

**BREEDS:**



Call ducks, the smallest domestic breed, make their home at Dux Farm in Wills Point, Texas. Photo courtesy of Kevin and Kristine Tanzillo, on the Dux Farm.

# Where It All Started

## *Popular Heritage Breeds for Your Backyard Flock*

People have raised all kinds of poultry for at least 8,000 years. Chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, guineafowl and even ostriches have been domesticated — that is, they have become genetically able to live and reproduce among humans. Domestication itself is an interesting process. Of 148 large mammal species, only about 15 have ever been domesticated.

**By CHRISTINE HEINRICHS, CALIFORNIA**

Chickens are descended from Junglefowl, which still roam wild in India and other parts of Southeast Asia. Most domesticated ducks are descended from mallards, but domesticated Muscovies from the Americas are also raised. Geese are descended from Western Graylag geese and turkeys from wild turkeys, which still roam the countryside. Wild guineafowl and ostriches are common in Africa, but their domestic relatives live on farms.

That wild heritage includes a lot of variety, both in appearance and in those invisible genes.

That's one of the values of heritage breeds, their genetic variability. You see it in their body shape and conformation and their colorful plumage. Equally important are unseen qualities such as disease resistance, broodiness and egg production. Choosing heritage breeds for your backyard flock puts you and your birds in the long history of traditional poultry.

Hybrid chickens may lay more eggs and the Cornish-Rock cross is the fastest-growing meat bird, but they lack the genetic variability of heritage breeds and many of the less visible qualities. Broodiness is bred out of hybrid layers, so that they don't take any breaks from laying. They may be spent, have laid as many eggs as they will ever lay, in three years.

"Any chicken that lays 300 eggs a year will not live past three years," said Frank Reese, life-long poultry breeder of Good Shepherd Poultry Ranch in Lindsborg, Kansas. "You do have an animal who is highly productive, but they are hyperactive, short-lived, dead-end animals."

Because they are hybrids, with the vigor of cross-breeding, they can't pass that on to their offspring, even if they were able to brood them. Cornish-Rock crosses do little but eat and grow. They are physically unable to reproduce.

"Healthy, balanced heritage breed birds have a healthy immune system," Reese said. "They are like athletes who have trained. Don't expect morbidly obese animals to be athletes. They are bred to be what they are."

Reese has worked with the Livestock Conservancy and others to develop a marketing definition of Heritage Chickens (find the full definition on page 64): "A Heritage Egg can only be produced by a Standard-bred Chicken admitted by the American Poultry Association. A Heritage Chicken is hatched from a Heritage Egg sired by an American Poultry Association Standard-bred Chicken established prior to the mid-20th century, is slow growing, naturally mated with a long productive outdoor life."

That definition is a foundation on which to build a market for traditional breed poultry and educate the public. A USDA-approved definition would require producers to meet that definition in order to label their products as "heritage," and sell for a premium price. One of Mr. Reese's goals was to write the definition so that it would not be subject to being subverted by the poultry industry the way "natural," "free range" and "organic" often are. A precise definition is necessary to prevent unqualified companies from labeling their products with it, until the term loses its meaning and the producer loses the market premium.

The American Poultry Association has a Heritage Breeds Committee to explore how the APA could lead in certifying flocks in the marketplace.

### Breeds for Backyard Flocks

Identify the breeds that suit your needs. Just as a hunter wouldn't choose a Chihuahua for a hunting dog, small flock keepers should choose breeds that suit them. Silkies, Dorkings and Cochins have gentle personalities that make them desirable birds for households with young children. Bantams are small breeds, easier for small hands to hold.

Wyandottes, Leghorns, Rhode Island Reds, Plymouth Rocks, New Hampshires, Orpingtons, Polish and Houdans were commercial production breeds in

the early 20th century. Javas, Dominiques, Buckeyes, Delawares, New Hampshires, Rocks and Rhode Island Reds are among the historic chicken breeds that are appearing more frequently at poultry shows. Some breeds, such as the New Hampshire, are often shown, but most do not meet the Standard.

