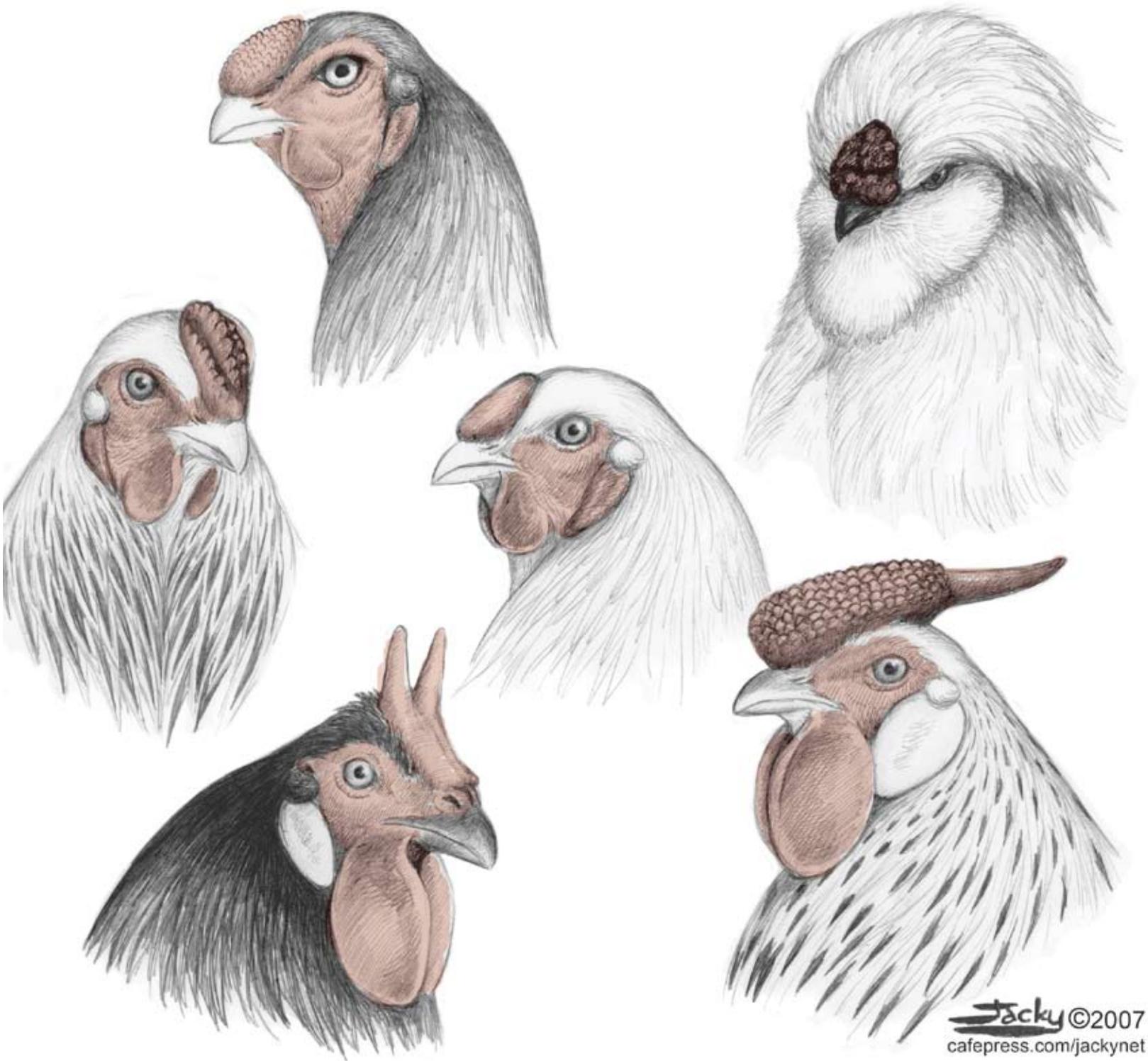


Perfect Chickens



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A nitty GRIT-ty guide to backyard breeds

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BY

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ILLUSTRATIONS

BY [DIANE JACKY](#)

Every farm and most households in America used to play host to at least a small flock of laying hens – doing so was, after all, part of the program for feeding the family. Those flocks also supplied plenty of meat for the table, either as old hens long past their reproductive prime or cocks of virtually any age.

