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Angel Wing

I am a Backyard Poultry subscriber and love the information I find in there. I am hoping you can give me some advice.

I rescued my goose, Lefty, from a former tenant of my parents where she was being beaten up by his Toulouse geese. He bought her at a sale and told me she had been a pet, which is obvious in that she loves people. She doesn’t want to be touched, but she loves to be hand fed clover and grass and she honks to get our attention.

Her wing has looked like this since he got her. I have thought all along that it was angel wing. Since she was a pet, I assumed the previous owners weren’t feeding her a proper diet. But two years and a healthy diet later it still looks like this. Does angel wing goes away?

My biggest question is this: The only time she is comfortable sitting (not on an angle) is when she has molted and all those feathers drop off. So, can that wing be removed? Or should I stop fretting about her and just leave her be?

Any advice you can give me on Lefty’s wings will be greatly appreciated!

Anna Ulrich

Angel wing does not go away without help, and a mature goose that hasn’t been treated for the condition is beyond help, since the wing muscles, tendons, etc, have set long ago.

The wing can be removed, but probably should be done by a vet. It needs to be snipped off at the joint and disinfected. The vet might retain some skin to pull over the amputation.

The wing feathers might be clipped short, but watch at the next molt to make sure they fall out properly so new feathers can come in (and be snipped).

This is info from my book, Hatching and Brooding Your Own Chicks: Twisted wing, also called slipped wing or angel wing, is a condition in which one or both wings have one or more twisted feathers. Either the primary feathers overlap in reverse order—over rather than under each other from outer to inner—or, more commonly, the entire last section of the wing flops to the outside, angling away from the body like an airplane wing. This condition may be genetic or may be caused by a dietary imbalance.

It is more often seen in waterfowl, particularly geese, than in land fowl and is more common in ganders than in hens. In geese the deformity occurs usually when flight feathers grow faster than the underlying wing structure. The heavy feathers pull at the wing, causing the wing to twist outward. When the bird matures, the affected wing remains awkwardly bent outward instead of gracefully folding against its body.

Prevent this condition by avoiding excess protein. Letting young waterfowl graze helps. Once it is noticed, switching from high protein starter to alfalfa pellets will give the wing’s structure a chance to catch up with feather development. Vet wrap securing the last two joints of the wing for 4 or 5 days will hold the feathers in proper position to help the wing grow in the right direction, but be sure to remove the vet wrap each night so the bird can exercise its wing muscles.

Gail Damerow
Geese, long ago domesticated and a companion to human agriculture, are losing ground. Backyard chickens are popular and easy to keep, but breeding full-size traditional geese, now raised mainly for exhibition, is a different commitment. They require lots of time, feed and space to grow and mature through their life cycle.

“The decline has subtly grown over the years, due to loss of farms, for economic reasons and the cost of feed,” said James Konecny, experienced waterfowl breeder and past president of the International Waterfowl Breeders Association. “There are limited flocks. The numbers have really declined.”

The American Poultry Association separates geese into three classes for exhibition purposes: Heavy, Medium and Light. This article will focus on the heavy breeds: Embden, African and Toulouse.

All three Heavy breeds have been in the Standard of Excellence since the first one was published in 1874. Big geese require time and space to succeed. But there’s a market for them and they are an asset to integrated farms.
All three heavy goose breeds have separate lines for commercial production and exhibition showing. It’s confusing, because they go by the same names. Exhibition birds are larger than commercial ones. Exhibition Embdens stand 36 to 40 inches tall, compared with commercial ones at 25 to 30 inches. Commercial varieties are bred for quick “growth to table” size. They have good fertility and reproduce well.

“Compared to commercial varieties, exhibition geese are just massive,” said Konecny.

Geese are generally hardy and easy to manage. They are naturally resistant to many of the maladies that afflict other poultry. Reginald Appleyard, legendary English waterfowl breeder, describes them as “being amongst the brainiest of all classes of domesticated fowls.” They eat grass and weeds. They are sociable with each other and with people. They form a cohesive gaggle—the word technically correct for a group of geese on the ground—as they graze. They are a flock in flight. Domestic geese retain some ability to fly, but they need time to take off and a clear runway. With a happy home and comfortable living conditions, they are unlikely to present any problem by taking to the air.

Some geese are territorial, especially during the breeding season, and will sound the alarm when strangers approach. They are effective as watchdogs, because they announce the presence of strangers so noisily. They are protective of the flock. Geese have strong individual personalities.

“They will respond to you and have a conversation with you,” said Konecny. “They make great pets even if you don’t tame them down.”

Domestic geese retain some wild qualities. Even wild geese tame relatively easily. Wild/domestic hybrids are not uncommon. Domestic geese, like their wild relatives, are seasonal egg layers. Chickens and some ducks have been selectively bred and domesticated to be year-round egg layers. Geese have not, although some breeds lay between 20 and 40 eggs in a season.

**EMBDEN GEESE**

These are the big, white farmyard geese. Standard weights for adults are 26 pounds for males, 20 pounds for females. They are not as noisy as Africans but not as quiet as Toulouse. They are excellent meat birds that require three years to reach full maturity.

“You can see your potential and what you will have at Year One,” said Konecny, “but full potential will be reached in three years. You have to have patience. That’s the growing cycle of these big birds.”
TOULOUSE GEESE

Historically, this French breed was raised for its large liver, used in making foie gras. Today, the exhibition Toulouse is less desirable as a meat bird because of its extra fat. Commercial Toulouse are popular for the table, smaller and leaner. The ideal exhibition Toulouse is low-slung and heavy bodied, with a dewlap under the chin and a fatty keel below its midsection hanging nearly to the ground. Because of this lower distribution of its body, its legs appear short.

The Toulouse was originally an all gray breed but now a buff variety is recognized and some breeders maintain white flocks.

Ganders often weigh as much as 30 pounds, although the Standard weights are 26 pounds for old ganders and 20 pounds for old geese.

AFRICAN GEESE

The big brown or white African geese have a distinctive knob on their head, black in the brown variety and orange in the white, above the top bill. A buff variety, with black knob, is being raised but is not yet recognized for exhibition. They stand more upright than other geese, and have long, swan-like necks. Standard weights for exhibition birds are 22 pounds for old ganders and 18 pounds for old geese. Like the other breeds, commercial varieties are smaller, more like Chinese geese, their cousins in the Light classification. African geese are more likely than the other two heavy breeds to be interested in having a relationship with humans. They are also the most likely to be good setters.

“Even though I don’t spend a lot of time with them, they stay pretty tame,” said Konecny. “Africans stand out as the friendliest.”

