The American Standard of Perfection has over 60 breeds: which breed is right for you?

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If you are new to raising poultry, breed selection can seem a bit overwhelming. The American Standard of Perfection (see sidebar) has over 60 breeds. Which breed is right for you? Determining what your goals are in raising birds will help answer that question. Also take into consideration the climate, shelter, free range or not, etc. Is this a backyard flock to get a few eggs? Are you interested solely in egg production? Do you want a bird that will lay eggs and have a decent carcass to harvest? Are you raising a bird just for meat? Do you have other motivations, such as breed conservation, or do you just want to have an interesting mix of different and unique-looking birds? Below are some recommended breeds, depending upon your goals.

Backyard flock
People who are raising a backyard flock are typically most interested in the eggs and often want that connection to raising their own food. Seeing a mix of breeds is common in backyard flocks as a means to try several different breeds. In Montana, almost every backyard flock has at least one Araucana or Ameraucana for their pastel-colored eggs. Other common backyard flock breeds include Orpington, Rhode Island Red, Leghorn, Australorp or Sussex.

Egg production
If the goal is to raise birds just for egg production, particularly selling the eggs, the Leghorn breed will produce the most eggs, which are a white egg. In fact, this breed holds the record for the most eggs laid, 371 eggs in one year. Australorp, which produces a brown egg, is another good egg laying breed, with records of 364 eggs in one year. Another good egg layer is a Welsummer, which lays a dark brown egg.

Dual purpose
If you are looking for a breed that will be dual purpose (i.e., meat and eggs), most of the heritage breeds (see sidebar) are dual purpose. However, dual purpose breeds tend to be superior in one trait versus the other. As an example, the Orpington is a dual purpose breed that was bred to have a better carcass than some other dual purpose breeds, and their egg laying is average (175 – 200 eggs per year). Orpingtons have white skin, which may be foreign to most consumers that are used to seeing yellow skin on a meat chicken. Another example is the Welsummer which is usually better at laying (200 plus eggs per year) than for its carcass. The breeds mentioned above for backyard flocks, with the exception of the Leghorn, are dual purpose breeds. Other common dual purpose breeds include Barred Plymouth Rock, Buckeye and Wyandotte.

Meat
There are some breeds that are not recognized by The Standard that are commonly used in commercial poultry production. The most common meat breed, the Cornish Cross, is an example of one such breed. They have an extremely fast growth rate; from chick to a finished carcass in as little as six to seven weeks. Freedom Ranger is another commonly used meat breed not recognized by The Standard. Other meat breeds include Jersey Giant, Delaware, Chantecler, Cornish, and Buckeye.

Other motivations and considerations
Several poultry breeds are in critical threat of becoming extinct. The Livestock Conservancy has a list of such breeds and classify them as critical, threatened, watch, recovering and study. The critical classification has the greatest potential...
for extinction. Some breeds on the critical list include: Campine, Holland, Nankin and Sultan. Some people, especially those that are interested in breeding poultry, may be interested in trying to preserve such a breed.

If you are looking for a meat bird that will be a good forager, the Freedom Ranger or the Delaware will do a better job of foraging than the Cornish Cross, which tend to like to hang out by the feeder, due to their inherent mobility issues.

Montana’s cold winters can be harsh on breeds like the Leghorn that have a large, single comb. If exposed to cold temperatures, their combs can easily succumb to frost injury, which won’t kill the birds, but is very stressful and may decrease production. Consequently, if raising birds like the Leghorn, you will need to have adequate shelter and supplemental heat during the winter.

There is a lot of consideration that goes into selecting breeds that will fit your goals. Become familiar with a breed before you select one. The American Livestock Conservancy, an organization working to protect endangered livestock and poultry from extinction, has a table on their website (www.livestockconservancy.org) that may aid in selecting a breed. For additional information, contact your local MSU county or reservation Extension office.

The American Standard of Perfection is the official breed standard for poultry in North America. It was first published in 1874 by the American Poultry Association. Often referred to as the “The Standard,” it classifies and describes the recommended physical appearance, coloring, use, etc. for all recognized breeds of poultry, including chickens, ducks, turkeys, and geese. The current edition was published in 2010.

Heritage Chickens, as defined by The Livestock Conservancy, must meet the following criteria: 1) American Poultry Association Standard breed established prior to the mid-20th century, 2) able to naturally mate, 3) have a long and productive outdoor lifespan, and 4) have a slow growth rate.