

“Choosing the Right Breed of Chicken”

A short guide on the most commonly kept breeds of chickens in the UK.

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Rhode Island Red



Pure breed chicken

Average Annual Egg Production: 260

Garden Suitability: High, but prefer space given the choice

Best Features: good pets, easy-going attitude, high egg production

The Rhode Island Red originally came from the town of Little Compton in the US state of Rhode Island in the late 19th century, and arrived in the UK in the first decade of the 20th century. Although originally developed as a dual purpose bird, the Rhode Island Red's ability to lay up to 260 eggs per year ensured its popularity with commercial egg farmers. They subsequently cross-bred Rhode Island Reds to create new hybrids, such as the Rhode Island/Sussex cross.

If you had to draw a chicken from memory, chances are, it would look like the Rhode Island Red! It's the typical chicken shape; deep in the chest, the sort of bird you can tuck under one arm without worry about hurting it. You'll find this laid-back chicken on farmyards the world over, scratching about with its bright yellow legs, and shaking its rich red feathers in the dust.

Rhode Island Reds may be heavyweights of the chicken world, but they are an active breed. Rhode Island Reds like nothing better than foraging amongst grasses and hedges, and are also surprisingly quiet for their level of activity. These are tough birds that easily cope with British winters, while their active nature and general alertness makes them interesting pets

Sussex and Sussex Bantam



Pure breed chicken

Varieties: Large: White, Silver, Speckled, Light Red, Brown Buff

Bantam: Columbian, grey, silver, red, porcelain, white, Columbian blue marked

Average Annual Egg Production: 260

Garden Suitability: High

Best Features: docile, high egg production, bantams make good pets

The Sussex chicken originated in the UK county of Sussex, where they were highly prized for their meat. Today, this long-established breed is a very popular dual-purpose bird, which lays large quantities of eggs.

The Sussex is an elegant bird with white skin on their legs, and a medium sized comb. They have a long broad back, deep breast, and their tail should be held at 45 degrees from their body. Cocks weigh about 9lbs and hens less, at 7lbs. Their eggs are cream or light brown.

A Sussex chicken is a fairly laid back bird, docile yet also very interested in their surroundings. They are happy in a coop and run, but given the chance, love to forage as a free-range chicken. Sussex chickens are hardy and don't mind whatever the British weather throws at them.

Sussex chickens can get broody, but this is a rare occurrence and most of the time they are happy just to do their own thing. Speckled variety Sussex chicks take the longest to develop.

The Sussex Bantam has all the great qualities of its larger cousin, but in a more compact bird. Sussex bantams are well-proportioned birds, and their loving nature makes them ideal for keeping as children's pets. They brood well and are good mothers, should you wish to breed them. Best of all, Sussex bantams are prolific layers and often continue to lay throughout the winter when other breeds stop.

Barnevelder



Pure breed chicken

Varieties: Black, Double Laced, Partridge and Silver

Average Annual Egg Production: 200

Garden Suitability: Medium – should be free range

Best Features: Tough hardy birds, good layers, good with pets

Barnevelder chickens were bred in the Dutch town of Barneveld specifically to develop a chicken that laid more eggs, and was also appealing to the UK market.

Barnevelders are good-looking chickens, with lovely patterned feathers in golden red and black, bright yellow legs and beak, orange eyes and a small single red comb offset with red earlobes.

Barnevelders can lay up to 200 brown eggs per year, but need to be well exercised as they are basically lazy birds, and easily run to fat. Therefore, they do best as free-range chickens rather than contained within a small run or coop area.

Hens are prone to becoming broody, but this in turn makes them excellent mothers. Their chicks are bright yellow, which kids adore, gradually turning darker as they age.

One of the best points for home chicken owners is that the Barnevelder seems totally unphased by family pets, and are friendly towards them too.

Maran



Pure breed chicken

Varieties: Cuckoo (dark, silver, gold), French Wheaten, Copper Black

Average Annual Egg Production: 200

Garden Suitability: Medium – should be free range

Best Features: hardy chicken, easily tamed, chestnut brown eggs,

Maran chickens originate from the French town of Marans, where they were first bred in the mid 1800's. Originally bred as a dual purpose chicken, the Maran became popular in the UK simply because people liked their dark brown eggs so much! UK breeders developed the breed further in the 1920s into the attractive chicken you'll see today.