Dewlap in Geese

The dewlap is the feathered fold of skin that hangs under the head of African and Standard Toulouse geese. A dewlap is a required breed characteristic. The strictly cosmetic dewlap may not appear until a gosling is six months old, but it continues to grow throughout the goose’s life.

For African geese, the Standard describes it as “large, heavy, smooth; lower edge regularly curved and extending from lower mandible to below juncture of neck and throat.” For Toulouse, it must be “pendulous, well-developed, extending in folds from base of lower mandible to front of neck.”
GOOSE HISTORY

Geese were domesticated as far back as 5,000 years ago in Egypt, the natural flyway for waterfowl migrating between Africa and Eurasia. The migrating flocks included Asia’s Swan goose and Europe’s Graylag goose, the ancestors of modern domestic geese, as well as the Egyptian goose, technically not a true goose. Egyptians netted them as hundreds of thousands settled on the Nile on their migration. From catching wild birds to eat, it’s a short step to keeping them in pens, then breeding them and selecting breeding birds for the qualities most desired. Religiously, the goose was associated with the cosmic egg from which all life was hatched. The god Amun sometimes took the appearance of a goose. Geese were also associated with Osiris and Isis, as a symbol of love.

The Romans and Greeks raised geese and honored them. Geese were sacred to Juno, queen of the gods, wife of Jupiter and protector of Rome. White geese lived in her temples. They are said to have saved Rome from an attack by the Gauls around 390 BC by raising the alarm and awakening the guards. They became associated with Juno as symbols of marriage, fidelity and contentment at home. The Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, was welcomed by the Charities, whose chariot was drawn by geese.

The 4th century AD Christian Saint Martin of Tours is the patron saint of geese, which is traditionally the feast centerpiece on his day, November 11. The tale is that he did not want to become bishop, so he hid in a barn with the geese. They noisily drew attention to him and he became bishop of Tours in 372. Charlemagne encouraged goose husbandry in his empire, 768-814 AD.

Celtic myths associated the goose with war, and remains of geese are found in warriors’ graves. The migrations of geese suggested their role as messenger of the gods to early cultures. They also symbolize movement and spiritual quest. Their return each year is a reminder to come home.

Mother Goose may have been based on a historic person or may be a mythic character to embody storytelling. The goose is a symbol of communication, expressing themes of human life in legends and tales. The first book of Mother Goose stories was published in Boston in 1786. “The Goose Girl” was included in Grimm’s Fairy Tales in 1815, translated into English in 1884.

As little as a century ago, people in England kept geese in a half-wild state, letting their geese forage and live on the river. The geese spent the spring and summer on the village green, then migrated to the River Cam for the winter. In February, the owners would call their geese, which responded to their voices and returned home to nest and rear their young. Those offspring were a significant contribution to the villagers’ income.

Sexing Geese

Male and female geese look alike. Telling males from females on the basis of looks alone has resulted in more than one disappointed breeder who eventually learned he had a pair of one sex in the breeding pen. Males are generally larger, louder and have higher voices than females, but the sexes overlap in those characteristics and it’s not a sure thing. The only certain way to know the sex is by examining the genitals. Vent sexing reveals whether the goose has a male penis or female genital eminence. Dave Holderread describes the procedure, with accompanying photographs, in his book, The Book of Geese.

Some geese are auto-sexing, which means that males and females are different colors, so they can easily be distinguished from each other. The Pilgrim, in the Medium class, is the only recognized auto-sexing breed. Shetland Geese and Cotton Patch Geese are unrecognized auto-sexing breeds.
Goose has fallen out of most cooks’ repertoire and few cookbooks even offer advice for cooking it successfully. As a cold weather bird, goose carries a thick layer of fat under its skin. Their fat makes those unfamiliar with them stay away, but their meat is not marbled with fat, as beef is. The meat is actually quite lean, and all dark meat. The roasting process produces prodigious fat, inches of it in the roasting pan. The fat under the skin acts as a natural basting for roasted goose. Goose grease is an unappreciated oil that can be used in baking. Collect it from the roasting pan and use it throughout the year. NPR commentator Bonny Wolf calls it “the crème de la crème of fat.”

“I am not advocating the daily use of goose fat. I wouldn’t, for example, put it on my morning toast,” she said. “It would, however, be delicious.”

In the 19th century, every farm raised some geese and the goose was the traditional holiday bird. Contemporary chefs are re-discovering this favored bird on the table. Current USDA statistics show that American consumers eat an average of less than a third of a pound of goose annually.

Commercial geese are produced mainly in South Dakota and California. Commercial producers have their own varieties that they rely on, the ones sold frozen in markets.

Their down and feathers are also valuable goose products. Goose down is the best insulator for clothing and comforters.

A breeder needs to keep at least one family of geese to keep a bloodline intact, without experiencing loss of characteristics or inbreeding. Generations will live together, but geese prefer to mate in pairs, although some are willing to live as trios.

Geese should produce and lay and be fertile. “Around here they burn it off because it gets cold,” said Konecny from his Royal Oaks Farm in Barrington Hills, Illinois. If that weight loss doesn’t happen naturally, reduce feed so that the geese enter breeding season fit and trim.

“If they go into breeding season with a full keel and haven’t burned some of that fat off, they will have fertility problems,” he said.

As waterfowl, geese like water but can manage without it. They do better if they have some access to water, even if it’s only a kiddie pool.

“A nice clean tub of water gets them in the mood and stimulates them to mate,” he said.

Angel wing is a problem that may result from a diet too rich in protein. “It can happen to any breed of goose,” said Konecny. “They are all going to be big birds and they grow fast.” He reduces protein in the goslings’ diet as soon as blood feathers start coming in, around four to six weeks of age, by putting them out on grass or providing greens in some other way. (See sidebar for more information on angel wing. — Ed.)

All geese are grazers and prefer to move around on pasture. Konecny’s birds have both pasture and woods to roam. Although some commercial growers claim success with as little as nine square feet per bird, John Metzer of Metzer Farms in California considers that a bare minimum.

“I would like to see at least nine square feet inside and 30 square feet outside per bird,” he said. Konecny has observed that Toulouse geese are especially sensitive to a diet overly rich in protein. “They must process protein a little bit differently,” he said. He didn’t have any angel wing in his flocks in 2012.

Commercial meat birds can be allowed to hatch their own eggs and raise their goslings. Exhibition birds are too large and heavy. Konecny recommends setting their eggs artificially.
The IWBA has developed its own feed formula to supply all the nutritional needs of waterfowl. Breeders were dissatisfied with the formulas offered on the market, none of which had everything waterfowl need. The IWBA formula includes fishmeal, important to waterfowl that often include fish in their wild diet, and probiotics. It’s also competitively priced to be affordable for both backyard poultry keepers and commercial producers. Distillers grain, a common feed ingredient, harbors microtoxins that geese can tolerate but can kill smaller ducks.

