

Introduction: (Heritage) Chickens and Turkeys and Ducks: Oh, My!

ABOUT A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO, when Abraham Lincoln was president, 48 percent of the American population was farming, and nearly everyone lived somewhere close to fresh food sources. Currently, less than 2 percent of our population raises our food.

Think about what that means. We are that dependent on someone else to feed us.

The development of the interstate highway system, the advent of air freight and a major shift in the population toward big cities — all these factors have contributed to significant changes in what we eat. Most of us live so far away from these farms and processing plants that more and more fossil fuels are being used just to transport the food to us. How good is the quality of that food by the time it reaches our local grocer and, later still, our tables? And how much money does the farmer pocket, once all the middlemen take their cut?

Sustainability: What It Means, Why It Matters

The dictionary definition of *sustainable* is, in part: “a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged.”

Wow. Suppose we could simplify the way we feed ourselves, and do it sustainably? Suppose that, by choosing to grow some of our food, we also contribute beauty and a healthier environment to our

world? Suppose that, in the process, we find a richer, more self-sufficient life, as individuals, families, communities — even at a national or global level?

What do you actually know about where your food comes from? How was the chicken you ate last night raised? You might not want to know; frankly, you might not care. Okay, fair enough. But we can't ultimately have it both ways.

Suppose we start to take back the responsibility for feeding ourselves, and at the same time, nurture our natural environment and help support our local community. I believe that, no matter where you live or how much space or time you have, you can begin to make choices that will, step by step, ultimately result in the satisfaction of being more self-sufficient. It's not just about having the freshest eggs ever or your own homegrown holiday turkey; it's about a mindset that is willing to acknowledge — and pursue — a better way of doing things. In fact, a better way of life.

Why Raise Poultry at All?

Historically, in times of war or a tough economy, Americans have relied on the small family farms to provide their food. Worldwide, there is much less arable land per capita now than there was 100 or even 50 years ago. So where is our food coming from? Increasingly, people are choosing to take up the challenge of producing some of their own food. Besides the obvious benefits of eating the freshest, most nutritious foods at a lower cost, they're discovering the joy and satisfaction of providing for themselves and their families.

This was certainly part of our motivation when my husband David and I began planning how we would live once we moved to the farm. Having gained plenty of experience over the years with gardening and food preservation techniques, I was already familiar with that sense of pride and accomplishment. In addition to growing fruits and vegetables, though, we expected that at some point we would take the plunge and try raising animals. Having heard lots of stories from my mother, who raised pigs while growing up in Illinois, I really wanted to raise them too. At the time, though, David wasn't too

enthusiastic. Although initially disappointed, I decided we shouldn't go ahead with pigs unless we were both really excited about it. After a bit more debate, and some initial research, we agreed to start with chickens. Just a few laying hens, we thought, to provide enough eggs for us and maybe some extras to share with friends and family.

Knowing what I know now, I would raise poultry for the entertainment value alone! I wouldn't ever have guessed that there are such different personalities between chickens, turkeys and ducks. Just trying to decipher the different vocalizations of the chickens is wonderfully diverting. The turkeys are incredibly friendly and curious, and just want to follow us around whenever we're outside. Actually, they also walk around the house when we're inside, trying to see where we are and what we're up to. The ducks have an adorable way of looking up at us sideways — I call it the Princess Diana look — and have definite games they play with us, mostly when it's time to close them up for the night. Ducks also look like they're always smiling.

Heritage vs. Hybrid

What does “heritage” mean, as far as poultry goes? It's really just another term for a purebred bird, as distinct from a hybrid. A purebred bird is one that results from the mating of two genetically similar parents. Hybrid varieties are produced from genetically dissimilar parents. Hybrid poultry breeds have, in general, been bred for some specific trait or traits, such as high egg production or rapid maturity. Most of these hybrid poultry breeds were developed relatively recently; there were no hybrid varieties in the poultry industry prior to 1930.

The commercial poultry industry overwhelmingly favors hybrids, due to their comparatively fast growth and high production capabilities. Examples are the familiar Cornish Cross meat chicken and the Broad Breasted turkey (typically the Nicholas strain, Giant White), both of which are commonly found in large grocery stores. However, there are numerous problems that can arise over multiple generations of cross-breeding. The main issue is that, in the process of selecting for just one trait, such as high egg production, the overall health of

the bird is ignored. Combined with the typical extreme overcrowding in commercial poultry operations, this has led to the necessity of adding sub-therapeutic doses of medications to the birds' feed in order to offset their lower disease resistance and their unhealthy living conditions. This means that the poultry industry has found a way to ultimately separate their own bottom line from the health and well-being of the birds.

On the backyard or small-farm level, though, heritage-breed poultry have much to offer. Where the goal is sustainability, they win every time over hybrids. Lately a growing number of poultry lovers (and other thoughtful consumers) in America are turning back to the future: discovering the pleasures of raising hardy, disease-resistant birds that mate naturally, incubate, hatch and raise their offspring and forage much of their own food. And that's just the beginning of how beautiful, sustainable heritage poultry can contribute to your more self-reliant lifestyle.

Benefits of Heritage Breeds

One of the most obvious benefits of raising purebred poultry is that they produce offspring that are true to type — a clear advantage over hybrids, which must be replaced by buying more birds. Among the many other reasons that make heritage breeds an attractive choice:

- There are many breeds to choose from, and they are adapted to many different climates.
- They mate naturally and brood their own offspring.
- They happily provide part of their own food by foraging.
- They help control weeds and harmful insects, and even small rodents.
- Their disease resistance and longevity are superior.
- They are easy to care for.

Here at Canyon Creek Farms, the only poultry breeds we raise are heritage breeds. We have no personal experience raising hybrids such as the Cornish Cross meat chicken. You might be thinking that we would change our minds about raising dual-purpose heritage chickens

for meat production if we gave the Cornish Cross a chance. I personally haven't met anyone around here who, given the choice, would opt for the beautiful dual-purpose New Hampshire, our choice for farmstead meat and egg production (see Chapter 27). Yes, we have to wait longer for our New Hampshires to grow to a good slaughter size. Sure, the hens don't lay as many eggs per year as production laying birds. However, we are able to breed our birds, saving the expense of buying new chicks every year. Our New Hampshire cockerels, which typically dress out at five pounds or more by about 18 weeks, are a whole lot tastier than the comparatively bland supermarket chicken. And our hens will still be laying their delicious, nutritious eggs long after those commercial layers reach the end of their second year — and the end of their useful laying life.

Depending on your goals, it may turn out that hybrids such as the Cornish Cross make more sense for you: for example, if you aim for a large profit-oriented meat-bird operation that will be your sole source of income. My motivation in writing *Pure Poultry* is not to convince you that heritage-breed poultry is the answer in every imaginable situation. I simply hope to show, through relating our actual



New Hampshire pullets on our old split-rail fence.

experiences in our first few years on the farm, how heritage-breed chickens, turkeys and ducks can contribute to a healthy and satisfying way of life.

We choose heritage breeds for many reasons, but there is no doubt that, compared with hybrids, they are simply a better fit for our way of life.