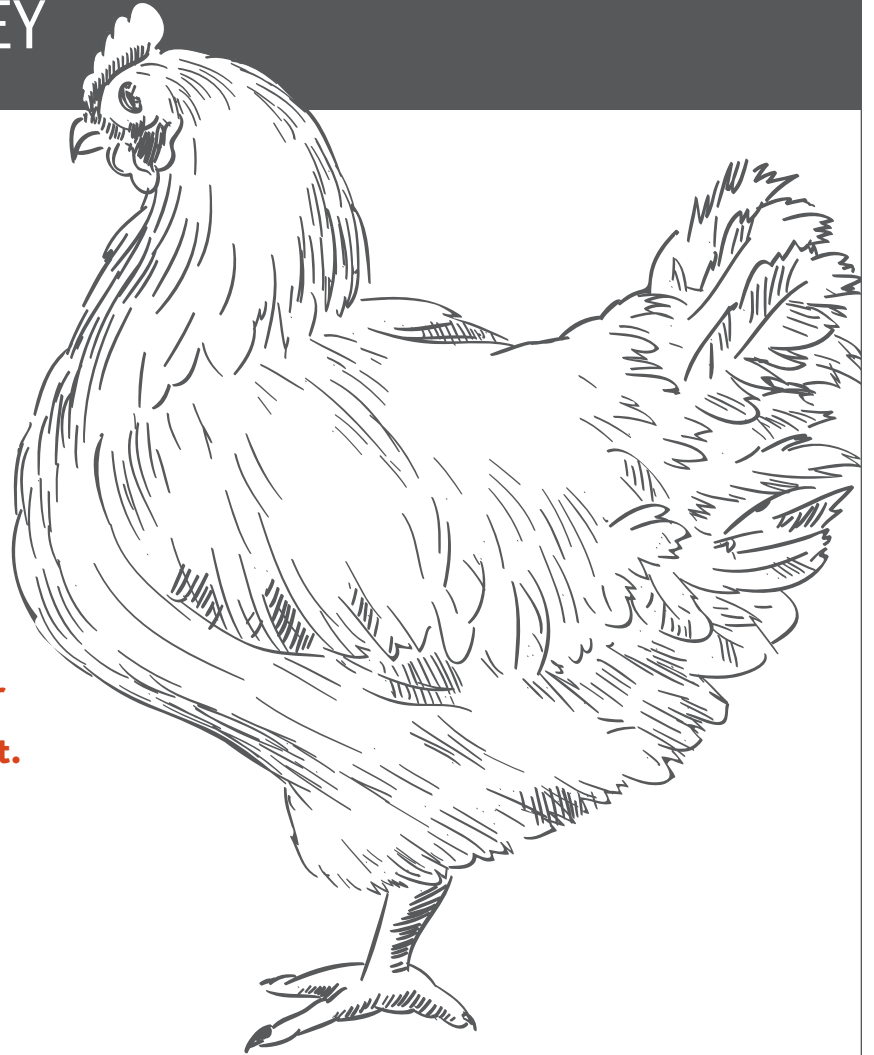


# A DO-IT-YOURSELF GUIDE TO CHOOSING THE BEST CHICKEN AND TURKEY

**Free range! Pasture raised! Vegetarian fed! Shopping for chicken and turkey can be confusing when the farm is not certified organic. Use this guide to fill your bag with the most nutritious poultry, while supporting producers who care for farm animals and the environment.**



**L**ocal farm stands, CSAs, and farmers markets can provide access to some of the freshest and most nutritious seasonal food directly from the people who produce it. These community anchors advance the good food movement while contributing to the vitality, health, and economic resilience of your neighborhood.

However, simply shopping at a farmers market does not guarantee that all of your purchases were grown locally or responsibly. If you are looking for fresh, nutritious, and environmentally friendly local food, the first step is to ask a farmer at the market if their farm is certified organic.

Real organic farms practice humane animal husbandry, steward the soil and watershed, and do not use synthetic agrichemicals. Reward local certified organic farms

with your food dollars, and you'll be getting the most nutritious, delicious, fresh food, while supporting environmental health and your community's economy.

If you do not have access to *certified* organic farms in your area, you can often still find options produced in the spirit of organic. Many smaller, direct-marketing farms forgo organic certification because they are able to build face to face relationships with their consumers, explaining their production practices in person.

The following questions will help you determine whether a farmer's production practices meet your individual needs and expectations for poultry.



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# 1 IS ANY PART OF YOUR OPERATION CERTIFIED ORGANIC?

Due to a lack of certified organic poultry processing facilities, many small and diversified organic farms produce poultry that cannot be labeled “organic.” These farms are likely to manage chicken, turkey, or other poultry as certified organic until the moment of slaughter. If this is the case, the producer should be able to show that their “live birds” are certified.

Some very small operations may also fall under exceptions for certification. Organic farms and businesses with less than \$5,000 gross annual organic sales (total sales before expenses are deducted) are exempt from certification. These exempt farmers can only represent their poultry as organic when they sell it direct-to-consumer.