Mr. Reese has focused on New Hampshires and is making good progress with them. "It takes years of commitment, but it's so satisfying to walk out and look at your flock and be happy with what you see."

Attend a poultry show and meet the breeders. Consider visiting the farm where they raise their flocks.

"Seek out those people who have dedicated their lives to quality and proper breeding," Mr. Reese said. "See how the

a muddy pond.

They have five toes, like the Dorking and the Silkie. They are a medium sized bird, at 6 pounds for a rooster and 4 pounds for a hen. Bantams top out at 22 to 26 ounces. They are good layers of white eggs, your bonus for keeping such distinctive birds.

Bantams are small chickens, generally one-fifth to one-third the size of large fowl, weighed in ounces rather than pounds. Most are small versions of standard size chickens, but some are True Bantams, such as Nankins and Silkies. They require proportionately less space and feed.

Modern Games, both large fowl and bantams, were bred exclusively for showing. They have an unusual, modern art appearance. Japanese bantams hold their



These Royal Palm turkeys strut on Ryon Carey's farm in Kansas. A guinea fowl keeps them company. Photo by Christine Heinrichs.

mom and dad birds treat you. Find out what it takes to maintain a good flock of these birds."

Breeds may be familiar, such as the Rhode Island Red, the state bird of Rhode Island, or obscure. Sultan chickens were bred as ornamental birds for Turkish royalty by the 19th century. They are decorative indeed, with full flowing white crests, muffs and beards, long feathers gracing their legs. Their feathery legs, called vulture hocks, are undesirable in other breeds, but in the case of Sultans, they add to the allure. To keep those feathery feet attractive, you won't want them spending time around the edge of

black tails high above their white bodies. Silkies have unusual hair-like feathers. Bantams come in every color imaginable.

Many bantams retain good mothering characteristics and will happily set on eggs and raise chicks for you. Their eggs, though small, are tasty. A friend finds one regular chicken egg too small for breakfast and two too large, but two bantam eggs just right.

### Add Ducks to your Flock

Mandarin ducks and Wood ducks look as if someone painted them, with distinct brightly colored green, red, brown and white markings. The drakes, at any rate.

# Hoffman Hatchery

# Kencove Farm Fence

# Hawk- eye Steel Products



Breeder Dave Kozakiewicz took this photo of his Sebastopol geese at sunset on his Michigan farm.

The hens, like so many waterfowl, have camouflage plumage that is less striking. They happily nest in boxes and will raise a clutch of youngsters for you.

Wood ducks are native to North America, one of the few duck breeds that nest in trees. That first step out of the nest can be a big one for ducklings — jumps as long as 290 feet, without injury, have been documented. They naturally produce two broods in a year. You may attract some wild ones to your pond, or you can acquire domestically raised birds. Trimming the primary flight feathers on one wing will keep them from flying away, although domestic birds may willingly stay in the comfortable surroundings you provide.

Mandarin ducks are Asian cousins to Wood ducks. While they are not native to North America, they do well here. Their stunning plumage makes them popular in private collections. While their wild numbers in China are declining, they are doing well in domestic flocks. Pairs bond for life, making them a symbol of marital love and fidelity, often used to bless Chinese weddings.

Not everyone finds the caruncles of Muscovy ducks attractive, but they are a conversation point. The fleshy growths on their heads are warty and strange. These large ducks, native to the American

continents, can be friendly companions. The hens are good mothers and naturally lay quite a few eggs. Crested ducks have feathered knobs on their heads, giving them an eye-catching appearance. Runner ducks are often described as “wine bottles with legs.” With supportive diet, they lay as many eggs as chickens, and come in many colors.

Bantam ducks, weighing less than two pounds, may suit you. Call ducks were originally bred to attract wild ducks by calling them down to the hunter’s blind. They retain their inclination to call, and are vocal and sociable. East Indies ducks glimmer with greenish iridescence on their black plumage.

