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Buckeye Chickens Carry Unique History

The buckeye chicken is a cold-hardy, dual-purpose breed with a distinctive history—it's the only American chicken developed by a woman. Although the breed was nearly lost, its value is being rediscovered.

Nettie Metcalf of Warren, Ohio, developed Buckeyes in 1879 while seeking outside income as a farmer's wife. She was dissatisfied with the brown leghorns on the family farm and tried many other breeds without success. In frustration, she began crossing breeds to create a bird that met her requirements: a lively chicken, good for eating, an excellent forager, and a decent year-round egg producer. The birds also needed to survive Ohio's temperature

extremes in both summer and winter.

She initially crossed Barred Plymouth Rocks with Buff Cochins, producing chickens that, in her words, were "lazy, but good eating." The next step was to add Black-Breasted Red Game birds. This iteration produced one red-feathered chicken, along with chickens with pea combs, yellow legs, and a Cornish body shape. She continued breeding the red-feathered chickens, fine-tuning the genetics with each generation. Her original roosters were aggressive and required years of careful breeding to eliminate their fighting instincts.

Eventually, Metcalf developed a red-feathered bird that met her meat, egg and

foraging needs. Its name is an homage to Ohio and a nod to its coloring, which resembled a ripe buckeye. By her description, the birds were "large and vigorous" and the best layers she'd ever owned. Better yet, the new breed thrived in harsh conditions, making it ideal for Midwest backyards and homesteads.

Metcalf submitted the birds for admission to the American Poultry Association's Standard of Perfection in 1902. They remained popular for the next five decades, thanks to their hardiness, productivity, foraging ability and inquisitiveness. However, the breed was left behind as commercial breeding operations moved indoors and backyard flocks declined in popularity. By 2003, the breed was considered critically endangered, with lax breeding standards and fewer than 72 known breeding pairs remaining in the country.

The story began to change in 2005, when the Livestock Conservancy formed the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy and launched a program to restore the Buckeye's original characteristics. Today, the breed recovery project is considered a success. Not only has the population rebounded, but breeding standards have met Metcalf's initial goals. In 2011, the breed was upgraded from critical to threatened status. Today, estimates indicate that there are more than 5,000 Buckeyes in the U.S.

Today, Buckeyes are praised for their gentle dispositions and wide range of vocalizations. They're a dual-purpose chicken with deep mahogany plumage and the only American breed with a pea comb. They're also known for their short, broad, slanting backs; meaty thighs; and powerful wings and breast, which make them notably cold-tolerant. They have yellow legs and skin.

Buckeye chicks are born brown. Hens have a dark spot on their heads and dorsal stripes along their backs, while males have a white or cream-colored spot on each upper wing. The

chicks grow quickly, so they benefit from a high-protein diet for the first two months. A game bird or turkey starter feed might work best. Although the birds take up to 16 weeks to reach butcher weight, they offer flavorful, nutty meat that's delicious when slow-cooked or brined.

Full-grown roosters weigh in at 9 lbs., while the hens are a small 6.5 lbs. Likewise, their game-bird origins ensure they're excellent foragers and thrive in free-range conditions.

Naturally active and friendly, Buckeyes tend to run toward people rather than away. Expect a hen to lay 200 medium-sized brown eggs per year, with a tendency to go broody.

Those interested in learning more can reach out to the American Buckeye Poultry Club on Facebook. This vibrant online community is working to raise awareness of this unique poultry breed.

"As an anchor breeder for the past 20-odd years, Buckeyes are among the most active American fowl," says Michael Sullivan, Facebook group admin. "They're excellent foragers and can hustle for a large portion of their food given the opportunity. The birds are engaging, beautiful, tolerant of confinement, and not prone to bumble, as some other breeds may be."

The group offers proof that the birds still thrive in their home state, even a century and a half after their development.

"Modern Buckeyes handle our Northwest Ohio winters with elegance and energy," says group member Janis Montgomery. "I believe Nettie Metcalf would approve of what breeders are doing with her visions."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, American Buckeye Poultry Club (www.americanbuckeyepoultryclub.com); Facebook: American Buckeye Poultry Club).