# 2 HOW DO YOU MANAGE YOUR LIVESTOCK?

Under the federal organic standards, all livestock are required to have access to the outdoors. When done right, this allows birds to express their natural behaviors.

If a farm claims that their chickens or turkeys are “pastured” or “free range” or any variation on these terms, ask them:

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “PASTURE RAISED” OR “FREE RANGE”?

Poultry products are often labeled “free range,” but this term can be misleading. “Free range” only means the birds are not confined in cages. Large flocks of chickens raised in fixed barns with limited access to the outdoors may still be called “free range.” Few of these “free range” birds actually venture outside of their large buildings. Indoor conditions vary; overcrowding and lack of perches are common. But producers who are dedicated to animal welfare may also use the term “free range”—ask them to clarify how they manage outdoor access.

Even brands that use fixed housing, but allow poultry some access to the outdoors, are counterintuitively permitted to label their products “pasture raised.” This misleads consumers. In general an animal that a farmer is calling “pasture raised” should be getting significant time outdoors on land that is not denuded (stripped bare).

## ARE YOU USING MOBILE HOUSING?

This is generally the best approach to pasturing poultry. However, even if mobile housing is not used, small flocks (approximately 200 birds or less) that live in a fixed house may still roam widely, depending on other management factors. Other excellent options include rotating moveable fencing or allowing poultry to range over crop fields that have already been harvested.

## HOW MUCH OF THE BIRDS’ LIFESPAN IS SPENT OUTDOORS?

Chicks and poults (baby turkeys) are usually kept indoors until they have feathers. Highly ethical producers will encourage birds to spend at least two-thirds of their lives outdoors before they are slaughtered.

## WHAT DOES YOUR OUTDOOR AREA LOOK LIKE?

Farmers committed to high animal welfare give their birds frequent access to fresh ground. For pasture raised poultry, the size of the pasture matters. If birds are only given access to a small pasture and they are not rotated to fresh ground frequently, they will strip the area of vegetation. In this setting, poultry manure becomes concentrated on the land, harming the soil life and leaving a “pasture” devoid of the invertebrates that are crucial to the birds’ naturally diverse diet. Birds allowed

to eat this more natural and diverse diet produce more nutrient-dense eggs and meat.

Other ethical, diversified producers rotate their birds through previously harvested (spent) crop fields or inside greenhouses after the growing season.

### HOW OFTEN ARE BIRDS ROTATED ONTO FRESH GROUND/PASTURE?

Moving birds frequently in outdoor areas gives them fresh areas to forage for invertebrates and other organic matter. With frequent rotation, the poultry manure is a source of pasture fertility rather than a pollutant. Depending on the quality of the pasture and the type of vegetation present, birds should be moved at least every couple of days.

### DO THE CHICKENS FORAGE ON LAND SPRAYED WITH ANY SYNTHETIC FERTILIZERS, PESTICIDES, OR HERBICIDES?

Organic certification ensures the land livestock range on is free from most synthetic chemicals.

### SILVOPASTURE

Silvopasture, the practice of combining forestry and livestock in a mutually beneficial way, is another legitimate path to raise healthy and happy poultry outdoors. Forested or shrubby areas more closely mimic birds' natural habitat, making them an excellent choice for high-welfare systems.

## 3 WHAT KIND OF FEED DO YOU GIVE YOUR CHICKENS?

Many local farmers rotate their birds on quality pasture. But pasture is just one component of the birds' diet. Supplemental feeds, which often include grains such as soy or corn, also deserve consumer scrutiny. Even in the summer, up to 85% of the feed consumed by pastured chickens still comes from stored grains, seeds, and legumes. In the winter months, often 100% of the chicken feed is stored feed.

An animal product is not organic if the feed it consumed was not organic.

### IS THE POULTRY FEED CERTIFIED ORGANIC?

It is important to ask the farmer what kind of feed they give their chickens, whether it is organic, and how and where it was sourced. The best poultry feed is both locally grown and certified organic (or grown with organic practices).

Some producers will advertise "soy-free" poultry products, which indicates that the birds were not fed soybeans or soy meal (important to eaters with soy allergies).

If a farmer is not feeding certified organic grain to their poultry, 85-100% of what the animals are eating is very likely to be from GMO corn or soy and therefore contaminated with herbicide residues. Some farmers tout their use of non-GMO feed. It is important to understand that non-GMO feed has almost certainly been grown using synthetic fertilizers and sprayed with synthetic pesticides. In contrast, organic feed is always non-GMO, and free of most synthetic pesticides and all synthetic fertilizers.

### DO YOU PRODUCE ANY OF YOUR POULTRY FEED ON-FARM?

Farms that grow all or some of their own livestock feed have more control over the quality of the feed and save on transportation costs and emissions. Feed grown on-farm or at a local mill can also provide benefits to the local economy and ecosystems. If feed is produced on-farm, it is important to ask whether herbicides or other pesticides were used on that crop and whether synthetic fertilizers were used in production.

