


What type of turkey is best for small and backyard poultry flocks?

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Technically, only one breed of turkey exists, but many varieties of turkey are available. If you are interested in raising turkeys, it is important to choose a variety that meets your particular needs.

An important distinction to understand is the difference between a commercial-type variety and a heritage variety. Commercial-type varieties have been bred specifically for commercial producers to address consumer preferences and production efficiency. Heritage varieties retain the characteristics of turkey varieties bred long ago in Europe and the early United States.

Commercial Varieties

Turkeys are used primarily for meat production. Most U.S. consumers prefer the breast meat, or white meat, of a turkey. To accommodate this preference, producers have carried out generations of genetic selection that have resulted in broad-breasted turkey varieties. These commercial-type varieties also have rapid growth rates and high feed efficiency.

Many small flock owners raise commercial-type turkeys because of their high breast meat yield, fast growth, and high feed efficiency. The most popular varieties for small flock production are the commercial varieties Broad-Breasted Bronze (also called Bronze) and Broad-Breasted White (also called Large White). The Broad-Breasted Bronze has plumage resembling that of a wild turkey, and the Broad-Breasted White has been selected for white feathering and fast growth. Although both types are good for small flock production, a disadvantage of the Broad-Breasted Bronze is that dark pin feathers sometimes remain on the meat after processing.

Heritage Varieties

Many turkey varieties are classified as heritage turkeys. In its Standard of Perfection, the American Poultry Association (APA) recognizes eight varieties of turkeys, all considered heritage varieties. They are the Standard Bronze, Beltsville Small White, White Holland, Bourbon Red, Narragansett, Slate, Black, and Royal Palm. Figure 1 shows examples of four of these varieties. The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) recognizes additional varieties, including the Jersey Giant and White Midget. In addition, some hatcheries carry other varieties, including the Crimson Dawn, Calico, and Red Phoenix.

Fig. 1. White Holland, Slate, Bourbon Red, and Royal Palm turkey varieties. Source: John Anderson, The Ohio State University.

Commercial turkey production has focused primarily on broad-breasted strains of the Standard Bronze, White Holland, and Beltsville Small White. In the past few decades, the other varieties have been kept primarily for exhibition purposes. Recently, however, there has been an increased interest

in the production of heritage turkeys.

Heritage variety turkeys must meet certain criteria. For example, to be considered a heritage variety of turkey, a turkey must be able to mate naturally. Most of today's commercial turkeys are too big to breed naturally and must be bred through artificial insemination. Also, a heritage turkey must have a long, productive life span outdoors and a slow growth rate.



Most heritage turkey varieties are well adapted to a small flock management system. Typically, they are more disease-resistant than commercial varieties and are good foragers. In addition, they mate naturally and can raise their young, although mothering abilities vary from variety to variety. When marketing heritage varieties, small flock producers must keep in mind that their slower growth rate increases the production costs, especially total amount of feed consumed. Also, these turkeys produce less breast meat. Typically, 70 percent of the meat produced by a Broad-Breasted White turkey is breast meat, whereas heritage breeds produce about a 50:50 ratio of white meat to dark meat.

If you are interested in raising heritage turkeys or entering purebred turkeys in poultry shows, you can choose from several varieties. Options include the following varieties:

- **Standard Bronze.** The Standard Bronze variety was developed in Rhode Island. It is a large bird but does not dress out well because of its dark feathers. Standard Bronze turkeys are good layers, as far as turkeys go, but do not go broody as easily as some other varieties. The Standard Bronze variety was developed by crossing the turkeys the settlers brought to America with Eastern wild turkeys. The resulting offspring showed hybrid vigor. They were larger than the European turkeys but had a tamer disposition than the wild turkey.
- **Beltsville Small White.** The Beltsville Small White was developed in the 1930s at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) research station in Beltsville, Maryland. For many years, the Beltsville Small White was the most popular turkey variety grown commercially. The development of the broad-breasted turkey resulted in a decline in the production of Beltsville Small Whites. The Beltsville Small White produces a nice table bird but is not as flavorful as the other varieties. (Note: The Beltsville Small White was developed in response to market research indicating that consumers were interested in a small to medium-sized turkey with no pin feathers. The smaller variety, however, did not satisfy the needs of restaurant owners, who wanted a larger bird from which they could get more slices. The result was the development of the Broad-Breasted White. The Broad-Breasted White could be harvested at a young age to meet the need for a smaller turkey or at a later age for use in restaurants.)
- **White Holland.** Early explorers who traveled to the Americas brought back to Europe white-feathered turkeys being raised by the Aztecs. From these birds, the White Holland was developed in the Netherlands (thus the name) and reintroduced to the colonies by early Dutch settlers. The White Holland is said to be the calmest variety. The white feathers reduce the visibility of any pin feathers that may remain after plucking.
- **Bourbon Red.** The Bourbon Red (shown in Figure 2) is named for Bourbon County, Kentucky, where the variety was developed in the late 1800s. Bourbon Reds are said to be good natured, making them suitable for small flock production. Also, they are good setters and mothers.
- **Narragansett.** The Narragansett variety is named for Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. It was developed from a cross between the Eastern wild turkey and the domestic turkeys brought to America by the colonists. The Narragansett was the foundation of the early turkey industry in

New England. Narragansetts are an excellent choice for small flock production because they have calm dispositions and are good foragers. Also, they mature early, are good egg producers, and have good maternal instincts.

- **Slate.** The Slate variety (also called Blue Slate or Lavender) is named for the ashy blue color of its feathers. Although the Slate variety was recognized by the APA in 1874, considerable variation in coloring still exists, making it difficult to breed this bird consistently. The Slate is gaining popularity in small flocks because of its survivability and flavor.
- **Black.** The Black variety (sometimes called Black Spanish or Norfolk Black) was developed in Europe from the first turkeys brought there from the Americas. Blacks were crossed with the wild turkey to produce the Bronze, Narragansett, and Slate varieties. The Black variety was farmed commercially until the early 20th century, when the Broad-Breasted White became popular.
- **Royal Palm.** The Royal Palm variety (also called Crollweitz or Pied) is kept primarily as an ornamental variety. Royal Palms have the least filled out breast of the turkey varieties, but they have a calm nature. They are prolific layers and go broody quickly. Recognized in 1977, they were one of the most recent turkey varieties to be included the APA Standard of Perfection. Royal Palm turkeys have been kept in some areas as a means of biological insect control.
- **Midget White.** The Midget White was developed at the University of Massachusetts in the late 1960s as a smaller complement to the Broad-Breasted White, but the anticipated demand never surfaced. Midget White turkeys are relatively friendly and well suited for small farms.

Fig. 2. Adult male Bourbon Red turkey. Source: John Anderson, The Ohio State University.



For More Information

[Selecting Breeds for Small Flocks.](#) West Virginia University.

[How to Raise Heritage Turkeys on Pasture: Choosing a Variety and Obtaining Poults.](#) ALBC.