In many cases, the flock consisted of a multipurpose breed suitable for egg production and of sufficient size to fill a frying pan when young, or as roasters as young adults. Folks in need of food haven't been the only people interested in poultry, however. Humans have fancied the flock for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and early breeding efforts gave rise to a number of ornamental chicken breeds as well as more specialized meat- and egg-producing varieties.

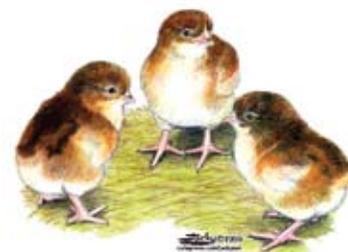
Today, chickens born of pinpoint-focused genetics are raised by the millions. The average frying chicken is physiologically so well adapted to gain weight that it is ready for the frying pan in no more than six weeks. Modern hybrid laying hens are so efficient at the process that they don't even think of sitting on eggs – and they barely have enough meat on their bones to make a decent pot of stew when their laying days are over.

Industrialized chicken farming has done wonders for keeping meat and egg prices low, but with an unexpected consequence: the extinction of many interesting old breeds. In the United States today, the several hundred million Cornish Cross and strain-crossed White Leghorn chickens raised each year for meat and eggs are estimated to be close to 99 percent of the country's total chicken production. The reality that traditional breeds have little value to the factory farm is all the more reason to consider raising them yourself.

A “heritage” chicken is one that was hatched from a heritage egg sired by an American Poultry Association standard breed established prior to the mid-20th century. It is slow growing, naturally mated, and lives a long, productive, outdoor life. These breeds don't fit our modern production standards, even though most will outperform their conventional counterparts in the home flock. Heritage chickens are also profoundly important as a pool of genetic diversity and will no doubt be essential to the well-being of future factory flocks. Because of their often quirky characteristics and downright good looks, heritage chickens today offer many excellent choices for those of us who want more control over our food supply.

In the entries that follow, we have compiled the key characteristics and some anecdotal information on 25 interesting chicken breeds that fall far from the mainstream. We've also included information from the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy Priority List (www.ALBC-USA.org) for each breed. They classify a breed as critical if fewer than 500 breeding birds and five or fewer primary breeding flocks exist in the United States. Threatened breeds have fewer than 1,000 breeding birds and seven or fewer breeding flocks. For a breed to be classified as a watch breed, it must have fewer than 5,000 breeding birds and 10 or fewer breeding flocks or be a breed that presents genetic or numerical concerns or limited geographic distribution. All three of these classifications include breeds that are considered globally endangered. A recovering breed is one that was once in another category, has exceeded the numbers of the watch category and still needs monitoring. A “study” classified breed is one of genetic interest that lacks definition, genetic or historical documentation.

If your favorite breed wasn't included, please send us a photo or post one (with a caption) at our photo-blog website cu.Grit.com.





Ameraucana

size: **small**
 comb: **pea**
 plumage: **widely variable**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **blue, green**
 use: **special interest**
 ALBC rating: **not rated**

Ameraucanas are easy-keeping birds well known for their blue and blue-green eggs and are often confused with the blue-egg laying Araucana. The breeds may or may not be related, although they often are sold interchangeably by commercial hatcheries. The muffed and bearded Ameraucanas are good layers of medium-sized eggs.

The Andalusian's preferred blue color results from crossing white birds with black. With two blue Andalusians, the resulting offspring exhibit a pattern of 1 black: 2 blue: 1 white (neither dominant nor recessive). These birds make an attractive addition to the home flock because hens are good layers and show little tendency to broodiness.

