

Raising Turkeys

So, you want to raise some turkeys? No problem! There are some facts you need to keep in mind when deciding how to set up your flock, as well as how you want to raise them.

Commercial breeds vs. heritage breeds

- Commercial breeds will reach market weights faster and yield more end-product.
- Heritage breeds tend to be hardier and capable of more natural behavior.
- Heritage breeds take 24 to 28 weeks to get to market weight. Commercial breeds take around 18 to 20 weeks to get to market weight.
- For heritage breeds, Toms will reach a peak weight of 17 to 22 pounds, while hens will be around 8 to 10 pounds. For commercial breeds, Toms will weigh in at 20-22 pounds, with hens at 12-15 pounds.
- For commercial markets, 20-22 pounds is the ideal market weight. A turkey will retain 75% of its live weight after processing. Thus, if your turkey weighs 30 pounds live, it will weigh right at 22.5 pounds dressed with giblets.
- Top commercial breeds: Broad-breasted white, Bronze Heritage
- Top heritage breeds: Bourbon Red, Narragansett, Standard Bronze



Consider purchasing birds from a hatchery that is a member of NPIP (National Poultry Improvement Program)

- These farms actively monitor for disease and will provide you with certified, healthy birds.

Special care is needed for birds that have been shipped

- The first two weeks of raising your birds will be the hardest. It is a good idea to give them sugar water or Gatorade when they first arrive, as shipping is really hard on them. You need to check them as often as time allows each day, keeping a close eye on the temperature. The temperature needs to remain at 95 degrees the first week. The temperature is reduced by 5 degrees each subsequent week until room temperature is reached.

Housing

- Even if you raise them on pasture, turkeys will need some type of shelter in place to protect them from extreme weather conditions and predators. A car port or open-sided shelter may be used; however, a more open structure will increase the birds' vulnerability to predation. Consider a shelter that they may be corralled and closed into for the night.
- The general consensus is that adult turkeys need 6 square feet per bird; the minimum is 3 square feet.
- Give your birds a way to roost. Perches should be constructed inside the shelters and built all on the same level to prevent the birds from squabbling and competing for the highest perch.
- Perches should be approximately 15 to 30 inches off the ground and at least 24 inches apart. Allow roughly 10 to 15 inches of perch space per bird in the flock.
- As an added measure for sanitation purposes, you may want to build a chicken wire framed barrier with a covered top six inches below the roosts to keep the birds from getting into their droppings.
- Ventilation is crucial with any type of housing or shelter. Make sure any shelter your turkeys have is properly outfitted with good ventilation to prevent build-up of ammonia from their waste.

Pasture (if applicable)

- If you are raising birds on pasture, good fencing will be your first line of defense.
- Place shelters in the corners of pastures for maximum usage of space.
- Do not place shelters close to the fence, as the birds may try to use the shelter as a launch site to fly over the fencing. Keep in mind that heritage breeds can fly up to areas they can roost in, which may lead them to escape. Commercial breeds do not have the ability to fly but may escape if they have structures they can jump from.

Feed, feed, feed

- Feed availability is crucial in the first 48 hours to the first week. The more feed they have in their gut, the bigger the gut will be later in life, therefore the more efficiently they can take in nutrients and grow. An empty gut can leave your turkeys open to bacteria.
- Check on crop fill (just rub a thumb over it) the first couple of days or if your birds are having health issues to make sure the crop is full and pudding like. If you have a bunch of empty, gassy, or hard crops, you may have issues.
- The feed must be a high protein (28%) feed and grower grit. Quail starter feed with 28% protein is also a good feed. Consider using a medicated feed for your turkeys, as this will help build immunity to common health issues.
- Grower feed needs to be fed for around 3 weeks. During the fourth week, gradually change the feed over to a 21% protein feed for the remainder of the growing season.
- At the start of the fourth week, you can put your birds out on pasture. You can either let them free range or put them in a mobile pen.
- Turkeys like all types of clover and 8-10-inch-tall grass. Turkeys can also eat any fruit and/or vegetable scraps from your garden. They love watermelon and cantaloupe. Do not feed them meat. Feed that contains animal byproducts, such as bone meal, are fine as long as the byproducts are not from turkeys.

Water

- Make sure your turkeys have access at all times to cool, clean water. Keep any water sources created by you in a shaded area.
- If raising your turkeys on pasture, try to limit access to standing water sources, such as ponds and puddles. These can be sources of parasites for your birds.

Sanitation

- If raising your birds in a penned area, keep the shelter relatively clean. Clear manure at least every 3-4 days to reduce chance of disease and parasite infestation.
- If you work around other animals, equipment, or chemicals, wash your hands and use alternate clothing before getting around your birds. Humans are one of the biggest health risks to turkeys, so it is important to keep yourself contaminate free.
- Keep feed troughs and waterers clean of turkey waste, debris, and other contaminants.

Health issues

- Turkeys are susceptible to several diseases and health issues. Some common ones are bird flu, turkey rhinotracheitis, fowl pox, and bumblefoot.
- Observe at all times for abnormal characteristics and behavior. If your birds are breathing abnormally, have a runny nose or skin issues, are exhibiting slow activity or limping, contact your veterinarian for further diagnosis and treatment, if possible.
- Keep an eye on your turkeys' legs. The more weight they carry, the more stress it puts on their legs and feet structure.

Raising turkeys can be challenging, to be sure. But if you do things right, it can also be rewarding. The key to your success will be to assess your birds' needs, create a business plan to provide for those needs, and follow up with care and maintenance of the birds and their resources. For further information, you can access these links. And, as always, consult your County Agriculture Extension agent.

<http://afs.ca.uky.edu/poultry/raising-turkeys>

<https://extension.psu.edu/small-flock-turkey-production>