“We want everyone who raises waterfowl to have a good food,” he said. “Most commercial feeds are horrid for our birds.”

Feed may be a factor in keeping heavy geese’ legs, feet and bills the correct orange color. They should not be pink, but pink feet and legs and reddish pink bills have been showing up all around the country. Even Konecny’s geese have developed pink feet. Metzer attributes it to feed that relies on grains other than corn. Lower levels of xanthopylls in other grains result in the undesirable pink feet. Some birds may have a genetic tendency toward pink feet, legs and bills, too.

“Unless they are getting green grass or alfalfa hay, their bills, feet and egg yolks will lose their orange color over time,” Metzer said. “The underlying color in some geese seems to be pink.”

With time and space to grow, good food to eat and a pool to splash in, geese do well in all climates. The United Nations, in a Food and Agriculture brochure titled “The Underestimated Species,” calls them “a multipurpose animal,” an “ecological weed control alternative” and “the unbribable watchdog.” Underappreciated for the value they can add to integrated farm operations, heavy geese are losing ground on American farms.

“Our large Standard breeds of chickens, ducks and geese are the breeds that are disappearing and are in trouble,” said Konecny. “IWBA is available to help new breeders get started and succeed.”

Get more information on Metzer Farms from their website, www.metzerfarms.com. Christine Heinrichs is the author of How to Raise Chickens and How to Raise Poultry, Voyageur Press, both of which focus on raising traditional breeds in small flocks.
his second part of a 3-part series on geese looks at medium geese, as classified by the American Poultry Association. The five recognized breeds range from 13 to 17 pounds in weight, but many unrecognized breeds are also raised by devotees of these birds, so deeply entwined in our history and hearts.

All geese are related to the wild geese that still migrate across the globe. Knobbed Chinese and African Geese are descended from the wild Asian Swan Goose. American Buff, Pomeranian, Sebastopol, Embden and Toulouse are descended from European Graylag Goose. All show some influence of the wild Bean Goose. Among medium geese, Pilgrim Geese are a modern composite developed from traditional Gray Geese and the old West of England Geese. The traditional American Gray Goose, a larger domesticated version of the Western Graylag, has never been formally recognized but was the dominant breed raised in America since Colonial days.

Sebastopol geese are easily recognized for their long curly feathers. The feathering also requires better protection from foul weather than other goose breeds generally need. Photos by Dave Kozakiewicz, Hindsight Farms, Michigan
Many unrecognized goose breeds are attractive and useful. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has identified 96 breeds or genetic groups of geese worldwide.

Lyn Irvine says, in her 1961 book, *Field with Geese*, “No other creature so rapidly turns grass into flesh—the commonest weed into the most coveted food.” They can be turned out in fields after harvest to glean and clean. They are vegetarians and may look with disdain, as only a dignified goose can, on the relish with which ducks devour insects and snails.

Medium geese are the most popular being kept today, according to waterfowl breeder and judge James Konecny, past president of the International Waterfowl Breeders Association.

“The vigor is up, they are easier to manage, there are more sources to purchase them and the availability of day-olds makes them popular farm birds,” he said.

Medium geese grow and mature faster than heavy breeds. In one full year, goslings can hatch in the spring and grow to experience a complete breeding cycle by the following spring.

“You don’t need to be as patient as you need to be with heavy geese,” he said. “You can get there and see what you’ve got in the first year.”

Geese are sociable and usually enjoy going to shows. Judges enjoy them and they often do well, going to Champion Row. The best success is with geese kept on the farm for their whole lives, though. The stress of changing environmental conditions, the dangers of hot weather and exposure to disease increase the risks even for the hardiest birds.

**MEDIUM GOOSE BREEDS**

Recognized traditional medium goose breeds are Sebastopol, Pilgrim, American Buff, Pomeranian and Steinbacher. The Steinbacher is the most recent addition to the Standard of Perfection, being recognized in 2011. John Metzer of Metzer Farms in California finds geese very variable in personality. No single breed stands out as most calm and personable in his experience, because individuals vary so much from calm to aggressive.

“There’s no one breed that is always the best,” he said.
**Sebastopol geese** look as if someone curled their feathers. Their soft, flowing ruffles give them the appearance of fantastic dream birds. Their feathers are as much as four times as long as normal feathers, with flexible shafts that spiral, draping down to the ground. Traditionally white, their fanciers are experimenting with breeding them in buff, blue, gray, and saddleback color varieties. Konecny calls them “the Silkies of the goose world.”

Despite their decorative appearance, they are an ancient utility breed, hardy and respectable egg layers of 25-35 eggs a year. The breed is associated with Eastern Europe, around the Danube River and the Black Sea.

Sebastopols’ unusual appearance attracts owners who are inclined to keep them as ornamental birds and as companion birds. Keep docile Sebastopols away from aggressive birds. They enjoy bathing those lovely feathers in clean water. They aren’t good flyers, with those long, soft feathers. Their loose feathers make them appreciate protection when it’s especially cold, wet and windy.

Those long feathers may interfere with successful breeding. Feathers around the vent can be clipped to improve nature’s chances.

Their popularity sometimes pressures breeders to misrepresent less desirable birds. Unscrupulous exhibitors may pull straight feathers, an exhibition defect, from their birds.

**American Buff geese** have the colorful plumage that reflects their name. Their light feathers make them easy to dress out without dark pinfeathers. They were developed from the traditional Gray farm goose and Buff geese from Germany. They are the largest of the medium geese, topping out at 18 pounds. A double paunch is required for showing.

The buff feathers are not as strong as white or gray feathers, prone to sunlight oxidation, according to English breeder Chris Ashton. “The buff feathers lose their sheen and fade badly,” she writes, “They become brittle, lose their Velcro-like adhesion and become less weather-proof.”

**Pomeranian geese** are a historic German breed, associated with the Pomorze region of eastern Germany between the rivers Oder and Vistula. Although only Gray Saddleback and Buff Saddleback varieties are recognized, they are also raised in Gray, White and Buff varieties. In Germany, the Buff Pomeranian is known as Cellar goose.

True Pomeranians are distinguished by their pink bills and pink legs and feet. They have a single lobe. Orange bills and feet or a double lobe disqualify a bird as a Pomeranian.

