

Old Turkeys Find New Markets

Old-time turkey breeds are gaining in popularity and value as consumers realize that not all birds are created equal. Breeders like Frank Reese, Lindsborg, Kan., see the growing market as a new chance for the old breeds of turkeys like his "standard bronze."

"I am trying really hard to save these breeds from extinction," explains Reese who is active with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy and the American Turkey Growers Association. "To do that, we have to find a market again and people willing to take the time to become heritage breed farmers and raise these birds."

The standard bronze breed was the most popular turkey in the U.S. until modern commercial turkeys were developed in the 1940's. The new breeds were faster growing, more efficient, white feathered, big breasted and had to be artificially inseminated. The older breeds were nearly eliminated even though most people say they're superior in taste, if not efficiency.

"There is a difference in the meat, not so much the taste as the texture and a little more dark meat," he explains. "When you slice the breast, it will hold together and be very firm. If you take a yearling and butcher it, it will have a beautiful natural layer of fat."

Properly marketed, the old breeds can sell for as much as \$4 per pound. Even at that price, Reese warns it's not a get rich quick deal.

"It takes me 24 to 30 weeks to get my turkeys to market size compared to half that for

commercial white turkeys," he explains. "I feed organic grain that costs twice as much as commercial grain and processing costs at least twice as much, too."

Reese raised 3,000 turkeys in 2003. He processed and sold nearly 2,000 head and kept the rest for breeding stock.

While Reese doesn't market his birds as organic, he won't use medications unless needed to keep them alive. They live on pasture during the day and roost in turkey sheds at night.

The free-range aspect is important to how he markets birds but it also increases his risk. "People seem most concerned about how my turkeys are treated and raised," he says.

But a free-range farmer can lose half his flock or more overnight due to disease or even freezing rain. Of course, Reese notes that free-range turkeys seldom suffer from the thyroid, aneurysm and autoimmune diseases of their barn-raised counterparts. While a commercial turkey producer will expect from 5 to 15 percent or more loss in transit, Reese lost only one bird out of 1,500 he shipped to Ohio for processing this past fall.

The turkey breeder advises people interested in raising heritage turkeys to start out with eggs and hatch their own to build localized immunity. Next best is to buy poults from a nearby breeder. Reese suggests buying from a reputable breeder to get high quality birds, not to mention helpful information. Most of all, you want to do your homework first.



Frank Reese is trying to bring back old-time turkey breeds such as the "standard bronze" (above). It was the most popular turkey in the U.S. until modern commercial turkeys were developed in the 1940's.

"Find out if you have a market, where it is and who will buy your birds," he warns. "How far is a processor? What are the federal and state requirements if you sell across state lines or to restaurants?"

Most of all, be sure you like raising turkeys. Reese points out that these old breeds are not stupid. "They can jump and fly and will follow you anywhere," he says. "They can flatten a 10 acre field of grass down to the ground, and owls, coons, possums and coyotes all like to eat them."

Of growing concern to him is that many assume any dark turkey is a standard breed - heritage turkey. "Just because they have dark feathers, doesn't mean they are a standard turkey breed," he warns. "You can order bronze turkeys from a hatchery and find out the chicks are bronze, but the hens were white commercial birds."

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Farmer Makes Friend Out Of Kudzu

Most Southerners despise kudzu for its annoying ability to choke out everything in its path. But a North Carolina couple managed to turn the noxious weed into something good.

"We love it," says Henry Edwards. "It's a wonderful plant, but like anything else, only in its place."

The viney weed can grow as much as 1 ft. per day during the hot, humid months of summer and it thrives to such a degree in moist areas that it blankets anything and everything, including abandoned vehicles, buildings, and even power poles and trees. It can eventually kill trees by shading them.

Eighty-year-old Henry and his wife, Edith, 77, of Rutherfordton, North Carolina harvest kudzu on their 330-acre farm and use it for a variety of purposes.

Henry remembered from when he was a small child, his grandfather had great success feeding kudzu to cows.