Andalusian

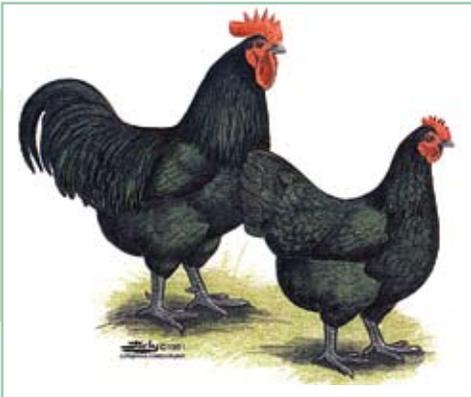
size: **medium**
 comb: **single**
 plumage: **blue, black, white**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **white**
 use: **ornamental**
 origins: **Spain**
 ALBC rating: **critical**



Australorp

size: **large**
 comb: **single**
 plumage: **black**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **brown**
 use: **dual**
 origins: **Australia**
 ALBC rating: **recovering**

The black Australorp was developed in Australia using Black Orpington stock originally imported from England. An Australorp hen carries the dubious honor of world record egg layer. In 365 days, she laid 364 eggs. This medium heavy breed is an excellent homestead chicken because it makes a fine layer and has a compact but meaty frame.



Although often considered a meat breed, heavy-framed Brahma hens are also efficient egg layers. The light coloration pattern consists of white base, with white and black feather accents on hackles, feet and tail. The buff variety is similar with buff as the base color. Dark Brahma hens have a gray and black penciled base, while the rooster has a black base and white shoulders.

Brahma

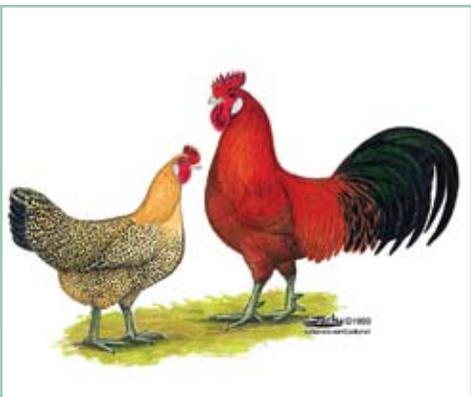
size: **large**
 comb: **pea**
 plumage: **light, dark, buff**
 legs: **feathered**
 egg color: **brown**
 use: **meat**
 origins: **Asia**
 ALBC rating: **watch**



Buttercup

size: **small**
 comb: **buttercup**
 plumage: **buff hens, red roosters**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **white**
 use: **ornamental**
 origins: **Sicily**
 ALBC rating: **critical**

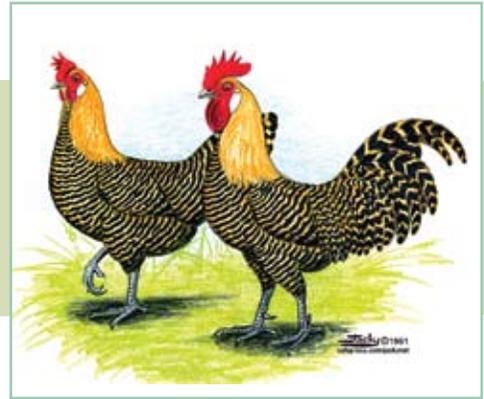
Evenly distributed black spangles give Buttercup hens their speckled appearance. Roosters, on the other hand, have red bodies with scattered black spangles, especially at the hackle's base, and black tail feathers. In spite of their ornamental status, Buttercups are fairly good layers of small eggs, and because of their unusual coloration, they really shine in the show ring.