Marans are classed as heavy weight chickens, so they are fairly substantial birds. Most UK bred Marans are said to be cuckoo-coloured, but in fact range from a light silver to a dark grey colour, with a speckled feather pattern. Most Marans for sale in the UK are now dark cuckoo-coloured, the other variations having fallen from favour in the last 50 years or so. All Marans have white legs, and red or orange eyes.

The French Wheaten Maran is gaining popularity for its large chocolate-brown eggs and pretty honey-coloured feathers, perfect for incubating eggs in a nest. French Wheaten Marans can become very tame if you handle them, and will come running if offered food, so they make good pets.

Marans tend to be lazy if given the chance and quickly get fat, so your Marans will benefit from being free-range rather than in a small run. However, they are hardy chickens, happy on rough or marshy areas, so you can pop them in otherwise unproductive corners of your garden.

Marans are a gentle, quiet chicken by nature, and are also disease-resistant, making them ideal if you want a reliable, peaceful free-range chicken breed with high quality meat.

Orpingtons

Pure breed chicken

Varieties: Jubilee, Spangled, Cuckoo, Blue; colourings including Red, Partridge, Barred, Gold & Silver Laced

Average Annual Egg Production: 180

Garden Suitability: Medium (large birds, free range only)

Best Features: lovely plumage, docile, good pets. Good show animals



Orpington chickens originate from the town of the same name in Kent. Originally bred just in black, Orpington hens now come in a dazzling variety of colours, including the golden feathers of the Orpington Buff. All varieties have magnificent feathers, but beauty comes at a price, namely a much lower egg yield than other breeds. The Orpington lays attractive smallish pink/beige eggs.

The Orpington is a greedy bird that needs lots of exercise to stay trim, but luckily they also have a small wingspan, so can be contained in an area with low fences.

Orpington hens are disposed to be broody, especially during spring and summer, and hens will sit on a nest all day given half the chance. They therefore make excellent mothers should you wish to raise your own chicks.

Leghorn

Pure breed chicken

Varieties: White, Light Brown, Dark Brown, Black, & Blue

Average Annual Egg Production: 200

Garden Suitability: Low

Best Features: high egg yield



The Leghorn is an Italian breed, named after the port of Leghorn, from which they were shipped all over the world. The breed was further developed in the USA, arriving in Britain in the 1870s. The Leghorn is usually an all-white bird except for its yellow legs and beak, and coloured facial features. Like your favourite pair of white jeans (or is that just us?), Leghorns will get dirty and muddy, so don't keep them if you're a clean freak, and want your chickens to look as immaculate as your home!

Joking aside, the Leghorn is a superb chicken to keep at home if you love eggs, as they are proficient layers, and lay throughout the winter. It's no wonder that they are the breed of choice for commercial egg farms, laying eggs as white as their feathers.

Leghorns are not broody, are non-sitters, and continue laying after many other breeds are spent. The chicks mature early, and young hens are ready to lay within four to five months. Leghorns are heat tolerant, but hate the cold, so make sure you bring them in during frosty weather, and provide them with a draught-free coop and plenty of bedding.

Leghorns are not ideal for an urban garden, as they are noisy and easily flustered by loud noises or sudden movements. They are rather aloof, and since they can fly, they should be kept in an enclosed run. In the countryside, however, they take quickly to being free-range. They also come in other colours, but no matter their variety, they always lay white eggs.

Silkies

Pure breed chicken

Varieties: Black, Blue, Gold, Partridge, White, in Standard or Bearded

Average Annual Egg Production: 150

Garden Suitability: High

Best Features: Very, very cute! Perfect pets for children



Silkies are an Oriental chicken breed, although whether they originated in Japan, China or Malay is open to debate. Certainly, the explorer Marco Polo reported finding chickens with 'fur' on his travels in Asia during the 13th century. Silkies are officially classed as large chickens, but their extraordinary cuddle-ability makes them ideal pets.

In the 'cute chicken' stakes, the Silkie wins hands down thanks to its 'furry' appearance. Its feathers stick out like fur and have no real definition between them, creating the illusion of a Boris Johnson type haircut! Under a mop of pure white plumage, Silkies have unusual black faces and skin, black combs, and black feet with five toes covered in yet more 'fur'.

The drawback is that their plumage is not waterproof, so they always need access to a dry coop to retreat to if the weather changes suddenly. However, the plumage also keeps them warm in winter, so they are reasonably hardy.

It's probably just as well they are cute, as they are not proficient layers, averaging only 150 eggs per year. Silkies are calm and trusting birds who cannot fly, and are perfectly content in a confined space.