## Geese are Beautiful

Historic geese breeds such as Embden, Toulouse and Pomeranian have smooth feathers, but Sebastopol geese look as if someone curled theirs. Their soft, flowing ruffles give them the appearance of fantastic dream birds. Their feathers are as much as four times as long as normal feathers, with flexible shafts that spiral, draping down to the ground.

They are an ancient utility breed, hardy and respectable egg layers of 25 to 35 eggs a year. Goose eggs can substitute for chicken eggs in cooking and are especially valued in baking. Their

albumen is heavier than that of chicken eggs, so don't bother trying to get them to whip up light.

Sebastopols are considered medium geese, weighing 12 to 14 pounds at maturity, making them good table birds, if you are so inclined. They are gentle and enjoy human companionship. Keep them away from aggressive birds. They enjoy bathing those lovely feathers in clean water.

All waterfowl feathers and down make the warmest insulation, both for the bird and for clothing and bedding. No man-made product is as good as goose down and feathers. Geese stay warm in the harshest winter weather, but the loose feathering of Sebastopols makes them appreciate protection when it's especially cold, wet and windy.

Don't worry about them flying away. Those long, curly feathers are useless for flying. Like all geese, they mate for the duration, which may well be for life. They love raising a family and will happily adopt youngsters of other species. Give them a place to nest and you will have years of happy families.

### **On Beyond Turkeys**

All turkeys are the same breed, but their different colors separate them as varieties. Royal Palm turkeys have striking white and black markings. And while Royal Palms have been selected for their beauty, they did not lose their ability to forage for themselves. Royal Palm turkeys will also raise their own poults for you.

Wild turkeys are plentiful around the U.S. now, having made a recovery from being hunted into extinction in many areas. If you keep domestic turkeys, you may find a wild male eager to join your flock for a season. Farmers of the past generally welcomed such interlopers, for their contribution to the vitality of the flock. The offspring won't retain the distinctive coloring of Royal Palms, but that may not be important to you. All turkeys are sociable and companionable with people.

Royal Palm turkeys are relatively small, with toms topping out at around 22 pounds and hens around 12 pounds. They are good table birds, if you find yourself with more than you want.

*Christine Heinrichs is the author of How to Raise Chickens and How to raise Poultry, published by Voyageur Press.*

## McMurray Hatchery

## Zellwin Farms Co



This white Dorking hen and Colored Dorking rooster represent a distinctive heritage breed with a long history back to the Roman Empire. Photo by Christine Heinrichs.

## What Makes a Heritage Breed?

Chickens must meet all of the following criteria to be marketed as Heritage:

1. APA Standard Breed: Heritage Chicken must be from parent and grandparent stock of breeds recognized by the American Poultry Association (APA) prior to the mid-20th century; whose genetic line can be traced back multiple generations; and with traits that meet the APA Standard of Perfection guidelines for the breed. Heritage Chicken must be produced and sired by an APA Standard breed. Heritage eggs must be laid by an APA Standard breed.

2. Naturally mating: Heritage Chicken must be reproduced and genetically maintained through natural mating. Chickens marketed as Heritage must be the result of naturally mating pairs of both grandparent and parent stock.

3. Long, productive outdoor lifespan: Heritage Chicken must have the genetic

ability to live a long, vigorous life and thrive in the rigors of pasture-based, outdoor production systems. Breeding hens should be productive for 5-7 years and roosters for 3-5 years.

4. Slow growth rate: Heritage Chicken must have a moderate to slow rate of growth, reaching appropriate market weight for the breed in no less than 16 weeks. This gives the chicken time to develop strong skeletal structure and healthy organs prior to building muscle mass.

The Livestock Conservancy's Definition of Heritage Chicken. Chickens marketed as Heritage must include the variety and breed name on the label. Terms like "heirloom," "antique," "old-fashioned," and "old timey" imply Heritage and are understood to be synonymous with the definition provided here.

— Christine Heinrichs



Underneath his white hair-like feathers, this Silkie rooster has black skin. Photo by Corallina Breuer.