**Steinbacher geese** are a German breed of fighting goose. They have a long, graceful neck and a short head and bill, giving them what waterfowl breeder Lou Horton calls “a powerful appearance.” Its distinctive orange bill is edged with black ‘lipstick’ markings. They have no keel or dewlap. In the U.S., only the blue variety is currently raised and recognized, although gray, buff, and cream varieties are raised in Europe. Blue and gray colors breed true. Despite their reputation as fighting geese, only the males fight each other, and then only during the breeding season to establish the flock hierarchy. They are mild-mannered with people but protective of their nests.

This hardy breed thrives on a lean diet of grass on pasture. They cannot tolerate a rich diet and can die from overfeeding.
Recently hatched Pilgrim goslings can be distinguished by both feather and bill color. Females are darker. The bills of both will be orange at maturity. Photo by Ricky J. Millet, Louisiana.

Pilgrim geese are the only auto-sexing breed recognized for exhibition. Ganders are white, females are all gray or saddle-backed. This helps breeders avoid the pitfall of selecting only one sex for the breeding pen! Photo by Bonnie Long, Virginia.

Autosexing geese

Females and males of most breeds are so similar to each other that it’s difficult to tell them apart. More than one breeder has been disappointed in breeding pens, only to find out that the birds in them were of only one sex. Autosexing breeds solve that: the sexes have different plumage. Ganders are white and hens are solid color or saddlebacked. Saddleback means that the shoulders, back and flanks are colored, in contrast to the white body. Autosexing dates back 1,000 years or more in England and France, longer in Scandinavia. These breeds probably originated in Scandinavia and are indigenous to areas where Vikings set their anchors.

Pilgrim geese were developed in the 1930s by Oscar Grow. They are a modern composite of American Gray and the autosexing Old English or West of England geese. Pilgrims have orange bills and legs, which distinguishes them from the Old English. They are the only autosexing breed recognized by the APA for exhibition.
HOUSING

A total pen area of 2,500 square feet should be adequate for a small flock of less than ten geese. If it can include a pond of 500 square feet of water, so much the better. Geese enjoy splashing in water and swimming, although they can manage without it. They stay cleaner and have fewer parasites if they have access to water. It's easier for the geese to walk to the water than for you to bring the water to them.

Their water must be kept clean, despite their defecating in it and splashing mud around. Cement-lined artificial ponds or children’s plastic pools are easy to clean and don’t turn into mud holes, but small wetlands can be constructed and managed to enhance habitat for domestic geese as well as wildlife. Natural running water such as a stream on your property can provide the regular fresh water geese need.

Geese can be territorial and aggressive in the breeding season, so plan to separate them in pens. Like all domestic fowl, geese are vulnerable to predators. Fence them from predators with four-foot poultry wire fencing. In mild climates, security from predators is all the protection they need.

“I have yet to see a goose get under shelter to get out of the rain!” says experienced breeder Dr. Tom T. Walker of Texas.

In cold climates, simple structures are adequate to protect them from the weather. Stacked hay bales with a plywood roof facing south or a semicircular windbreak of straw bales keep them out of the wind and snow. Provide plenty of dry litter for them, wood shavings or straw. Replace it as it gets wet. As long as geese are well fed and have clean bedding, their natural insulation can take almost anything winter throws at them. In a winter storm, they may be out looking around while other fowl are sheltered indoors.

James Konecny, past president of the International Waterfowl Breeders Association, keeps his geese in a mixed flock with his ducks during the winter. The geese help keep the ducks warm.

“The runner ducks especially need the geese to survive the cold weather,” he said from his Royal Oaks Farm in Illinois, experiencing a freeze in January.

A house to lock geese up overnight should provide about 10 square feet of space for each goose. Geese confined for longer periods of time should have 20 square feet per bird. A low shelter open on all sides can offer shade and protect food.

Domestic geese do not fly much. If flying becomes an issue, trimming four inches off the leading four or five primaries of one wing will prevent them from successfully flying away. Feathers will need to be trimmed again after each molt. Pinioning removes the entire first joint of the wing, cutting it off. It can only be done on goslings in the first day or two after hatching. It makes it impossible for the bird ever to fly.

BREEDING

Select strong birds without defects for breeding. Wing problems, such as angel wing, may be environmental, but it’s wiser to avoid breeding birds that have them. Weak legs are another reason to keep birds out of the breeding pen. Size is less important than type in selecting breeding birds. It is easier to breed for larger size than to correct defects in type.

They will make their own nests on the ground. Walker provides a small structure like a dog house for geese in nesting pens, but finds they often prefer to nest outside the house. The dampness is important in incubating the eggs. “The goose will even take the hay out of the house and mix it with sticks, leaves and other things she finds to build a nest outside the nice house that I have built,” he says. They will line their nests with their own down.

Watch them carefully until you are sure the goose will be broody and the pair can manage their nest. Ms. Irvine attributes to the 18th century French scientist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon the observation that “the condition of a sitting hen, however insipid it may appear to us, is perhaps not a tedious
situation but a state of continual joy.” Broody chicken hens or artificial incubators can be used. Many goose eggs are successfully hatched under hens. A hen can manage from four to six goose eggs, and can foster the goslings. Goose eggs benefit from moisture, as they would receive from their mother on her daily ablutions. Ms. Irvine dunked her hen’s lower regions in water as she returned to the nest each day.

A typical clutch is 10 to 15 eggs. If the eggs are removed, many geese will continue to lay, as if for a second clutch. A clutch of 13 or 14 is exceptional, more than some geese will be able to cover for incubation. If those eggs are removed, leaving an artificial egg to encourage her, the goose may continue laying. Others will not lay any more, even if they end up setting on the false egg alone.

Eggs can be stored as long as seven days if they are to be incubated in an artificial incubator, up to four weeks if they are to be incubated by a hen. Candle eggs between eight and 14 days of incubation. Infertile eggs are clear. Developing embryos show a half-moon air sac at the round end of the egg. Goose eggs hatch in 29 to 31 days, but they may vary from as early as 27 days to as long as 33.

Goslings will start eating grass right away and can be supplemented with crumble. If hatched by a hen, she may attempt to feed them as she would chicks, but they will ignore her. Don’t feed goslings medicated chick starter. They may consume more than the recommended dose and it can make them sick.

The floor should be covered with some kind of rough material that gives the goslings’ feet something to grip. Otherwise, they may develop leg problems.

Like all geese, medium geese mate for the duration, which may well be for life. They love raising a family and, especially Sebastopols, will happily adopt youngsters of other species. Give them a place to nest and you will have years of happy families. Geese are long lived in good circumstance, living more than 20 years.