So when he and Edith began dairy farming in 1962, they had a feed analysis done on kudzu at North Carolina State University. They learned that the deep-rooted vine with large, abundant leaves actually contained 21 percent protein and 35 percent fiber, making it just as good as alfalfa, but much cheaper to grow.

The Edwards say they can make more money from an acre of kudzu than they can from an acre of corn or an acre of hay.

"You can get about five tons per acre of kudzu silage compared to 1 1/2 tons per acre of hay," he says.

Edwards says cattle really like it. "You can't keep a fence between cattle and kudzu and it won't cause bloat like alfalfa," he points out. It's organic - you don't need to fertilize it and you don't need to spray it.

"Once planted, it lasts a lifetime. We've got some on this farm that's been here 70 years," he says. "When you go to bale it, you want to mow it close to the ground, and pick it up with the baler header in the transport position, so it doesn't catch on the uncut vines on the ground. You can mow it with a sickle



Kudzu silage makes good feed, say Henry and Edith Edwards of Rutherfordton, N.C., who plant kudzu as a crop.

mower, mower-conditioner or disc mower." To increase yields, he plants rye, oats, barley or wheat into it in the fall.

The Edwards used the plant instead of corn silage for their dairy herd in the 60's and 70's, and were rewarded with the county's highest per cow annual average milk production. Henry says his dairy cows were eating 125 lbs. of kudzu silage per day.

The Edwards also fed kudzu to their horses, sheep, goats, hogs and chickens.

They didn't stop there, however. Edith decided to take the plant into her kitchen, cooking up a variety of innovative products with it. She makes a red jelly and pancake syrup from the sweet-smelling flowers. The taste has been compared to apples, pears or grapes. Edith also makes a type of kudzu relish with the blossom and a delicious quiche.

"I also make tasty snack fries by frying the leaves in a cold tempura batter. We've made a starch from the roots that is useful in food preparation and for medicinal purposes," she says.

The Edwards have sold root stock to such places as Bolivia, Puerto Rico, and even to Canada for indoor use. The Edwards put on kudzu education programs at local schools and they sell kudzu products and books on the plant.

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"I just spent five months restoring an 1870's barn that will soon be listed on the National Registry of Historic Buildings," says Bruce Willemsen.



Builder Finds Niche In Barn Restoration

Bruce Willemsen has been working construction since his parents stopped farming when he was just 16. The Pella, Iowa, building contractor can handle just about any type of new construction or remodeling, but one recent project changed his focus - and maybe his life.

"A customer asked us to build a barn like the one that was on his parents' farm when he was a boy," Willemsen tells. "He wanted the exterior to be as authentic as possible, complete with a limestone foundation, carriage doors, and a big hay loft. I was able to buy a complete roof system for the barn from a log building manufacturer, or that might have been a problem, too."

"The only problem was the stone foundation," he continues. "We had no trouble finding the right kind of boards for siding and actually found an overhead door that looks just like the doors he wanted. But I couldn't find a trained stone mason anywhere in central Iowa who could do the job."

Not one to let little things like that stop him, Willemsen began studying how the old stone masons laid limestone barn foundations and laid the foundation himself.

"What I learned is the art of building with stone is nearly dead in the Midwest," he says.

He says the barn turned out great and the customer was pleased. Inside its old barn

exterior, Willemsen built a garage, workshop, a complete kitchen and bathroom. The hay mow area, with its authentic board floor, was intended to house an extensive model railroad.

Even though Willemsen hadn't been able to find a working stonemason, he did find that there was a need for his newly acquired skill.

After building that first "new old barn," he's built several more. Even more challenging, though, is restoring old barns to like-new condition.

"I just spent five months restoring an 1870's barn in the Nevada, Iowa, area that should soon be listed on the National Register of Historical Buildings," he says. This particular barn, in addition to having a stone foundation, also had a bridge into the hay-loft.

"It required extensive restoration," he says. "The whole foundation had to be redone. The windows were an odd size, so I had to make all those. The sills were too soft or rotted to reuse, so they all had to be replaced. And it needed all new siding."

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