# 4 HOW DO YOU MANAGE ANIMAL HEALTH?

It is important to know how the farmer handles the medical needs of their livestock. Certified organic production bans most veterinary medicines as well as the use of antibiotics. Organic farmers must prevent disease instead of depending on drugs. Minimizing exposure to diseases and parasites is necessary for optimal animal health and well-being. Maintaining a closed flock, keeping sick or newly purchased animals in quarantine, and proper sanitation of equipment and living spaces are recommended practices.

Proper outdoor management is essential for parasite control because it enhances animal health and nutrition. This is particularly true for

poultry. A sustainable stocking rate (animals per acre or how many square feet are allotted per bird), frequently moving animals to fresh ground, and maintaining diverse vegetation in outdoor areas are helpful practices to break the life cycles of parasites.

## HOW DO YOU TREAT SICK ANIMALS?

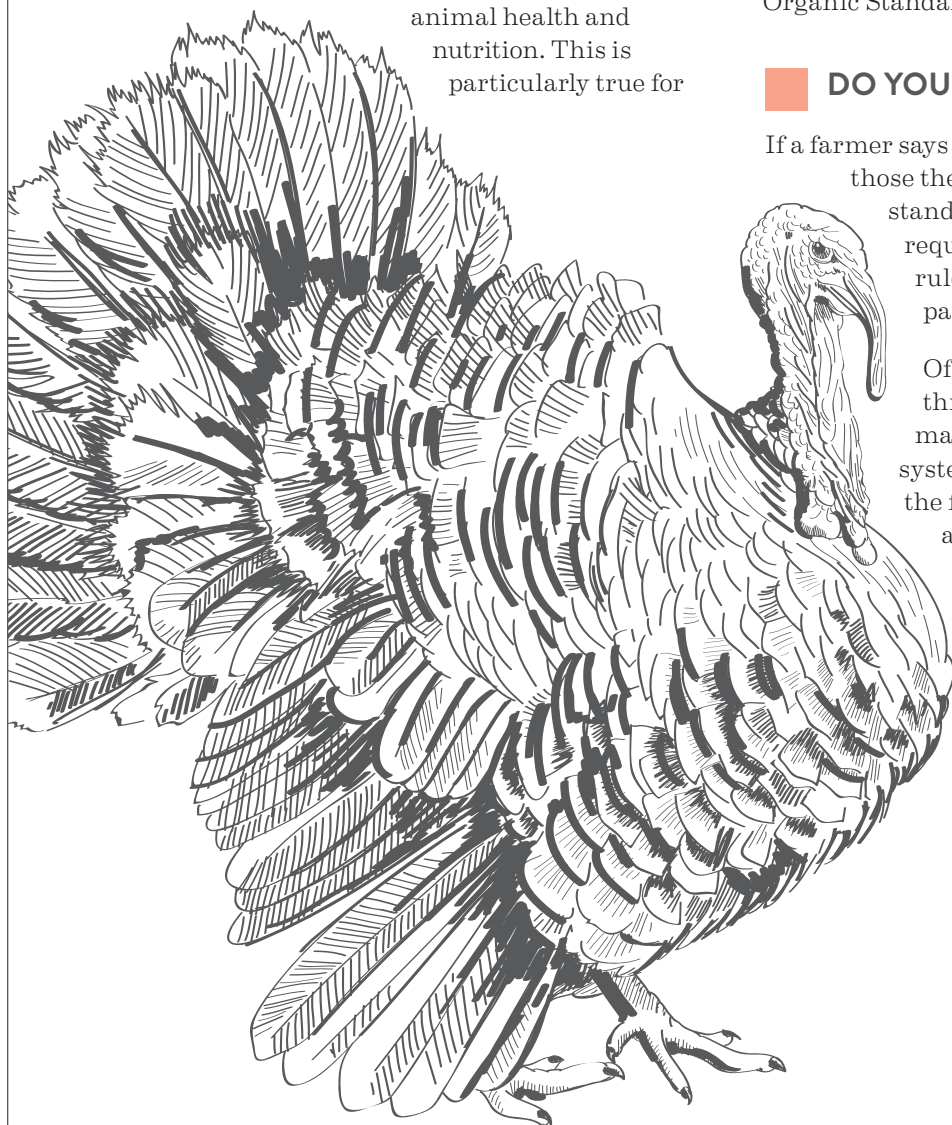
There are a number of organic-approved alternative remedies to treat livestock. However, non-certified farmers may not be knowledgeable as to which alternative therapies are acceptable under the National Organic Standards.

## DO YOU USE PARASITICIDES?

If a farmer says they use parasiticides, ask them if those they use are allowed under the organic standards and if they are abiding by the required withholding periods. The organic rules only allow treatment with synthetic parasiticides in emergency situations.

Of course, if an organic animal's life is threatened, otherwise-prohibited drugs may be used, even in certified organic systems. In the case of a certified farm, the farmer must then remove that treated animal from organic production or, at a minimum, abide by withholding times.

*If you end up using this guide, we'd love to hear your feedback. Send us an e-mail at [cultivate@cornucopia.org](mailto:cultivate@cornucopia.org).*



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Cornucopia provides needed information to family farmers, consumers, and other stakeholders in the good food movement through research and investigations on organic agriculture and food issues.