GOOSE PRODUCTS

The primary product is the table-ready bird for roasting. Medium geese are good meat birds. Table birds are usually butchered before they reach six months of age. The gizzard, heart and liver are all desirable meats. Goose liver is the prime ingredient in pate de foie gras. Geese do not need to be force-fully fattened to produce delicious liver.

Birds can be processed on the farm or at local processing facilities. Some local governments offer mobile processing facilities built on trailers that can be rented for home use.

To avoid pinfeathers in the carcass, butcher goslings before they molt their juvenile feathers for adult plumage, at nine to 12 weeks. Part the feathers and check to see whether pinfeathers are forming. If they are, delay butchering until the birds have their full adult plumage, six to ten weeks. Geese, like ducks, can also be skinned. Poultry wax can be used to clean carcasses. Feathers can be saved after plucking, washed and used or sold.

Check state laws on selling birds. Every state allows a small number of geese to be sold within the state, but crossing state lines requires USDA certified processing.

Goosefeathers and down are the original insulating materials for warm clothing and bedding. No man-made product is as good as goose down and feathers. Geese stay warm in the harshest winter weather.

Goose eggs have the reputation of being superior for baking. The white, or albumen, is thicker than that of chicken eggs and may be disappointing for whipping uses. It is not light enough to whip up well.

Christine Heinrichs is the author of How to Raise Chickens and How to Raise Poultry, Voyageur Press, both of which focus on raising traditional breeds in small flocks.
This third and last part of the Goose Series focuses on light geese, as classified by the American Poultry Association’s Standard of Perfection. In addition to two domestic breeds, the light goose class includes the wild Canada goose and the Egyptian goose, which is not a true goose at all.

Geese continue to struggle to win the hearts and wallets of American consumers. The USDA’s most recent figures compare sales in 2002 and 2007, which showed a decline. I’m optimistic that more recent figures would show an increase.
Chinese and Roman Geese

The Chinese and the Tufted Roman are domestic geese, long favored on farms. They are light compared to their heavy and medium cousins, weighing 10 to 12 pounds and standing about three feet tall. They are usually kept for ornamental purposes and make good companions. As Samuel Cushman says in the article included in the 1912 edition of Harrison Weir’s The Poultry Book’s chapter on The Domestic Goose, the Chinese are “more on the bantam order.”

Chinese geese are the best egg producers of all goose breeds. Occasional reports claim more than 80 eggs a year, but 30 to 40 is more realistic. Geese remain seasonal layers, a legacy of their wild past.

Chinese geese are good foragers, making them welcome as weeders. Schiltz Goose Farm of South Dakota, which now produces two-thirds of the commercial geese sold in grocery stores, got its start from hatching goose eggs for other farmers, who wanted the geese as weeders for their crops. “In the late 1940’s, the geese went to the cotton fields of Texas and California, the strawberry beds of Michigan and the asparagus and mint fields of Washington. These farmers found geese to be economical and effective labor to weed the fields, as the geese literally worked for food,” according to the farms’ corporate history. Schiltz, which began with heavy Toulouse geese, now raises its own variety of geese, bred for meat production.

Like their larger African cousins weighing 18 to 22 pounds, they are knobbed geese. The knob between their eyes develops to its full size over several years. Although generally males are larger and have larger knobs than females, this is not a reliable way to sex African or China geese. Both sexes vary too much in size. The Brown have black knobs and the Whites have orange knobs. White Chinese are more popular than the original Brown color variety. Their relation to the wild Swan goose is apparent in their graceful necks. The Brown variety shows a dark brown stripe down the back.

Both were separately recognized in the first Standard of Excellence in 1874, but with different weights, separated by only four pounds between African and Chinese geese, according to Willis Grant Johnson’s 1912 edition of The Poultry Book, p. 1103, which gives weights of 20 pounds (now 22) for the African gander and 18 (now the same) for the goose, 16 for a Chinese gander (now 12), 14 (now 10) for a goose.

“Many people prefer a small table goose,” said James Konecny, president of the International Waterfowl Breeders Association. “They want a goose that’s about the size of a big duck.”

Cold weather doesn’t bother them. Their close feathers protect them and may make them appear smaller than their muscular bodies are. Their knobs are subject to frostbite, showing up as orange patches on black knobs, which fade back to black over time.

The hens develop a lobe during laying season, but otherwise they have a slim, graceful silhouette. They have a short body and carry the head upright on a long, arched neck. In 1902, Harrison Weir in Our Poultry and All About Them, considered Swan Goose an alternate name for Chinese Geese, which he said were also known as Spanish, Guinea, Cape and African. “In carriage or deportment it differs widely from the goose tribe in general, being upright and stately, sometimes exceedingly so, with its long crane-like neck erected to the utmost,” he wrote.

Tufted Roman Geese are named for the round tuft of feathers on their heads. They have a long European history, going back to Juno’s temple in Ancient Rome, where they were sacred. They originated in the Danube area and are related to Sebastopol Geese. Despite that long history, they were not added to the Standard until 1977.

They have a compact body without keel, lobe or dewlap and make a good roasting bird, despite their relatively small size. The tuft is present from hatching. They are now raised in several colors, although White is the only recognized color. Their eyes are blue and bill and legs and feet may be pinkish or reddish-orange.

Breeders can’t resist breeding other colors into these popular and hardy geese. Gray tufted geese have been developed but the buff is the most popular.
Unrecognized Breeds

Buff Tufted Roman geese were developed by Ruth Book of Book Farms in Granby, Missouri. She crossed the Buff goose with the Tufted Roman goose and selectively bred them to get a buff bird as large as the American Buff goose with the Tufted Roman conformation. Metzer Farms in Gonzalez, California, purchased her entire breeding stock and is continuing her work.

“We hope to introduce them throughout the United States,” said John Metzer, owner of Metzer Farms. “Our ultimate goal is to have them recognized as a distinct breed by the American Poultry Association.”

Andrea Heesters of The Netherlands bought some from Metzer Farms and continues to breed them. She finds them affectionate and loyal. “They are curious and talkative and can be very opinionated, although in a nice way,” she says “They are vigilant when they see strangers and make quite a lot of noise at that moment but, in general, they are quiet geese and certainly not noisy.” Their curiosity can lead them into adventures. Mrs. Heesters reports that “One of our ganders, Jules, found it extremely interesting to see how we opened the gate and stood there a few times watching us intensely. A few days later, Jules opened the gate himself!”

Ideally, they should have the same type as the white variety: the same size, with a medium-length neck, a fat head and a short, stout beak. The bill and feet should be a pinkish-red.

“It should be a small, stocky, rounded plump little goose,” said Konecny.

