

Definition of a Heritage Turkey

All domesticated turkeys descend from wild turkeys indigenous to North and South America. They are the quintessential American poultry. For centuries people have raised turkeys for food and for the joy of having them.

Many different varieties have been developed to fit different purposes. Turkeys were selected for productivity and for specific color patterns to show off the bird's beauty. The American Poultry Association (APA) lists eight varieties of turkeys in its *Standard of Perfection*. Most were accepted into the *Standard* in the last half of the 19th century, with a few more recent additions. They are Black, Bronze, Narragansett, White Holland, Slate, Bourbon Red, Beltsville Small White, and Royal Palm. The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy also recognizes other naturally mating color varieties that have not been accepted into the APA *Standard*, such as the Jersey Buff, White Midget, and others. All of these varieties are **Heritage Turkeys**.

Heritage turkeys are defined by the historic, range-based production system in which they are raised. Turkeys must meet all of the following criteria to qualify as a **Heritage turkey**:

1. *Naturally mating*: the **Heritage Turkey** must be reproduced and genetically maintained through natural mating, with expected fertility rates of 70-80%. This means that turkeys marketed as Heritage must be the result of naturally mating pairs of both grandparent and parent stock.
2. *Long productive outdoor lifespan*: the **Heritage Turkey** must have a long productive lifespan. Breeding hens are commonly productive for 5-7 years and breeding toms for 3-5 years. The **Heritage Turkey** must also have a genetic make-up that enables them to withstand the environmental rigors of outdoor production systems.
3. *Slow growth rate*: the **Heritage Turkey** must have a slow to moderate rate of growth. Today's heritage turkeys reach a marketable weight in about 28 weeks, giving the birds time to develop a strong skeletal structure and healthy organs prior to building muscle mass. This growth rate is identical to that of the commercial varieties of the first half of the 20th century.

Beginning in the mid-1920s and extending into the 1950s turkeys were selected for larger size and greater breast width, which resulted in the development of the Broad Breasted Bronze. In the 1950s, poultry processors began to seek broad breasted turkeys with less visible pinfeathers, as the dark pinfeathers, which remained in the dressed bird, were considered unattractive. By the 1960s the Large or Broad Breasted White had been developed, and soon surpassed the Broad Breasted Bronze in the marketplace.

Today's commercial turkey is selected to efficiently produce meat at the lowest possible cost. It is an excellent converter of feed to breast meat, but the result of this improvement is a loss of the bird's ability to successfully mate and produce fertile eggs without intervention. Both the Broad Breasted White and the Broad Breasted Bronze turkey require artificial insemination to produce fertile eggs.

Interestingly, the turkey known as the Broad Breasted Bronze in the early 1930s through the late 1950s is nearly identical to today's Heritage Bronze turkey – both being naturally mating, productive, long-lived, and requiring 26-28 weeks to reach market weight. This early Broad Breasted Bronze is very different from the modern turkey of the same name. The Broad Breasted turkey of today has traits that fit modern, genetically controlled, intensively managed, efficiency-driven farming. While superb at their job, modern Broad Breasted Bronze and Broad Breasted White turkeys are not **Heritage Turkeys**. Only naturally mating turkeys meeting all of the above criteria are **Heritage Turkeys**.

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