Campine

Campines are among the oldest breeds found in North America. The birds exhibit a black barred feather pattern with buff or gray bases. The hackles on both males and females are uniformly golden or silver. Hens are typically nonbroody, and all birds are described as alert, intelligent and excellent foragers.

size: **small**
comb: **single**
plumage: **silver, golden**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white**
use: **egg**
origins: **Belgium**
ALBC rating: **critical**



Catalana

size: **medium**
comb: **single**
plumage: **buff**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **cream to tinted**
use: **egg**
origins: **Spain**
ALBC rating: **critical**

The Buff Catalana is not widely known in North America, but it has been popular in Spain and South America. Compared with other Mediterranean breeds, the Catalana comes pretty close to being a true dual-purpose chicken. Its feathers are also valued for decoration and fishing fly tying.

Cochin

Although they are among the largest domestic chickens, Cochins are poor layers but excellent setters. Early American settlers valued these fowl for their uncanny good looks and their willingness to hatch eggs from virtually any other poultry breed or species. Cochins are well suited to confinement, but due to thick, fluffy feathering, egg fertility is often lacking.

size: **large**
comb: **single**
plumage: **black, buff, partridge, white**
legs: **feathered**
egg color: **brown**
use: **ornamental**
origins: **China**
ALBC rating: **watch**



Cornish

size: **large**
comb: **pea**
plumage: **white, white laced red, buff, dark**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **brown**
use: **meat**
origins: **Cornwall, England**
ALBC rating: **watch**

The famed Indian Game bird, as the Cornish was once known, was bred for meat production in a self-sufficient and relatively hardy package. The birds have massive breasts and thighs that, when coupled with their short and closely held feathers, make them look somewhat prehistoric. This breed provided a large proportion of today's meat breed genetics.

Crevecoeur

The Crevecoeur is especially notable because the combination of its fluffy crest, muffs and beard makes its head look a little like a pompom. It was developed in Normandy, likely before the 18th century. This unusual-looking breed exhibits little tendency to incubate eggs and benefits from confinement, especially in foul weather.

size: **medium**
comb: **V-shaped**
plumage: **black**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white**
use: **ornamental**
origins: **France**
ALBC rating: **critical**



Dominique

Sometimes considered to be America's first poultry breed, the Dominique was developed in New England in the early 19th century. For many years, it wasn't distinguished from the Barred Rock. Dominique hens are good brooders and excellent mothers. The breed is quite cold tolerant and makes a good choice for free-range management.

size: **medium**
comb: **rose**
plumage: **black and white barred**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **brown**
use: **dual**
origins: **United States**
ALBC rating: **watch**



Dorking



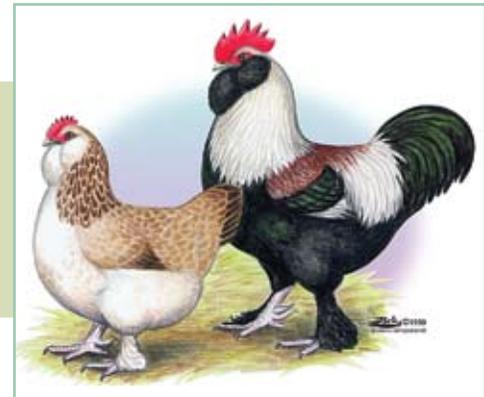
size: **medium**
comb: **rose, single**
plumage: **silver gray, white, colored**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white**
use: **dual**
origins: **England**
ALBC rating: **threatened**

The Dorking is said to have been introduced to Britain during Roman occupation, but the breed underwent most of its development in England. In addition to striking plumage, this bird has remarkably short legs and five toes instead of four, the more prevalent among chickens. Although it is a good layer, the Dorking remains somewhat famous in England for its delicious meat.