Other unrecognized light geese include Cotton Patch Geese and other traditional American farm geese, such as Choctaw geese. They are local variations that developed from the West of England or Old English geese which probably came to America with early English settlers.

Shetland geese are the smallest of the autosexing geese, which have different plumage on males and females, making it easy to select birds for the breeding pen. Females are saddlebacked or gray and white. Males are white with blue eyes. So few of these birds are in American breeding pens that the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy recommends that additional birds be imported to increase the genetic pool. The Classic Roman goose has no tuft. The absence of the tuft disqualifies a Tufted Roman goose in the show ring, but smoothheaded Roman geese are the norm in Europe. Smooth-headed Roman geese are a separate breed. Metzer Farms is developing a flock that will be available in the future. Dave Holderread has developed the Oregon Mini Goose at his Holderread Waterfowl & Preservation Center in Corvallis, Oregon. They are small geese, bred to weigh four to ten pounds, in white, splashed, belted, saddleback and solid varieties. They mature early and are attracting an enthusiastic following.

Ornamental Geese

Canada geese and Egyptian geese are technically not domesticated. They are tamed but still considered wild. Canada Geese, like all geese, tame relatively easily (as compared to say, a chukar or a peacock). Wild flocks may become resident on golf courses and playing fields, where they become a nuisance. They adapt to confinement and breed well. They are about the same size as Chinese and Roman geese, at 12 pounds for a gander and 10 pounds for a goose. The Eastern or Common subspecies is the one recognized for exhibition, but many color variations exist.
The Egyptian is not a true goose, but a bird between a dabbling duck and a goose. It’s biologically classified as a Shelduck, a subfamily in the duck, goose and swan family. They are the smallest of the recognized breeds and the smallest geese raised domestically, at 5 ½ pounds for ganders and 4 ½ pounds for geese. Egyptian geese were considered sacred by the ancient Egyptians, and appeared in much of their artwork.

Although not recognized for exhibition, the Nene goose is sometimes kept in captivity. Because of its status as a federally endangered species, special permits are required. It’s a small wild goose, related to Canada geese, typically weighing around five pounds, females slightly smaller than males. It’s Hawaii’s state bird, but nearly became extinct in the 20th century. Its attractive ‘striped’ plumage (actually, diagonal rows of white feathers with black skin showing through), buff-colored cheeks and black head are distinctive. It’s so friendly and tame that the public is cautioned against making pets of it in its native state. Being too friendly can expose it to dangers, such as becoming road kill.

**Goose Eggs**

Bakers prize goose eggs for baked goods. They can substitute for chicken eggs but not one-for-one. Weigh them and use the appropriate amount, or figure roughly one goose egg equals two chicken eggs. The white is thicker and won’t whip up as well as chicken egg whites do.

Goose eggs are popular for decorative crafts, called eggeury. They are offered as a separate product, in five sizes, by Schiltz Foods, the supplier for most commercial table-ready goose. Metzer Farms sells its duck and goose eggs, making use of infertile eggs, in ten sizes for goose eggs, seven for duck.

Ukrainian Pysanky is an intricate art of dying eggs with progressive colors in delicate geometric designs. The dyes are applied from the lightest to the darkest, with layers of bees’ wax protecting the lighter colors. They have many mythical and religious meanings. Adriana, a Ukrainian artist in California, relates on her site that the first Pysanky were decorated by the tears of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was taking eggs to Pontius Pilate as a ransom for her son. Climbing the stairs, she tripped, and the Pysanky scattered all over the world.

Eggs can be blown out through two holes, one in each end. Shake the egg and most of the contents will pour out. The rest can be blown out. Repair the hole with spackling or tissue paper and white glue.

“I save all my goose eggs,” said Mr. Konecny. He identifies them by hen and compares them from year to year, to determine how each hen is doing.


Christine Heinrichs is the author of How to Raise Chickens and How to Raise Poultry, Voyageur Press, both of which focus on raising traditional breeds in small flocks. To place your order visit www.BackyardPoultryMag.com/Bookstore.
Tom and Ruth Neuberger’s Goosemobile got started as a marketing ploy in the 1980s. In 2013, it’s a popular local sight around South Dakota and an efficient way for them to deliver their wares to customers. They still sell geese and down products, but now they’ve added chicken, eggs, duck, Cornish game hens, turkey, beef, lamb and pork.

They find that after a severe decline, demand is increasing for goose and its products, especially goose grease. Their Embden geese are raised on organic grass, on pasture. That’s an important point, for nutritional and flavor considerations as well as humane treatment. The grease isn’t processed further than to be rendered from the goose.

“I have customers from all over who are looking for goose grease,” said Ruth. “People are looking for healthy, natural foods.”

Ruth makes the down products, comforters and pillows. She’s learned the fine points of making the best products over the years. She includes a few of the curled breast feathers in her down pillows, which keeps them fluffy. “That gives you a nice spring-back in your pillow,” she said. “Others get flat in six months.”

She anticipates enough down and feathers from the 75 geese Tom plans to raise this year to keep up with her orders. In the past, they have raised as many as 1,000 geese, but last year raised only 25. Some years, she didn’t have enough down for her comforters and pillows, and feathers from Canada geese proved unsatisfactory. Their dark color and occasional grease spots didn’t suit consumers.

“People want white pillows and comforters,” she said. Tom and Ruth didn’t expect to become farmers after they retired from 20 years of teaching, but it’s a vigorous lifestyle that suits them. Tom carries feed to the animals in five-gallon buckets.

“We both were physical education majors and know the merits of exercise,” Ruth said, “and know it’s better for animals too.”

They raise Cornish Rock crosses for meat, 250 a week to a total of about 2,500 birds annually. They raise about 200 Rhode Island Red chickens for eggs. “We advocate free range animals,” she said. “The meat is more healthy than organic, because our animals can forage around. The pigs love to eat those wild plums when they fall to the ground.”
Celebrate The Holidays With Your

Home-Grown Goose

By Gail Damerow

Geese were primarily developed for meat, although some are bred with emphasis on other attributes as well. The Sebastopol, for instance, has long, curly feathers that look like a misguided perm, while the diminutive Shetland was bred to thrive in a harsh environment. Nearly every breed has a tufted version, meaning the goose has a decorative puff of feathers growing upright on top of its head.

The fact remains that geese, like turkeys, are basically meat birds. Properly cooked, goose meat is rich and juicy without being greasy. And family squabbles over who gets the light meat and who gets the dark are eliminated, since the meat is uniformly succulent throughout.

Chinese geese are a common breed used for weeding, and the hens are prolific layers. Photo of Brown Chinese by Jeannette Beranger/ALBC.

