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Poultry Breeds for the Small Farm

Jonathan Moyle
Poultry Specialist
University of Maryland Extension

F. Dustan Clark
Extension Veterinarian

Scharidi Barber
Instructor - Poultry
Youth Programs

Tom Tabler
Extension Professor
Mississippi State University Extension

One of the first considerations when determining which breed is best for your farm is what is your reason for keeping poultry. Common reasons people keep and raise chickens are egg production, meat production, exhibition, insect control around the property and breed preservation. Another important consideration is to know your market. If you are selling eggs, what size and color do your customers prefer: white, brown, green or blue? For meat production, do you want yellow or white skin? Or maybe your customers would like birds with black skin and meat. All of these questions need to be answered in order to determine which breeds will work best for you.

Chickens are classified into groups based on several factors such as size, where the birds originated from, shape, color and comb type. There are two sizes of chickens: standard (large fowl) and bantams, which are usually about one-fourth the size of the standard. Most bantams are copies of the large standard breeds; however, a few, such as the Silkie, have no large counterpart. While bantams do not get the size of standards, they can still be used to produce a good number of small eggs. Additional classification terms that are used include:

- Class – Groups of birds from a common geographical area such as:
  - American, Asiatic, English, Mediterranean, Continental and all other standard breeds.
- Breed – Birds within a class that differ in body shape or size, skin color, number of toes or feathering on the legs.
- Variety – Birds within a breed that differ in feather color, feather pattern or type of comb.
- Strain – Birds within varieties developed for specific traits such as egg production, egg color or meat production.

Other important terms are:

- Broody – When the hen wants to sit on eggs and hatch them. This also includes care of the young as well.
- Forage – Ability to find their own feed, such as insects, grains and plant material.

Climate is another important consideration when looking at different breeds. Some chickens are better

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suited to cold areas while others do better in hot areas. For example, Mediterranean breeds generally perform well in hot, humid areas while most American breeds are better in cooler areas. Typically, birds with large combs will perform better in warmer climates since they allow the bird to cool better. However, large combs are a problem in cold areas as they can get frostbitten. Many breeds have varieties with different combs, so if you desire a particular breed, you can select the variety that is best for your area.

While birds that are selected for growth and meat quality typically produce less eggs, some breeds have been selected for both growth and eggs. These breeds are referred to as "Dual Purpose," and these breeds produce a good number of eggs and a good carcass for meat consumption.

Dual Purpose Breeds

Dual purpose poultry breeds are what most people think of as typical small family farm poultry. These birds will lay eggs and grow large enough and quickly enough to produce a bird suitable for home consumption. However, these breeds are not suitable for commercial enterprises. Additionally, these breeds will become broody to some extent. The dual purpose poultry breeds that produce eggs well will typically not become broody as often as those selected for growth. Most of these breeds have strains that will either be better at egg production or growth, so it is important to investigate the breed characteristics prior to obtaining them. Table 1 lists a few common dual purpose poultry breeds.

Figure 1. Silver Wyandotte, a Dual Purpose Breed.

Egg Layers

Table 2 is a short list of the common breeds used for egg production. While most egg-laying birds have been selected to not go broody, some breeds still have a few strains that will. Typically, most layers are small to medium in size and do not produce a good carcass for consumption, and the conversion of feed to muscle is poor.

Table 1. Common Dual Purpose Poultry Breeds.

Breed	Egg Production	Egg Size	Egg Color	Disposition	Foraging Ability
Plymouth Rock	Fair	Large	Brown	Calm	Fair
Rhode Island Red	Good	Large	Brown	Calm	Fair
Dominique	Fair	Medium	Brown	Calm	Good
Delaware	Fair	Large	Brown	Calm	Good
Wyandotte	Fair	Large	Brown	Calm	Fair
Brahma	Fair	Large	Brown	Calm	Good
Orpington	Fair	Large	Brown	Calm	Poor-Fair

Meat Breeds

Meat breeds are usually very poor egg layers and as such are not kept for egg production. These breeds will grow faster than most standard breeds but not nearly as rapid as commercial broilers. Additionally, they are not as efficient at converting feed to muscle as broilers, thus increasing the cost of production. But, if you want a slower growing, more colorful breed, then consider one of those listed in Table 3.

Figure 2. Bovan Brown, a Sex-Link Breed of layer.

Figure 3. A Meat Breed called Freedom Rangers.

Table 2. Common Poultry Breeds for Egg Production.

Breed	Egg Production	Egg Size	Egg Color	Disposition	Foraging Ability	Broody
Leghorn	Excellent	Large	White	Very Active	Good	No
Minorca	Excellent	X Large	White	Active	Good	No
Australorp	Excellent	Large	Brown	Calm	Poor	Yes
Ancona	Good	Large	White	Active	Good	No
Ameraucana	Good	Large	Blue-Green	Calm	Good	Yes
Hamburg	Good	Small	White	Very Active	Good	No
Fayoumi	Good	Small	Tinted White	Very Active	Excellent	Some
Maran	Good	Large	Bark Brown	Active	Poor	Yes
Sex-Link	Excellent	Large	Brown	Calm	Poor	No

Table 3. A Few Breeds of Meat-Type Poultry.

Breed	Growth Rate	Skin Color	Disposition	Foraging Ability
Cornish	Slow-Medium	Yellow	Calm	Poor
Jersey Giant	Medium	Yellow	Calm	Poor
New Hampshire	Fast	Yellow	Calm	Poor
Freedom Rangers	Fast	Yellow	Calm	Fair

There is considerable variation in the disposition of individual birds. While breeds as a whole may be calm or active, individuals within the breed may be very different. Males in particular can become very aggressive toward people, especially younger children, so care must be taken when they are around. Also, the foraging ability will vary by individual as well as by how the birds are managed. For example, if birds are not given all the feed they want, they will forage more to make up the difference. This is especially true of broilers, which are often considered the "couch potatoes" of the chicken world.

There are hundreds of different kinds of chickens that can be kept as a hobby, as pets, for exhibition or to forage around the farm looking for insects (almost 400 breeds and varieties). They are available in a wide range of colors and sizes to fit every need. If all you want are some birds to keep the insects down around the house, then consider one of the breeds on the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy list (http://albc-usa.org/).

Finally, when selecting the type of chickens you want to own, make sure you can take care of them before you acquire them. It is important to know if your local laws will allow chickens to be kept at your location. Many cities are allowing birds to be kept inside the city limits but may place restrictions on the number or whether or not roosters are kept. It is important to dispose of the poultry manure in a safe and legal way. The manure can usually be composted and added to gardens or flower beds since it is an excellent fertilizer. Lastly, remember to have fun. Rearing chickens is an excellent way to teach children about animals and where their food comes from.

JONATHAN MOYLE is a poultry specialist with University of Maryland Extension at the Lower Eastern Shore Research and Education Center, Salisbury, Maryland. **F. DUSTAN CLARK**, DVM, PhD, is an associate Poultry Center director of Extension and Extension veterinarian with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Center of Excellence for Poultry Science at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas. **SCHARIDI BARBER** is an instructor - poultry youth programs with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture in Little Rock, Arkansas. **TOM TABLER**, PhD, is an Extension professor with Mississippi State University Extension Service, Poultry Science, in Mississippi State, Mississippi.

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