Dehydrating food can save money on produce you don't get around to eating and offers a healthier alternative to store-bought snacks that contain added sugars and preservatives.

The Art Of Drying Food

Since civilization's earliest days, preserving food has been a priority. In fact, the basic practices of food storage date back to before 12,000 B.C.

Dehydration has proven to be one of the easiest and most reliable food preservation methods. The secret to its success is removing water. Microbes such as molds, yeast and bacteria need water to grow. Without it, they can't proliferate and spoil food. The water-removal process also concentrates calories and natural sugars, ensuring the remaining food packs a nutritional punch. A cup of grapes, for example, contains 60 calories, while the same amount of raisins approaches 500.

Jerky, as we understand it today, originated with Native North Americans. Drying strips of meat in smoke and sunlight proved an ideal way to preserve meat from large game animals such as bison and elk. Native Americans also used drying techniques to preserve corn, berries, squash and meat to make pemmican. These portable energy balls helped tribes store calories during the lean winter months, when gardens and hunting grounds were scarce. Other dried foods were used in soups and recipes year-round.

You can make dried food at home with nothing but sunshine or your oven. However, sun drying works best in low-humidity

areas, as it requires constant exposure to direct sunlight during the day and a relative humidity below 20%, conditions common in the American Southwest.

An oven offers more consistency, but it'll take two to three times longer to dry food than a dehydrator because it lacks a built-in fan. Minimal airflow also leaves food more susceptible to scorching toward the end of the drying period. However, many ovens are too warm for optimal slow-drying temperatures. You'll know there's a problem if the food forms a hard outer layer before the inside has had a chance to dry out—trapping moisture inside that'll lead to spoiling. Opening the oven door to increase circulation might help, as can positioning a fan near the door.

Electric dehydrators produce a higher-quality product than any other drying method. These self-contained devices include a heat source, a ventilation system, and trays for placing food. Look for an appliance with heat control and a temperature range of 85 F to 160 F. Trays work best with a 1/4 to 1/2-in. edge to prevent spillage.

The ideal dehydration temperature depends on the food's initial moisture content, as lower temperatures prolong the process. Fruits generally require much longer dehydration times than vegetables (24 to 36 hrs. vs. 4 to 8 hrs.). Herbs might take as few as 3 hrs.

Drying temperatures vary based on the amount of food, its moisture content, and even the outside humidity. Temperatures range from about 95 F for herbs to 155 F for jerky. While different foods with similar drying times can be dried together, be mindful of pungent smells, such as mint or garlic, that might affect the others.

When loading trays, avoid overlapping pieces to maximize air circulation and ensure

even drying. Large items should be flipped halfway through to ensure even drying. Determining when food is dry requires some experience and intuition. Vegetables are dry when they become leathery or brittle, and fruit is done when you can't squeeze moisture from it. When in doubt, add an extra 30 min. From a safety standpoint, it's better to over-dry than under-dry.

Store dehydrated food in a cool, dark, dry place. When properly stored away from moisture, dehydrated food can last several months or longer. Fruit can be kept for a full year, while vegetables should be consumed within 6 mos. For long-term storage, consider vacuum-sealing or freezing the dehydrated food.

Eat the dried produce as portable snacks or add it to soups, stews and casseroles. Campers and backpackers especially appreciate the weight-to-calorie ratio of dehydrated foods.

Note that dehydration affects certain nutrients, namely vitamins A and C, which are destroyed by heat and air. A sulfite treatment may prevent some of this loss, but it can also destroy thiamin. Likewise, drying won't improve food quality. Start with the freshest produce you can source to optimize the flavor and nutritional value of the final product. Tempting as it may be, don't attempt to salvage any dried food showing signs of mold.

Not only can dehydrating food save money on produce you don't get around to eating, but it also offers a healthier alternative to store-bought snacks that contain added sugars and preservatives. The devices take up minimal counter space and use very little electricity, making them an ideal tool for experimentation for anyone looking to improve their self-sufficiency.