The Embden is the most common goose to raise for meat because of its fast growth, large size, and white feathers. Photo courtesy of Chris Pool, South Dakota.
Good Stuff For Stuffing Your Goose

**Apple Orange Stuffing**
6 cups day-old bread crumbs  
2 cups diced tart apples  
1 cup diced orange sections  
1/2 cup raisins  
1/2 cup chopped pecans  
1 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon poultry seasoning  
1/2 cup orange juice  
1/4 cup melted butter  
Mix ingredients together and stuff the goose.

**Sauerkraut Stuffing**
1 cup chopped onions  
1/4 cup butter  
2 pounds drained sauerkraut  
1 cup shredded raw potato  
1 teaspoon salt  
1/2 teaspoon caraway seed (optional)  
1/4 teaspoon pepper  
1/2 cup white wine  
Saute onions in butter until transparent, then combine remaining ingredients.

**Pineapple Orange Stuffing**
1/4 cup chopped onion  
1-1/2 cup chopped celery  
6 tablespoon butter  
3 cup cooked rice  
1-1/2 teaspoons orange rind  
3/4 cup orange sections  
3/4 cup crushed pineapple  
3/4 cup sliced mushrooms  
1/4 cup chopped walnuts  
1 teaspoon salt  
1-1/4 teaspoons grated fresh ginger  
1 dash cardamom  
orange or pineapple juice  
Saute onions and celery in butter until transparent, then combine remaining ingredients, adding enough juice to just moisten.

The Breed For You
In choosing a breed to raise for meat, an important consideration is size. If you’ll be feeding a crowd, you’ll probably want Embden or Toulouse, which reach 20 to 25 pounds at maturity. For medium-size gangs, the African is just the ticket, weighing in at 18 to 20 pounds. Smaller families appreciate the tidy size of Chinese and Pilgrims, which range in mature weight from 10 to 14 pounds.

Remember when selecting a breed that a goose loses some 25 to 30 percent of live weight when dressed, the heavier breeds losing a smaller fraction than the lighter ones, and that at least one pound of dressed weight should be provided for each diner.

Don’t forget to check the size of your oven in relation to the size of the goose. A lot of modern ovens are not nearly big enough to hold a large roasting pan, let alone foiled potatoes or a casserole filled with stuffing on the side. If you can roast a big turkey in your oven, you can roast a goose.

Foraging ability is an important aspect for growing meat as naturally and as economically as possible. All breeds forage to some extent, although if you intend to employ your geese as garden weeders you may want to avoid the soil compaction that typically occurs with the heavier breeds.

Feather color is another consideration. Lighter varieties are better than darker ones, since missed pin feathers don’t show up as readily when the goose is cooked. Though it’s simply a matter of aesthetics, after going through all the trouble of raising the bird, cleaning it, and roasting it to perfection, you’ll want it to look its best on the platter.

Chinese geese grow relatively fast and have lean meat, and White Chinese pluck cleaner than the Brown variety. Photo courtesy of Stephanie Kendall, Funky Feathers Fancy Poultry Farm (www.funkyfeathers.com), Maryland.
How neat a bird will look on the table is partly determined by the stage of molt. Geese pick cleanest right after their first feathering, at about 13 to 14 weeks of age (sometimes longer in backyard situations). Since geese achieve their maximum growth during the early weeks of life, the age at first feathering is also the prime butchering time from an economic standpoint, even though the birds will not have reached their maximum weight.

Soon after the first feathering, a goose begins to molt into adult plumage and you’d best wait for it to come back into full feather before butchering. Otherwise the multitude of unsightly pin feathers may well put a damper on holiday appetites.

To determine if molting is complete, check to see if the wing primaries reach the tail, pet the plumage to test for smoothness, and run your fingers backward over the feathers as you peek underneath for the presence of pin feathers. Plumage should look bright and hard, with no downy patches around the vent or along the breastbone.

No goose breed lays as prolifi- cally as a chicken or a duck, but geese tend to be efficient layers for longer—as much as eight years for some breeds. A goose egg is nearly three times the size of chicken egg, the white is somewhat thicker than that of a chicken egg, and the yolk makes up nearly half the egg.

One goose egg makes a formidable omelet, although goose eggs are less often used for culinary purposes than for hatching or, because of their size and thick shells, for creating craft items such as decorative jewelry boxes. Yet goose eggs may be used in just about any recipe calling for eggs. They are especially prized for baking rich pastries.

The primary problem with goose eggs is that they are available only seasonally. In a warm climate, hens may start laying toward the end of January. In a cold climate they may not start until early March. Once they start, most hens lay an egg a day. How long they continue laying each season depends on the breed. Average egg production for each breed is shown in the “Quick Goose Breed Profiles” table on page 53. Some strains lay considerably better than average.

Age is another consideration. A hen’s egg production peaks at three to five years, then gradually declines. A third consideration is climate. As cool-weather birds, geese generally prefer to lay only as long as daytime temperatures remain below about 80°F.

A typical backyard scenario, though, is that a goose will lay a dozen or so eggs in early spring, then go broody, at which time she stops laying. If you take the eggs away as she lays them, or soon after she starts setting, she may begin laying again. Otherwise she finishes laying for the year and busies herself raising goslings for your future holiday meals.
Finishing Your Bird

When a goose reaches full feather, but is no older than 10 months for best texture and flavor, a common practice is to finish it in preparation for butchering. This process of putting on weight to round out the body is especially important where geese have been running freely in pasture.

Finishing takes from three to five weeks, and should be accompanied by confining the birds in an area where they cannot roam and burn off that extra plumpness you wish to encourage. But do give them sufficient room to remain clean and dry, or the resulting decline in vigor may result in weight loss.

Locate your finishing pen where the birds will not be agitated by outside disturbances, including neighborhood dogs. Unless you have raised only one goose for the purpose, try to finish several together as a lone goose often pines away for the gaggle it can see or hear nearby.

Feed the geese all they can eat of a good grower ration, stimulating appetites with a little grain making up no more than one-third of the daily total. Top off the feeder three or four times a day to stimulate interest in eating. Refrain from including in the diet any strong-flavored foods such as fish scraps, garlic, or onions, which sometimes cause off-flavors in the flesh.

The night before the big day, remove all feed so dressing won’t be complicated by messy half-digested rations. But continue to offer water to prevent dehydration and mottling of the flesh.