Faverolle

With their feathered feet, five toes, beards and muffs, Faverolles have enough visual appeal to keep any fancier fascinated. The breed was developed in 19th-century France principally to supply meat and eggs – but who said a utility breed had to be plain? Faverolles are known to be relatively cold hardy and are so docile they often get bullied by other breeds.

size: **medium**
comb: **single**
plumage: **salmon, white**
legs: **feathered**
egg color: **creamy tint**
use: **dual**
origins: **France**
ALBC rating: **critical**



Hamburg



size: **small**
comb: **rose**
plumage: **silver or golden spangled or penciled, white, black**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white**
use: **egg**
origins: **Holland**
ALBC rating: **watch**

Hamburgs are known to be a little skittish, but they are good foragers, have excellent flying abilities and thrive with free-range management. The breed is cold hardy, highly active and may have been developed before the 17th century. Hamburgs are excellent layers and are not at all broody, but their eggs are small.

Lakenvelder

This early-maturing breed is an excellent flyer and makes a good free-range bird, although its tendency to avoid humans might make it difficult to manage under those conditions. Both roosters and hens have a relatively rounded breast that's reminiscent of game birds. Lakenvelder hens generally are not broody.

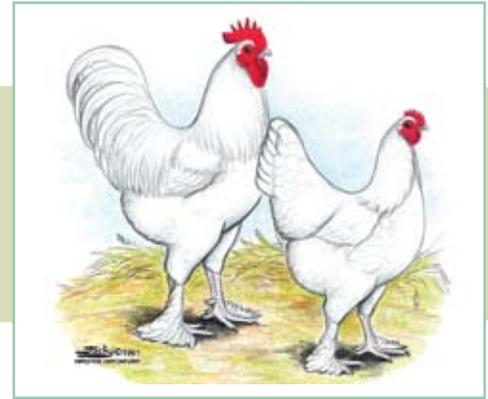
size: **small**
comb: **single**
plumage: **white with black hackle and tail**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white to tinted**
use: **egg**
origins: **Germany or Holland**
ALBC rating: **threatened**



Langshan

The Langshan was introduced to the Western world in the mid-19th century. The hens of this breed tend to be broody, and both sexes are extremely cold hardy. Langshans are adaptable and thrive under confinement or free-range management. The birds are noted for their long legs, high tails and stately appearance. Today, Langshans are most often used for exhibition.

size: **large**
comb: **single**
plumage: **white, black, blue**
legs: **feathered**
egg color: **brown**
use: **dual**
origins: **China**
ALBC rating: **threatened**



Maran

size: **large**
comb: **single**
plumage: **dark, cuckoo**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **dark chocolate brown**
use: **egg**
origins: **France**
ALBC rating: **not rated**

The Maran was developed in the early 20th century, and the Cuckoo variety, with its barred plumage, is widely available in the United States. This breed is known for high variability in temperament depending on the strain of origin, but most varieties are hardy and adaptable. The Maran's current popularity results from its striking egg color.

Minorca

Among the largest of the Mediterranean breeds, the Minorca is an efficient layer of large eggs. In spite of their size, these birds are not particularly known for meat production because of their narrow frames and characteristically slow growth. This breed makes an ideal laying flock where summers are warm and the birds have plenty of space to range.

size: **medium**
comb: **single, rose**
plumage: **black, white, buff**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white**
use: **egg**
origins: **Minorca**
ALBC rating: **watch**



Polish

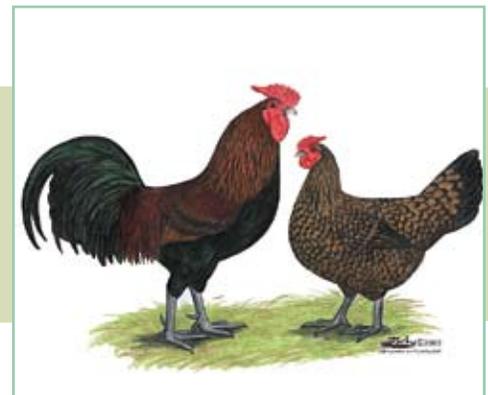
size: **small**
comb: **V-shaped**
plumage: **black, white, golden, silver, buff laced**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white**
use: **ornamental**
origins: **Eastern Europe**
ALBC rating: **watch**

Although named for Poland, this crested breed is thought to have originated in Eastern Europe or Russia before the 16th century. Historically, Polish hens were known for their egg production, but, as ornamentals, they always require protection from foul weather. Polish chickens come in many color variations, often with contrasting-colored crests.

