult, but there are three things that can make a brooding operation fail: chills, drafts or water. Chicks need to be kept warm and dry, and they need to be protected from predators (including cats and dogs).

You should have a chicken area ready before bringing home your chicks. For an instant brooder for a small batch of chicks (up to 100) use a spare stock-watering tank. If you don’t have a spare water tank, create a brooder guard by cutting corrugated cardboard into pieces about 12 inches high and then securely tape them together to form a round “pen” with a radius of about three feet. The round design is superior to simply using a cardboard box, because there are no corners for the chicks to pile up in—and those pile-ups can result in crushed chicks at the bottom.

Until birds are feathered out, they have no way to control their body temperature. When brooded by a hen, chicks hover under her to stay warm, but when artificially brooded, heat needs to be supplied by another source. A hanging heat lamp with a red, infrared bulb is the best way to provide the heat the chicks need. Adjust the height of the lamp so that the initial temperature on the floor under it is 95 degrees. Reduce the temperature by five degrees per week. If the chicks aren’t warm enough, they’ll pile up and peep loudly; chicks that are too warm will pant and move as far away from the lamp as possible; chicks that are comfortable will act contented—eating, sleeping and cheeping happily.

Bed the brooding pen with newspaper—it’s readily available, and easy to change out as it gets soiled and damp. After the chicks are two weeks old, switch to litter. Straw doesn’t work well unless it has been finely chopped, but pine wood chips, peanut shells or crushed corncobs work well.

Use a chick feeder and a chick waterer. These are inexpensive, readily available, help keep the feed and water clean and help keep the chicks dry. They can be purchased from hatcheries or from a farm supply store. Commercial “starter



rations" are also readily available and easy to use, providing all the nutrients a chick needs.

As your birds mature, less diligence is required. They need fresh water and feed each day and housing to protect them from severe weather and predators. A corner of a barn or garage can be made into a chicken area, or a small building can be constructed for the purpose. Your county extension agent will be able to supply plans for chicken buildings, and information on mixing your own feeds.

Whatever you desire—meat, eggs, entertainment or preservation—there's a chicken breed out there to meet it. From small to large, plain to fancy, chickens have it all.

About the Author: Carol Ekarius has authored many books on small farm and livestock-related topics. She is based on a ranch in Colorado.

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