Unlike any other breeds of chicken, Silkies begin laying in midwinter and completely stop during the summer months. They do turn broody, and as a result, many breeders use them exclusively as foster mothers for other breeds.

Sikie meat is an acquired taste, simply because the meat is as black as their skin. However, in China, this very quality makes the meat highly sought after.

Cochins

Pure breed chicken

Varieties: Buff, Black, Partridge, Blue, Silver Laced, Splash, Golden Laced, White, & Frizzled

Average Annual Egg Production: 120

Garden Suitability: medium (due to low egg production)

Best Features: friendly, make great pets



Cochins originate from China, and were first brought to the UK during the reign of Queen Victoria in the 1840s.

The Cochin is a heavy, rounded bird, almost plump in appearance, which can affect their general health unless they are kept active and busy. (Cochins are the chicken equivalent of couch potatoes, given the chance!) Cochins do not fly, and are very docile, quite content to be fenced in rather than in a topped run.

Cochins should be kept on short grass, as longer grass or vegetation can damage their prolific feet feathers. If let out on wet ground, mud balls can form under their feet feathers, causing feet problems.

Cochins are not great egg layers, but the medium size brown eggs they do produce are very tasty, so long as you give your birds good quality feed all year round.

So, why would you want to keep a Cochin? Cochins make good mothers who brood instinctively, and their eggs hatch a day later than most other breeds, so the chicks are strong from the outset. Cochins can also be used as foster mothers for other breeds.

Cochins are quiet chickens, rarely making much more than the odd cluck. Their friendly nature, cuddly appearance and long lives (up to 10 years) make a Cochin an ideal pet too.

Speckledy Hen

Varieties: cuckoo

Average Annual Egg Production: 250

Garden Suitability: Medium (best free-range)

Best Features: good pets for children, soft feathers



Despite its rather 'traditional' sounding name, the Speckledy Hen is a modern-day hybrid created by crossing a Rhode Island Red with a Maran.

The Speckledy is a large bird with a classic chicken body shape deep breast, supported on pale legs. The Speckledy has soft feathers, patterned in waves of black

and golden brown. Their docile nature and ease of handling makes them good pets for children.

Speckled Hens lay lots and lots of lovely deep brown speckled eggs, which travel well as they have strong shells. The yolks are also a strong yellow colour, perfect for egg-based dishes such as omelettes and custards.

Speckled chickens require more feed than other breeds as they are heavy chickens and need lots of energy for their prolific egg-laying habits.

Gingernut Ranger

Average Annual Egg Production: 300

Garden Suitability: Medium (best free-range)

Best Features: make excellent pets, very high egg production



Despite sounding like a kid's tv show hero, the Gingerbread Ranger is a Rhode Island Red and Light Sussex cross that lays plenty of eggs. Gingernut Rangers are pert birds, with their tails pointing skywards and wings tucked neatly by their side, and pale yellow, smooth legs.

Gingernut Rangers are very tame birds that enjoy following humans around the garden or farmyard whenever they can. They are hardy chickens with an inquisitive nature that makes them superb free-range foragers. Children adore Gingernut Rangers as they are easy to handle and very gentle.

Gingernut Rangers lay large brown eggs at an average of almost an egg a day, so they are perfect if you want to keep chickens primarily for egg production.

Gingernut Rangers are a commercial name for this hybrid, which is also known as a Meadowsweet Ranger, and is similar to a Calder Ranger or Warren hybrid chicken.

New Hampshire Red

Average Annual Egg Production: 280 eggs a year

Garden Suitability: High

Best Features: excellent meat birds

The New Hampshire Red chicken originated from New Hampshire in the USA, where farmers selectively bred Rhode Island Reds to create a bird that matured quickly and laid plenty of eggs.

The resulting New Hampshire Red is lighter in colour than a Rhode Island Red, and was bred mainly for eggs, although they have gained a reputation as a good table bird too!

They are handsome and active birds whose full feathers develop quickly. The hens are also easily tamed, with a placid and laid back nature that's non-aggressive and highly tolerant – very little phases a New Hampshire Red!

New Hampshire Reds are hardy chickens, but their large comb is prone to frostbite in cold weather. They do not fly well, so can be contained within a low fence or in a pen.

The New Hampshire Red is a good dual-use chicken with a bias towards a plump Sunday roast at the end.

