

EXTENSION NOTES



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Turkey Talk

It is that time of year when talk turns to turkeys. Technically, there is only one breed of turkey, with several varieties, although many people incorrectly refer to these varieties as breeds.

Turkeys are raised only for meat. They are not raised for egg production, as with chickens, ducks and quail. As a result, turkeys do not produce very many eggs.

The most common type of commercial turkey raised in the United States is the Broad-Breasted White. It has a larger breast than the other varieties of turkeys.

The term “heritage turkeys” refers to naturally mating turkey breeds native to the Americas. These varieties date back to early colonial times. They are Beltsville Small White, Bourbon Red, Jersey Buff, Narragansett, Royal Palm, Slate, Standard Bronze and White Holland. Heritage turkeys grow at a much slower rate than Broad-Breasted Whites. The result is a smaller bird but one with a more balanced dark-to-white meat ratio; a more intense, sometimes gamey flavor; and a thicker layer of fat surrounding the breast.

A young male turkey is called a Jake, and a young female is called a Jenny, while a baby turkey is a poult. Older females are called hens, and older males are called toms. Adult males are sometimes called gobblers.

Turkeys have brightly colored growths on their throat called caruncles and a flap of skin that hangs over their beak called a snood. They also have a wattle, which is a flap of skin under the beak. You will see all of these things turn bright red when a tom is upset or courting a female.

As turkeys get older it is easier to tell the toms from the hens. Toms are typically larger overall than hens and have larger snoods and caruncles than the females.

There are two species of turkeys, both native to the Americas: the North American (*Meleagris gallopavo*) and the Ocellated (*Meleagris ocellata*) turkey. The North American wild turkey is the species from which all domesticated varieties of turkeys originated. The Ocellated turkey, sometimes called the Mexican turkey, is native to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.

Raising wild turkeys is illegal in some states, including Kentucky. The prohibition includes domestic strains of wild birds. The law is meant to protect native populations.

The wild turkey was first domesticated by the Aztecs. Turkeys provided a source of protein, and the feathers were used for decorative purposes. Very little genetic selection was used with these early domesticated turkeys. The explorers took these turkeys back to Europe with them.

After some early genetic selection in Europe, these turkeys were re-introduced into America with the first settlers. While the initial genetic selection of domesticated wild turkeys occurred in Europe, the different varieties were developed in the United States, with the possible exception of the White Holland.

Many options are available for those interested in starting a small flock of turkeys. If fast growth and good feed efficiency are important, the commercial strains of turkey are your best option. The Midget White, a smaller version of the Broad-Breasted White, is well suited for small farms.

If you are looking at raising heritage turkeys there are several varieties to choose from. The Bourbon Red was developed in Kentucky and is suitable for small flocks.

If you would like to enter your turkeys in poultry shows, purebred varieties are required. Choose one of the eight varieties recognized by the American Poultry Association in their Standard of Perfection. The Royal Palm turkey is primarily an ornamental variety, but any of the other varieties are well suited to the small flock.

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Upcoming Events:

- **Northeast Area Livestock Meeting** – Tuesday, November 19th @ 6:00 PM; Topic – Understanding Seed Tags; Speaker: Dr. Jimmy Henning, UK Forage Specialist
- **Commercial Pesticide Applicator Continuing Education Training** – Friday, November 22nd – 9:00-3:30 - Virtual via Zoom – Call 474-6686 to register.
- **East KY Hay Contest Awards** – Tuesday, November 26th @ 5:30 PM