

# Choosing Chicken Breeds For Your Small Flock



There are more than 200 breeds of chickens available in the United States. Besides color, plumage pattern, style of comb and wattles -- somewhat cosmetic considerations -- chicken breeds differ on everything from personality, to broodiness (tendency to sit on eggs to hatch them), to egg laying ability and even egg color. Here are some things to keep in mind when deciding on a breed.

## Size

Chicken breeds are divided into one of two categories of size: standard or large, and bantam. In fact, many breeds are available in both sizes. Large breeds are, simply, larger than bantam breeds, and produce more meat and eggs. Bantams may be one-quarter to one-fifth the size of a large-breed chicken. Their eggs are smaller, and bantams often fly quite well. Bantams tend to be a little more intense in temperament than large breeds as well.

Some hobby farmers enjoy raising bantam chickens, breeding them, and showing them. Others do the same with large breed chickens. But those who are raising chickens for eggs and/or meat will likely choose large breed chickens for their greater efficiency in production.

## Heavy Breeds vs. Light Breeds

Heavy chicken breeds primarily originate from colder, more Northern locations. Examples are Wyandottes, Orpingtons, Jersey Giants and Brahmas. They have thicker bodies and denser feathers and are happier in the cold than non-heavy breeds. Many of the heavy breeds are considered Dual Purpose, meaning they provide both eggs and a bird big enough for the dinner table. Light breeds originate mostly from warmer climates. Examples are Leghorns, Andalusians, Campines. Many light breeds are excellent layers, but at the same time are often more high strung and likely to fly than other breeds. So accommodations for the two breed types can differ.

## Hardiness

Hardiness is not just a description of how well a chicken is suited to a cold winter. It refers to the breed's ability to sustain itself through tougher times, any genetic weaknesses, and its tendency to forage versus eating feed, often called "thriftiness." Some of the older, less heavily factory farmed breeds like the heritage or heirloom breeds still retain many of the qualities that chickens needed

when they were living in backyards all across the country. In contrast, production breeds bred by today's hatcheries have sometimes lost the ability to brood over a clutch of eggs or forage for food.

## Broodiness

Hens go "broody" over a clutch of eggs to hatch them. They settle in on the eggs, only leaving the nest once per day to eat and drink. If you're trying to hatch eggs naturally, this can be a good quality in a hen. If you are depending on a steady supply of eggs it may not be. Additionally, a broody hen who is not allowed to hatch chicks and is not stopped from being broody may see her health deteriorate.

## Dual-Purpose Breeds

Dual-purpose breeds are the old-time, classic breeds raised on the farm in early America. Many households had chickens, and they kept a laying flock but culled old, weak birds, birds who'd stopped laying, and young roosters to the table. The "dual purpose" of good laying production and plump meat for the table is the specialty of these breeds. Good dual-purpose breeds include Delawares, Black Australorps, Plymouth Rocks and Rhode Island Reds. Be aware that these breeds purchased from hatchery stock are virtually a different breed than the true heritage lines raised by private breeders.

## Egg Layers

White Leghorns and other pure egg-laying breeds are the most prolific egg layers. Their grain-to-egg output is maximized. These birds don't make particularly good table birds and they're not the best for cold climates. Hybrid layers offered by hatcheries, such as red and black sex-links, lay in high numbers for approximately 2 years.

## Meat Birds

Some breeds were developed purely to raise for eating. These breeds are the most efficient converters of grain to meat. The classic factory farm bird, sold in every grocery store across the U.S., is called a Cornish Cross. These chickens have top secret, proprietary genetics and are bred to

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be incredibly fast growing. They grow to a broiler size (4 pounds) in 6 to 8 weeks and are unable to live as adult birds due to their own great weight. There are other sustainable breeds suitable for meat production: Brahma, Cochin, and Jersey Giant are a few of them.

### **Egg Color**

Eggs range in color from all shades of brown and tan to blue, green and white. There is no nutritional difference between different colored eggs. The breed of chicken will determine the color of eggs produced.

### **Plumage and Looks**

Chickens come in every feather color, shape, and design imaginable. It isn't all about cosmetics, however. Combs come in a variety of shapes. Those that lie close to the chicken's head are less prone to frostbite, while large combs allow for cooling in hot climates. Feathers on heads and faces may prevent free-ranging chickens from spotting aerial predators, while feathers on feet and legs can get caked with mud in Northwest Winters.

### **Temperament**

Some breeds are more flighty and high-strung, while others are placid and calm. This impacts things such as safety while free-ranging (fast, flighty breeds have better survival skills) and safety for small children (docile breeds are generally better with kids).

### **Heritage and Rare Breeds**

Recently there has been a growing interest in heritage and heirloom chicken breeds, as well as popular "flavor-of-the-month" rare breeds. Heritage breeds should display great hardiness, foraging ability and production qualities. Rare breeds usually command high prices and come from limited gene pools. Many of the rare breeds have less than abundant production qualities.

*Thank you for your interest in purchasing chicks from local farmers who breed to a humane, sustainable standard of poultry production. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions.*