Plymouth Rock



Varieties: Barred, Blue, Buff, Columbian, Partridge, Silver-pencilled & White

Average Annual Egg Production: 200

Garden Suitability: High

Best Features: suitable as pets, good dual-use

The original Plymouth Rock chicken was first seen in an American poultry show in 1829, but the Barred variety (named after the bands of colour on its wings) first graced the show scene in 1869. The breed is still very popular in the USA, and is often bred for shows and exhibitions.

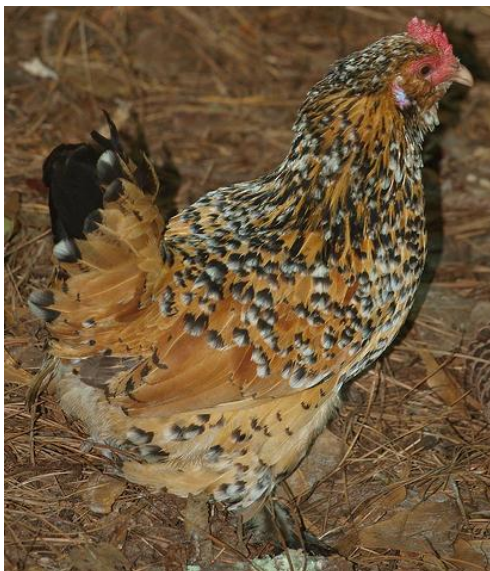
The Plymouth Rock is a good dual purpose chicken, laying a respectable 200 cream-coloured eggs a year. With its medium sized breast and long back, it is a good bird for the table too. Egg production does decrease in the winter, but rarely stops altogether.

Plymouth Rock hens can become broody unless eggs are removed swiftly, but are good mothers when given the opportunity. Their chicks grow rapidly for a heavy breed, feathering quickly, and living to a ripe old age too.

Plymouth Rocks tolerate cold weather well, and don't mind being confined or free-range. Whilst these chickens are friendly and easy to tame, they are also alert and competitive, so they make good pets for the family who want more from their pets than a quick cuddle! However, they should always be tamed to some degree, as they can turn aggressive.

The Plymouth Rock bantam is a just a mini version of the larger bird, a friendly bird laying light cream eggs.

Miss Pepperpot



Average Annual Egg Production: 300

Garden Suitability: High

Best Features: disease resistant, hardy, good pets

Despite its rather twee name, Miss Pepperpot is a superb egg-laying hybrid chicken breed, a cross between A Rhode Island Red, a Maran and a Plymouth Rock. Miss Pepperpots are only available to buy as hens. (Can you imagine a cockerel living that name down in the coop?)

Miss Pepperpot chickens have a thick plumage of black feathers with a green tint, topped with a red comb, a black beak and grey legs.

Miss Pepperpot is the perfect bird if you want large brown eggs – and lots of them. These docile chickens are easy to handle, and can be kept in a pen, but thrive best as free-range birds. They are resilient birds too, shrugging off the worst of the British weather, and are resistant to diseases.

As with most docile breeds of chickens, they make good pets; proud owners report how they quickly become one of the family thanks to their inquisitive natures and love of almost anything edible! Owners also report they are good with other family pets such as dogs

Pekin Bantam

Varieties: Lavender, Blue, Silver Partridge, Red Partridge, Blue Mottled, Columbian, Cuckoo, Mottled, Buff, Black, White & Wheaten

Average Annual Egg Production: 125

Garden Suitability: High

Best Features: full feathers, make great pets



The Pekin bantam originates from China, although there is no proof to the story that they were stolen from the Emperor's private collection in 1860!

The Pekin is a lovely little chicken that looks much bigger, thanks to masses of feathers that drop to the ground like a silken coat. They have short legs and heavily feathered feet. If they were show dogs, they'd be a Yorkshire Terrier or American Cocker Spaniel, groomed to perfection!

Pekin chickens enjoy human company, and are exceptionally tame. From day one, they settle into new homes extremely quickly and don't require much space to lead full and happy lives. However, they flourish best when you allow them to graze fresh grass as part of their diet. They are not destructive chicken, preferring to peck gently than scratch and scabble.

The Pekin tend to be broody, so they can be used as foster mums to other breeds if required. The cockerels are generally good-natured too, and have been known to share incubation duties!

Long-lived and usually very healthy, Pekins hens will even sit in your lap and be stroked. So Pekin hens make good pets for children who want a hen and a friend for life!