Redcap

Although they are best known for their large rose comb (complete with very large spike), the Redcap (also Red Cap and Derbyshire Redcap in some references) breed is also known for its non-broody hens that are prolific layers of small eggs. This breed matures relatively early, is known for its hardiness and easily adapts to confined management.

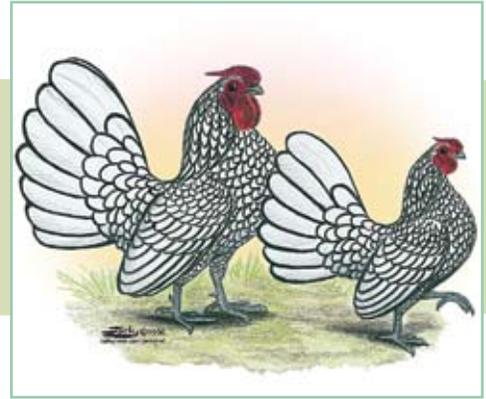
size: **small**
comb: **rose**
plumage: **red with black**
legs: **clean**
egg color: **white**
use: **egg**
origins: **Derbyshire, England**
ALBC rating: **critical**



Sebright

Sir John Sebright's several-decades-long breeding program in the late 18th and early 19th centuries resulted in this diminutive breed. Sebright roosters lack male-characteristic plumage and are so-called hen feathered. The hens lay tiny eggs from which tiny, relatively difficult-to-raise chicks emerge. Sebrights are described as jaunty and sprightly, and they are excellent fliers.

size: **true bantam**
 comb: **rose**
 plumage: **silver and golden with black lacing**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **creamy white**
 use: **ornamental**
 origins: **England**
 ALBC rating: **watch**



Spanish

size: **large**
 comb: **single**
 plumage: **black with white face**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **white**
 use: **egg**
 origins: **Spain**
 ALBC rating: **critical**

During the Colonial period, the Spanish (also White-Faced Black Spanish, Spanish White Ear, Clownface) came to the United States from Spain via the Caribbean. As the oldest of the Mediterranean breeds, the Spanish is known for the large patch of white skin (very large earlobes) on the sides of the face. The bird is most comfortable ranging free and is known to be noisy and heat tolerant.

Sumatra

This ancient breed looks distinctive because of its long, low tail, multiple spurs and dark purple face. Relatively small, the Sumatra is neither a gifted meat provider nor egg source. The birds resemble the wild jungle fowl of the Far East, and, as such, they do not tolerate confinement. Interestingly, the breed is both heat and cold tolerant and is well able to fend for itself.

size: **small**
 comb: **pea**
 plumage: **black**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **white**
 use: **ornamental**
 origins: **Sumatra**
 ALBC rating: **critical**



Sussex

size: **large**
 comb: **single**
 plumage: **speckled; red; light**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **creamy to light brown**
 use: **dual**
 origins: **Sussex, England**
 ALBC rating: **threatened**

As excellent meat and egg producers, the Sussex make perfect farm chickens. The hens are broody and make good mothers, and the cockerels are heavy and well-muscled. Sussex chickens are well-mannered, friendly and easy to handle. They are also very cold hardy, robust and adaptable to a wide range of management schemes.

Wyandotte

Originating with a silver-laced color pattern in the 19th century, the Wyandotte is now available in golden-laced, white, buff, partridge, silver penciled and other color patterns. This hardy breed is calm, cold hardy and adapts to a wide range of management practices. The Wyandotte's eggs are large and plentiful, and the breast meat is succulent, making it an excellent breed for the home flock.

size: **large**
 comb: **rose**
 plumage: **varied**
 legs: **clean**
 egg color: **brown**
 use: **dual**
 origins: **United States**
 ALBC rating: **recovering**

