

LESSON 1 SCOPE AND NATURE OF DOMESTICATED POULTRY

The term *poultry* can be applied to domesticated birds which are raised, farmed and slaughtered for use and consumption by humans. Common poultry include chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese and quail. Less common poultry species include guinea fowl and peafowl, pheasants, pigeons, emus and ostriches.

This course is intended for those interested in understanding the origins of the most common poultry species, the health and care of poultry, poultry production on small and large scales

and general industry standards for breeding, raising and looking after poultry. This course is founded on research from history, agriculture, science and business.

Suggested Tasks: ▼

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.



Free Range Chickens

A BRIEF HISTORY

Some poultry breeds have been around, relatively unchanged for a very long period of time, while others are relatively new. Many of the newer breeds are used in commercial poultry farming, traditional breeds are often passed over, however - as with many things in the modern world, new doesn't always necessarily mean best.

Pure breeds of poultry have certain advantages over their modern counterparts:

- They are genetically more stable
- Can survive on lower quality foods
- Are sometimes more productive than modern breeds
- The disadvantages are that they become broody faster than a cross breed

Modern breeds however are bred purely to improve meat or egg production and sometimes vigour. Cross breed hens for example start producing earlier than pure breeds and can more eggs per year. The downsides to cross breeds are:

- That their productive life is often shorter than their purebred counterparts
- They require higher protein feed and more feed than purebreds
- They tend to be egg eaters
- They can also be more aggressive than purebreds

ORIGINS OF POULTRY

The Chinese are known to have kept domesticated fowls as early as 2000 BC. The domestic fowl is thought to have originated from four different species of Jungle Fowl:

Gallus ferruginus

Gallus stanleyii

Gallus sonneratii

Gallus furcatus

Gallus ferruginus/Gallus bankiva (a red jungle fowl) probably played a major role and is probably a parent of most domestic fowls

European poultry were kept largely as scavengers around the yards of people across the UK and Europe until the arrival of feather-legged breeds in the nineteenth century. The arrival of the feather legged varieties saw attitudes toward poultry altered and from then poultry started to be kept in houses and hen yards of more and more people.

KEEPING POULTRY – PROFIT OR PLEASURE

Poultry keeping is cheap and simple when you compare it to keeping large animals such as goats, sheep, pigs or cows. Poultry are easy to handle and easy to manage; to keep poultry happy and healthy they need access to sunlight, a dust bath and appropriate (it can be simple) housing, that is well sheltered from cold winds and is vermin/fox proof.

LEARN MORE >>>

Suggested Tasks

Search for suppliers of chickens or other poultry in the country or region where you live. By doing so, discover what is, and perhaps what is not available in your locality.

You may do this by:

- Looking in poultry, farming or other publications that contain information about breeding and selling poultry. (Check newsagents).
- Searching the internet.
- Contacting poultry clubs or agricultural societies.

Poultry are widely kept as domesticated animals:

- By subsistence farmers
- For self-sufficiency i.e. eggs and meat
- As pets
- On small scale farms
- On large scale, commercial farms

Laying hens (for example) are popularly kept by the 'backyard farmer' or on a small holding for pleasure. Some small holders make a business out of their interest in poultry by breeding them for sale (and sometimes 'showing' them) or they sell (or trade) the eggs. Others may set up a full scale farm e.g. free range eggs and chicken, duck or turkey meat or as is the case in many large operations - as caged birds for full scale egg production and meat. Some concentrate on producing certain pure breeds, which they may take to poultry shows and exhibitions, as well as sell them to others interested in pure breeds. Others concentrate on cross breeds suited to meat or egg production. They may sell day old chicks to egg and meat producers while others sell point-of-lay hens.

Some breeders now also offer a 'trade-in' service – buyers trade-in their old hens when they buy new layers. That way they do not have the responsibility of not knowing what to do with unproductive hens. The breeder or poultry supplier takes the responsibility for them. This is an excellent service for backyarders that may like to keep a couple of hens for the family as pets and for fresh eggs, but are unable to dispose of them when the time comes.

CHICKENS

Depending on what your intentions are for raising or keeping chickens, the selection of stock can be important. The breed you choose will offer different benefits. Ornamental breeds are often enjoyed as pets, whereas cross-breeds are mainly used in commercial production as they are capable of laying eggs at a high rate and are exceptionally economical with feed. Cross-breed examples are the White Leghorn male crossed with a female Australorp or the New Hampshire x Rhode Island Red is another good crossbred.



Chicken

There are various ways you can obtain hens. You can buy them as day-old chicks, as pullets or as battery hens. Day-old chicks are cheap but require six months of feeding and much care and attention before they start to lay.

If you choose not to raise chicks (thus avoiding the possibility of being left with rooster/cock that you may not want), perhaps adopting or buying ex-battery hens could be a good alternative if you want to buy cheaply. Unfortunately, battery hens are in poor condition and could be diseased. They are usually sold off battery farms at about 18 weeks of age. You may not mind this and in fact you may take great enjoyment out of improving their health and quality of life.

For the novice poultry keeper, the easiest way to begin is to buy pullets. If you buy them at 18 weeks of age, they will start laying eggs within a further 4-6 weeks. Planning to introduce a younger group of birds into an established flock should take place. Often very young birds need to be kept from older birds initially – so a separate shed may be required for this.

Whatever breed or age you choose, it is important that you obtain stock from a reliable poultry breeder.

TURKEYS

Turkeys are not difficult to raise so you may choose to buy them as day-old poults. Young turkeys can be susceptible to disease and they are particularly vulnerable to chills so keeping them warm during the brooding period (the first few weeks after hatching) is important. If you buy them unsexed, you could also have too many males for your flock. Unless you intend on raising turkeys for meat production, they can be costly to feed and to look after properly and they have no financial benefits.

Alternatively you could buy adult birds and breed your own stock. Two hens and a gobbler are sufficient to start off with. Females should be two years

old at mating and males should be at least one year old and not too fat. One gobbler can serve 8 to 10 females.



Turkey

Many people state the taste of farm reared birds cannot be beaten – in comparison to commercially produced birds. Raising turkeys for the table can be a process of feeding well and fattening the bird up – the fat under the skin is where much of the flavour of these birds is found.

Turkey Breeds include: Broad Breasted White, Broad Breasted Bronze, Bourbon Red, Narragansett, Norfolk Black, Bronze Wing etc.

LEARN MORE >>>

Suggested Tasks

Choose two breeds of chickens that you would like to learn more about.

Search online for a breed association or history of each breed.

Read anything interesting which you find.