Japanese Bantams

Varieties: Black Tailed White, Black Tailed Buff, Buff Columbian, White, Black, Birchen Grey, Silver Grey, Dark Grey, Millers Grey, Mottled Black, Mottled Blue, Mottled Red, Blue, Lavender, Cuckoo, Red, Tri-coloured, Wheaten Bred, Partridge Bred, Brown Red, Blue Red, Silver and Gold Duckwing

Average Annual Egg Production: very low...

Garden Suitability: High

Best Features: small birds, long-lived, make good pets for children



Japanese Bantams (also known as Chabo bantams) probably originated in China and were brought to Japan in the early 17th century. The first UK club for Japanese bantams was established in 1912, although they probably first arrived here 50 years earlier.

Unlike most bantams, which are miniature versions of a bigger bird, Japanese bantams are a true dwarf breed with no large equivalent. Japanese bantams have short legs, vertical tail feathers, a large comb and low wings whose tips actually touch the ground.

To be honest, nobody really keeps Japanese bantams for their eggs, which are small - and few and far between. Certainly, Japanese bantams are not worth rearing for their meat, as they are small and light. Instead, just keep them for their looks and friendly, trusting nature, or consider showing these exotic chickens.

Japanese bantams are delicate birds that need to be kept warm and dry, with plenty of clean bedding inside a nice, cosy coop. In winter, they may even require additional heating, and like all large-combed chickens, their combs are prone to frostbite. Surprisingly, they are good fliers, so an enclosed pen or run with adjacent coop is best. Luckily, Japanese bantams do not dig as much as other breeds, so your lawn will stay intact if you put the run over it!

Japanese bantam hens are broody and make good, protective mothers. However, the mortality rate of chicks is very high (around 25%), so breeding them is not suitable for beginners.

Polish

Varieties: Bearded: Golden, Silver, White, Buff Laced. Non-bearded: White Crested Black, White Crested Blue, Black Crested White, & Golden, Silver, White, and Buff Laced

Average Annual Egg Production: 120

Garden Suitability: Medium (require some care)

Best Features: great characters, show birds, real talking point for visitors!

Polish chickens have a long and distinguished history, originating in Asia and brought to Russia by the Mongols in the 12th century. They were originally known as Crested Dutch chickens, as the Dutch traded in them, before they were imported into the UK from eastern Europe. The Polish was shown at the first ever poultry show in London in 1845.

It's hard to miss a Polish, with its distinctive top-knot of fluffy feathers. In the females, it appears as a sort of rounded hat, but for the males, the crest feathers stick out like a wind-blown bush! (The feathers grow on a cone-shaped protuberance on the top of the chicken's skull.)

Polish chickens are very friendly and have quite distinctive characters. Due to their head feathers, they often have restricted vision, and so respond to you calling them. In turn, however, they are easily spooked by unexpected loud noises. Polish chickens get distressed if separated from the flock and have a knack for getting stuck in the

most awkward of garden places, so they are best contained rather than free-range. One solution is to tie up the top feathers with a band (rather than cut them), so the chicken can see where they are!

As you might expect, Polish are not hardy birds, and need to have a warm, dry coop to retreat to at all times. If their head feathers get too wet, they can catch cold, so top breeders will often give their prize chickens a quick blow dry with a hairdryer before bedtime!

Polish chickens are not broody, and produce white eggs in moderate quantities, but most are kept in the UK for exhibition. The most common colouring is the White Crested black, which (as you might have guessed) has a black body of feathers topped with a shocking white top-knot.

A Few Quick Tips

Before you rush out to purchase new occupants for your coop, here are a few tips on buying chickens.

1. *Always buy your chickens in person.*

When buying chickens, you need to see what you are getting. Some companies will deliver them, but reputable breeders operate a collection-only policy, and with good reason. By buying in person, you can see the condition of your birds, how they are kept, and reject any that are obviously sickly, ill or not as described. If in any doubt, walk away – there are always other chickens.

2. *Buy in the light.*

Buy your chickens in daylight, when you can properly see their condition. A healthy hen should be alert, active and bright-eyed during the day. Feathers should be glossy and complete, but this may not be the case if the hen is in moult, or is at the bottom of the pecking order. If so, she will grow new feathers once she is in your tender loving care.

3. *Pick up your chicken.*

There is no substitute for picking up a chicken and feeling her condition for yourself. Look for smooth legs, good feather condition (see above) and a firm body, indicating good muscle and meat development. Gently part the feathers for a quick inspection for lice or skin conditions hidden below. Trust your instincts; if you like the bird and the bird likes you, buy it. If it (literally) feels wrong, walk away from the deal, or choose another chicken.