I would be lying if I said killing a goose is easy. First off, geese are regal and intelligent, and (like other poultry) have individual personalities. Second, even the young ones are pretty powerful. So butchering a goose requires overcoming both psychological and physical obstacles. A ploy that works pretty well for most poultry keepers is to keep a pair of yard geese, let them hatch out an annual brood, and hustle the young ones into the freezer while they’re still young and anonymous.

Feather Plucking

If your experience has been with chickens, you may be in for a little surprise when you pluck your first goose. Not only do they have extra layers of feathers and down, but the feathers seem to be stuck in more firmly than a chicken’s. For this reason, many folks turn at this point to a custom plucker. But it’s understandably not easy to find one who’ll do the job. Check not only in the farm community, but also among local hunters who may know someone who cleans the waterfowl they bag.

If you’ll be doing the picking yourself, one way is to chill the unplucked, whole carcass to a temperature of 33°F to firm up the skin, which makes dry picking easier. Since I’m always in a hurry to get the job done, I start dry picking right away. When only one bird is involved, dry picking is a lot less mess and bother than preparing a pot of hot water for scalding and wet picking. But if I have more than one goose to clean, or if I have other birds to pick at the same time, I’ll use hot water to loosen the feathers and speed up the job.

The water must be close to 150°F. Much hotter and it may discolor the skin and cause tearing when the feathers are pulled. Much cooler, and it will do no good. A little added dish soap breaks surface tension and helps the water penetrate the layers of feathers, and a long-handled spoon is handy for pushing the floating bird under water. You’ll need a lot bigger scalding pot than you’d normally use for chickens or ducks. If your pot isn’t big enough to hold both the whole goose and enough water to cover it, the resulting hot tidal wave will serve as a painful reminder to use a bigger pot next time.

For cleaning lots of geese or other waterfowl, it’s worthwhile to invest in picking wax as an aid in removing the final layer of down and pinfeathers. But for the occasional goose, it’s not worth the extra mess and expense.

Geese are easy to cook, requiring nothing but a roasting pan and a rack. Like all heritage breeds, the goose needs slow, gentle cooking for a crisp skin and a succulent moist interior. Photo courtesy of www.heritagefoodsusa.com.
Once the goose is dressed and ready for the oven, store it, loosely covered, in the coldest part of the refrigerator for no more than three days. If your butchering has been done well in advance of the holidays, freeze the bird in an airtight plastic bag designed for freezer storage. Thaw the bird in the refrigerator, allowing two hours per pound. Never thaw a goose at room temperature, since spoilage may occur in thawed portions while the inside is still frozen solid.

When you’re ready for roasting, rinse and drain the goose. If you’ll be stuffing it, fill the neck and body cavity loosely with your favorite mix, preferably one containing something tart, such as apples, oranges, pineapple, or sauerkraut to enhance the natural richness of goose meat. Fasten the neck skin to the back with a skewer and tie the legs together.

If you do not plan to serve stuffing, a sliced apple and an onion in the body cavity during roasting add a little extra flavor. To decrease cooking time of an unstuffed goose, heat up several metal forks in the preheating oven and pop them into the cavity to intensify heat during roasting.

**Roasting Your Bird**

Whether stuffed or not, pierce the bird’s skin all over with a meat fork to let the fat ooze out as it liquifies—a sort of self-basting process. For extra crisp and tasty skin, rub it all over with a cut lemon, sprinkle with salt, and dust with a little flour.

Place the goose uncovered and breast side up on a rack in a shallow roasting pan, with a meat thermometer inserted deep into the inside thigh muscle. Roast in a preheated 400°F oven for six minutes per pound, then reduce heat to 325°F and allow an additional 12 minutes per pound. I find it best to get the goose into the oven a little ahead of schedule, as sometimes it takes longer than it should and there’s nothing worse than an underdone goose when hungry diners are waiting expectantly around the holiday table.

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**RENDERING GOOSE FAT**

A goose collects fat in its abdomen, at the base of its neck, and under its skin. After the goose has been plucked and chilled, the abdominal and neck fat firms up and may easily be peeled away. To save it by melting it down, or rendering it, cut it into smaller chunks, put it in a saucepan over low heat, and warm it gently until the fat turns into a golden liquid. Take care not to let it get so hot it splatters or burns. Some people, not me, add a cup of water to the rendering fat, which evaporates by the time the fat liquifies and meanwhile helps keep the fat from turning brown.

The fat under the skin melts off during roasting. If you wish to save it, spoon it out about every half hour during roasting to keep it from browning. Do not baste the bird during this time, which is unnecessary anyway and would spoil the flavor of the rendered fat. In my experience, the fat that renders during roasting is never as pure as that rendered in a saucepan, so I keep it separate and use it primarily for pan frying.

In both cases, strain off and discard solid pieces and other impurities, pour the rendered fat into a jar, and store it in the refrigerator. Clean fat may be kept in the refrigerator for a long time—as much as a year—but is so good you will probably use it up long before then. It may be used wherever you might otherwise use butter, shortening, lard, bacon drippings, and the like. My husband grew up enjoying rendered goose fat, spread on bread and sprinkled with a little salt. The secret ingredient in my oatmeal cookies everyone raves about is—ta-da—goose fat instead of shortening.
You will know your goose is cooked when the thermometer reads 185°F and the stuffing reaches a temperature of 165°F. If you have no thermometer, you can test for doneness by pressing the meaty portion of the leg between protected fingers; it should feel soft. Then prick the thigh with a fork; the juices running out should not be pink. The skin should be golden and crisp.

During the last few minutes of roasting, after the fat has been melted off and spooned away (as described in “Rendering Goose Fat” sidebar), you can give your bird the gourmet touch by basting it. My favorite baste combines 1/2 tablespoon of sherry or brandy with 3 tablespoons soy sauce, 3 tablespoons honey, and 1/2 teaspoon seasoned salt. Brush this mixture over the goose 15 minutes before it’s scheduled to be done, and then again moments before you remove it from the oven.

Whether or not you have basted, skim the final pan drippings to make into delicious gravy to serve over the sliced meat, biscuits, potatoes, or stuffing. Arrange the finished goose on a large platter surrounded by sweet potatoes, baked apples, or other favorite trimmings, and be prepared for the “oohs” and “aahs” as you arrive at the Christmas table with your homegrown roasted goose.

Gail Damerow has enjoyed raising geese, chickens, and other poultry for more than 40 years. She shares her goose-raising expertise in The Backyard Homestead Guide to Raising Farm Animals, and is also the author of Barnyard in Your Backyard, Fences for Pasture & Garden, The Chicken Health Handbook, Your Chickens, and the recently updated and revised classic — Storey’s Guide to Raising Chickens, 3rd edition.

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* More than most breeds, individuals may be either docile or aggressive.