

Breeds of Chicken

What's the difference between hybrid and traditional breeds of poultry?

There are many different breeds of chicken. They can be split, very roughly into dual-purpose breeds (for meat and eggs), show breeds, Bantams, (small breeds) meat breeds and layer breeds (for eggs). Because the poultry industry became dominated by a few breeding companies these breeds became very specific. This was achieved by crossing breeds to produce hybrid breeds.

The story of hybrid poultry breeds

Hybrid is the combination of two or more different breeds to produce a particular objective. In the case of poultry there was demand for meat strains and egg laying strains. The upshot of this development, which really gathered pace after the second world war, is a few breeding companies producing a few strains which dominate our poultry consumption. The hybrid layer birds, such as Isa/warren and Bovan Goldline are egg-laying machines producing in excess of 320 eggs per year. In the meat industry the Ross/Cobb type bird is an eating machine, putting on meat at such a rate that in some cases they cannot support their own weight.

If you pick up a modern hybrid layer bird you will notice that it is very thin, it eats to produce eggs at the expense of its own body weight. The female meat birds are normally slaughtered weighing 2kg plus at around only 40 days old. If it were allowed to grow to the point of lay (POL; the point at which female hens reach maturity and start laying eggs) at around 140 days of age, you would discover that it lays very few eggs. Just like the ability of the hybrid layer to lay down meat and fat has been bred out, so the meat birds' ability to produce eggs has largely been bred out. In the case of white turkeys, the males have been bred to such sizes that they no longer have the ability to mate, being just too heavy. The breeding companies depend on artificial insemination to produce the next generation. The same has happened to almost every branch of food production.

While the modern hybrids will produce a huge quantity of eggs commercially this is only viably exploited in the first year of production. The number of eggs that a bird will produce will naturally decline

per year, as the bird gets older. The commercial producer therefore replaces their stock every year. Most of the unwanted birds will go into pet food or just be destroyed. Because there is no meat on these birds it costs the producer to get rid of them. The Battery Hen Welfare Trust www.bhwt.org.uk re-homes ex-battery hens. You will be providing an excellent retirement for a bird deprived of natural conditions. They will still be producing in excess of 260 eggs per year for at least two years and will very quickly start scratching around and doing chicken things as if born to it once they are given a more suitable environment.

The story of the traditional poultry breeds

The older breeds were normally what can be described as dual purpose or utility breeds, that means the females can provide eggs (around 275 per year) while the males born can be reared for meat, (taking around 16 weeks to reach 2+kg). The modern hybrid males are killed at birth, being of no use for meat production. Examples of traditional poultry breeds would be the Rhode Island Red, the Light Sussex or the Orpington. As the need for these birds declined so they became the preserve of the shows. Unfortunately show birds, just like the hybrid birds, are bred for specific purposes; their looks. Consequently some of the values for which they were kept have been lost or decline. In the case of the Orpington, which was a large dual-purpose bird, their egg laying ability has declined. Instead of the 220 plus eggs per year a show Orpington now only produces 80-100 eggs per year.

The older breeds of chickens are numerous and come in all sizes and colours. While not producing the same quantity as the modern hybrid bird they tend to produce for longer. By keeping such birds you will also be contributing to their survival. It is not good that 95% of our food production is dependent on such little bio-diversity. You can expect to pay a lot more for such birds as they are not so common, around £15-£25 per bird.

Breeds that produce coloured eggs

The colour of an egg is also dependant on breed. The British consumer likes a brown egg traditionally, although there is no difference in the taste or nutritional value of different coloured eggs. If you did want a dark brown egg than the Maran is the hen for you. Marans come from France originally and come in several colours. All of the Maran strains produce the dark brown egg. If you really fancy coloured eggs you can get blue eggs from the Araucana chicken.

Bantams - the little chickens

Bantams are a small variety of chickens. Historically they came from the city of Bantam in Indonesia where sailors found them useful. Being smaller they required less space of their ships. A lot of the larger breeds have a bantam equivalent. They are kept mainly for showing although they can fit in well to the small back garden, as they require less space. Their eggs are about half the size of normal eggs.

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