



Easter Giant chickens were created by crossing Jersey Giant roosters with Ameraucana hens.

New Backyard Poultry Breed

A new breed of chicken called Easter Giants are stirring up a lot of interest because of their colored eggs and large size. Dr. Amy Gilbert crossed Jersey Giant roosters with Ameraucana hens to create the new breed. Two East Central University (ECU), Ada, Okla., students took on the breed analysis as a senior level biology project.

“The pandemic caused an explosion in the number of backyard flocks that were already becoming very popular nationwide,” notes Gilbert, a retired poultry scientist. “I wanted to come up with a dual-purpose bird that was large, friendly, docile, easy to catch, not flighty, and with a small comb that could withstand very cold weather. Most importantly, it would be super cute and lay colored eggs.”

ECU students Mollie Nance and Allie Verner were students of Gilbert’s husband, Dr. Carl Gilbert. They took Gilbert’s work to the next level, comparing the 3 breeds in terms of size, appearance, egg production, egg size and color. They also evaluated feed efficiency, rate of gain and free-range habits.

“The Easter Giants inherited the smaller pea comb from the Ameraucanas, rather than the single comb of the Jersey Giants,” notes Verner. “That is important for backyard poultry, as the single comb can be subject to frost bite.”

“They are big, cute birds with the bearded, muffed face and colored eggs of the Ameraucana,” says Nance. “They lay large eggs, about 53 grams versus 54 grams from the Jersey Giant. Productivity and feed efficiency are about the same.”

According to Gilbert, the Jersey Giant is slower to mature, reaching its full size in 2 years. It also starts to lay eggs around 6 mos. versus 4 mos. for most breeds.

“We expect the Easter Giants to reach the same size as the Jersey Giants, given their



Breed’s colored eggs and large size make it unique.

comparative rate of gain,” says Nance.

Size is another important characteristic for free-range, backyard birds, adds Nance. “The Easter Giants and the Jersey Giants roamed throughout the yard,” she says. “They were too big to jump the 4-ft. fence, unlike the Ameraucanas.”

Neither Nance nor Verner had prior experience with chickens, but both hope to have backyard birds in the future.

Meanwhile, Gilbert is selling all the chicks she wants via word of mouth, a yard sign, and ads on Craigslist. She plans to continue refining the new breed. Currently, she projects about 75 percent of chicks will have Easter Giant attributes.

“I would love it if someone wanted to develop the breed further,” says Gilbert. “I just wanted chickens that little kids would want to have in their backyard.”

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Shropshire Sheep Re-Bred To Have Wool-Free Faces

Fred Groverman helped clear the face wool from Shropshire sheep, returning the ancient breed to its original look. Along the way, he boosted muscling and increased rib eye and dress-out percentages. He also kept his flock pure, avoiding the common practice of introducing genetics from other breeds. Today his sheep are regarded as likely the only truly pure Shropshires in the country.

“My dad bought his first Shropshires when I was 6 months old,” says Groverman, who is closing in on 87 years. “At the time, the breed slogan was ‘All wool, from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail.’ They had so much wool on their face that people showing them had to cut it away.”

In the early 20th century, Shropshires were the dominant sheep breed in the U.S. By mid-century they were losing market share as breeders bred for extreme wool cover and shorter, more compact sheep.

The excess wool face meant that as a boy Groverman had to bring the flock in several times a week when foxtail weed was going to seed. In the late 1940’s, his father imported a ram from England. British breeders had retained the larger, open face line while also breeding the new extreme wool line.

“My dad died in October of 1950 and never saw that ram’s lambs,” says Groverman. “When he was mature, the ram weighed 315 lbs. and sheared 19 lbs. of wool. By late 1952 we had lambs that looked like English Shropshires. By the late 1950’s, others started breeding for an open face too.”

Groverman became a veterinarian, but eventually took over the flock that his mother maintained after his father’s death. He continued to develop the open face flock, but also concentrated on increased muscling. Measuring the loin muscle in carcasses, he could see the impact of genetics. Ultrasound



Seals cut out the sheet metal between vertical ribs on bus, then bolted 2 by 4’s on the sides and top to attach greenhouse plastic.

Junked School Bus Turned Into Greenhouse

With sweat equity, Rick Seals converted a junked school bus into a useful greenhouse. The bus was motorless, tireless and filled with junk on the Sewanee, Tenn., farm Seals purchased, but he recognized its potential.

He poured concrete pads and added cross-ties to level the bus after removing the junk from inside, then went to work transforming it.

“I started by cutting out the sheet metal between the structure ribs of the bus. It had sheet metal on the inside and outside with insulation in between. I used electric sheet metal shears, and it was easier to do than I anticipated,” he says, adding that he used the metal pieces for other projects including a tailgate, trailer fenders and a trailer bed.

He bolted treated 2 by 4’s on the exterior sides and top of the bus to attach the greenhouse plastic. Metal strips over the bus on the ends keep it in place.

Seals built benches out of scrap wood and used a storm door to cover the opening left from the missing bus door. He purchased treated lumber to make shelves for outdoor plants on the front of the bus.

Power and water connected to the bus make it easy to water plants and control the temperature with a fan along with opening and closing windows.

“I have only used it to raise bedding plants



Benches built out of scrap wood support plant trays.

and late season lettuce, but I think it could be heated and used year-round,” Seals says. “All told, I have less than \$500 in the greenhouse.”

The only thing he may adjust is to use two layers of the greenhouse plastic when it needs to be replaced, to create a double wall for better heat retention.

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With wool-free faces, Fred Groverman’s sheep may be the only truly pure Shropshires in the U.S.

let him see the difference in live animals and select rams accordingly.

“We started in 1996 with 1 1/2-in. loin eyes, and by 2019 they were 3-in.,” says Groverman.

Groverman compared his flock to lambs from champion ram semen he introduced from England in 2009 and bred to some of his ewes. The half English Shropshires dressed out at 49 percent while the 100 percent Groverman lambs dressed out at 53 percent.

One result of his success is that an English breeder imported semen from Groverman’s flock. In 2019 the champion Shropshire ram in England was a result of that importation.

Groverman continues to sell breeding stock from his flock, and other breeders advertise having Groverman bloodlines. Yearling ewes are priced at around \$350, with rams going for \$450 to \$550, if he chooses to sell to a person.

If a buyer has less experience, he suggests starting with older ewes. He notes that the top Shropshire ewe in England last year was 15 years old.

“Look for depth and width of chest and how the front legs stand,” he says. “You need heart and strength with a belly long enough and big enough to carry and feed twins.”

“Groverman Shropshires are the only purebred flock in the country without other breed genetics,” says Corey Hiemke, Mapleton Mynd Shropshires (www.mapletonmynd.com). “We started with the breed in the 1980’s, and they may have been purer in the beginning. They were bastardized by bringing in rams we thought were purebred, but actually weren’t.”

Hiemke recently purchased a group of ewes from Groverman and is establishing the breeding line in the Midwest. He also administers the Groverman Shropshire Facebook page.

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