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Chicken History and Breed Characteristics

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There are more chicken breeds in the world than there are reasons for raising them. If you know what your purpose is, there is sure to be at least one breed of chicken to strike your fancy. In fact, many people can't stop sampling breeds until they run out of space to keep them.

Chickens are organized by class, breed and variety. Class refers to the geographical region where the breed was developed. The classes of domestic fowl are American, English, Asiatic, Mediterranean, Continental and Other. Breeds are distinguished within a class by differences in body shape, size and skin color. Breeds are further divided into variety by comb type, feather color and pattern. A strain is produced by inbreeding members of a specific variety or breed through at least five generations. The resulting offspring always looks the same and can be identified as belonging to a certain strain.

Bantams are miniature chickens that originated in the Dutch East Indies. Typically, they are identical versions of the standard sized chicken. However, there are some bantams which have characteristics not found in standard poultry. These are sometimes referred to as true bantams and the others as miniatures. The American Standard of Perfection lists all characteristics of standard and bantam size fowl. The Bantam Standard includes breeds of varieties not found in the Standard of Perfection. In general, bantams are kept for ornamentation or sometimes as natural incubators due to their broodiness. They are also prolific egg layers and can be used for meat.

Chickens are also divided into categories based on their productive qualities. Each group is noted for their success at producing meat, eggs, or both. In addition, certain breeds are known as exhibition breeds and others have usefulness for their feathers in fly-tying. The American and English classes are typically considered dual-purpose breeds. That is, they are good at both egg and meat production. The Mediterranean class is noted for their excellent egg production. This class is fairly light in body weight so are not used for meat production. The other classes are more often considered ornamental.

Chickens raised on commercial poultry farms are not pure breeds. Geneticists have selected birds with the best performance and bred them with birds of specific characteristics to produce the super bird of today. Commercial meat birds are a cross between Plymouth Rocks, Cornish and other breeds. Their offspring are bred to produce the dominant white feathers preferred by processors and consumers. Since these commercial birds are hybrids they will not breed true at your home farm.

For hobby farmers, other factors come into play besides production qualities. If you want a flock that will withstand cold northern temperatures, stick with the full-feathered American and English class. Choose varieties with smaller combs that are more resistant to freezing during hard winters. If children will be involved, it is better to raise a more docile breed that will easily tame. Orpington, Plymouth Rock, Brahma and Dorking will all fit this requirement. For smaller hands, the Cochin bantam is a nice choice. Most of the high egg production breeds are also extremely flighty. They can be handled and tamed with a lot of effort but in general they are very reactive to stimuli.

Roosters are not necessary for egg production but they are needed if you want chicks. Of all of the birds that hobbyists raise, roosters tend to be the least appreciated. Even if there are no zoning ordinances to prevent you from raising poultry, your neighbors may not enjoy the sound of crowing. And no, crowing doesn't only signal sunrise. Crowing can be heard around the clock. Your just mature rooster can spoil the simple pleasure of pitching a tent in the backyard with the kids. Sleep will not come easy. Another unpleasant trait of the rooster is the audacity of proving that he is at the top of the pecking order. You too will be included in his attempts to chase, jump at and otherwise scrap with all living things.

Sound Management

Before embarking on a poultry project check your local ordinances. Zoning laws can be very strict or loose enough that you can work with them. Oftentimes, being a responsible poultry raiser is all that is necessary to keep peace in the neighborhood. Offensive factors such as noise, appearance and smell should be eliminated from your hobby. Just work within your local laws and maintain a tidy poultry house. Both you and your chickens will be happier.

Interest in raising chickens has varied over the centuries. As a result, many breeds developed in the late 1800's have all but disappeared. The American class chickens have suffered due to zoning ordinances, the depression and general shifting of interest. To combat this decline of breeds, a few organizations have been developed. The first of these is the Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities (SPPA). The SPPA is composed of volunteer judges that track endangered breeds and varieties. The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) was formed in the mid 1980's to identify the most endangered old production breeds. This group has published lists of existing flocks and their number. As a result, the Rare Breed Poultry Conservation Project was developed to provide assistance to those hobbyists trying to prevent the extinction of rare and endangered breeds.

Good Health

Whatever breed of chickens you choose, to ensure good health, some things never change. You need to keep their environment clean and dry. Make sure your enclosures are predator proof. Disinfect regularly. Avoid overcrowding. And always provide plenty of fresh, clean water.

Good Nutrition

Feeding recommendations vary depending on whether you're raising chickens for meat or eggs. They also vary according to age. Here's a good rule of thumb.

To help get egg-type chickens/pullets off to a healthy start, feed Purina Mills® Start & Grow® Sun Fresh® Recipe. This 18 percent protein ration is perfect for raising laying chicks from hatch to 18 weeks of age or until they initiate egg laying.

For meat-type birds, try Purina Mills® Flock Raiser® Sun Fresh® Recipe. This 20 percent protein, nutrient-rich ration provides top starting, growing and finishing nutrition from hatch to final weight.

Mature birds can graduate to Purina® Layena® Sun Fresh®. This 16 percent protein, high calcium ration is ideal for birds 18 weeks of age or older, whether they are laying eggs or not.

Regardless of which breed, class or variety of chickens you're raising, these recommendations for health, management and nutrition will help keep your birds happy and healthy for life. Have a great summer!

Characteristics of common breeds of chickens

Class	Breed	Varieties	Usage	Egg Color
American	Plymouth Rocks	7	Dual	Brown
	Dominique	1	Dual	Brown
	Wyandottes	9	Dual	Brown
	Javas	2	Dual	Brown
	Rhode Island Reds	2	Dual	Brown
	Rhode Island Whites	1	Dual	Brown
	Buckeyes	1	Dual	Brown
	Chanteclers	2	Dual	Brown
	Jersey Giants	2	Dual	Brown
	Lamonas	1	Dual	White
	New Hampshires	1	Dual	Brown
	Hollands	2	Dual	White
	Delawares	1	Dual	Brown
Asiatic	Brahmas	3	Meat	Brown
	Cochins	9	Dual	Brown
	Langshans	2	Dual	Brown
English	Dorkings	3	Dual	White
	Redcaps	1	Egg	White
	Cornish	4	Meat	Brown
	Orpingtons	4	Dual	Brown
	Sussex	3	Dual	Brown
	Australorps	1	Dual	Brown
Mediterranean	Leghorns	12	Egg	White
	Minorcas	5	Egg	White
	Spanish	1	Egg	White
	Andalusians	1	Egg	White
	Anconas	2	Egg	White
	Sicilian Buttercups	1	Egg	White
	Catalanas	1	Dual	White
Continental	Hamburges	6	Egg	White
	Campines	2	Egg	White
	Polish	10	Egg	White
	Houdans	2	Dual	White
	Crevecoeurs	1	Dual	White
	La Fleche	1	Dual	White
	Faverolles	2	Dual	Brown