

## Eco-tips for buying a Thanksgiving turkey

The countdown for Thanksgiving has begun, and the search for the perfect bird is on. Remember these eco-friendly concerns when picking your perfect turkey.

By [NRDC's Smarter Living](#)

Wed, Nov 02 2011 at 12:19 PM EST

While some may have friends who shoot and make many delicious meals from one bird during the turkey hunting season, most of us don't hunt for our [Thanksgiving turkey](#), unless you count the hunt for the perfect bird at a farmers market or the grocery store.



Suffice it to say, the Thanksgiving turkey you are likely to track down

today in the supermarket is nothing like the wild turkey my friends hunt, and in fact it's quite different from what your grandparents ate 50 years ago. Ninety-nine percent of all turkeys raised in the United States at the present time are the Broadbreasted White variety (sometimes called the Large White). Raised in confinement in extremely crowded conditions on [factory farms \(PDF\)](#), they are fed a steady diet of grain and supplements like antibiotics, rather than the grubs, bugs and grasses they should eat and could eat if they were allowed outdoors.

As their name implies, Broadbreasted White turkeys are valued for their large, meaty breasts, which breeding has enhanced though the process has rendered them virtually infertile. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, without artificial insemination performed by humans, this variety of bird would become extinct in just one generation.

### **When shopping for turkey, what should you buy?**

There is [much to consider](#) when looking for the right type of turkey, or any type of poultry. To make the best choice, follow these three simple steps:

#### **Always know where your bird came from.**

If the person selling you the turkey is not the farmer, s/he should at least be able to tell you where it came from and how it was raised. To know what to ask and what answers you should be listening for, whether talking with a farmer, butcher or store manager, download [Sustainable](#)

[Table's terrific question and answer sheets](#). To learn what different claims really mean and whether you can trust them, check out [Labels to Look For When Picking Poultry](#).

### **Choose a heritage, organic or sustainable turkey.**

1. **What's a heritage turkey?** There is a movement to bring back older varieties of turkeys, many of which originated in the United States. Groups like [Slow Food USA](#) and the [American Livestock Breeds Conservancy](#) are working to reintroduce genetically diversified varieties of animals, including turkeys, that were common decades ago. These animals, often referred to as heritage breeds, are naturally bred and contain no hormones or antibiotics. By promoting genetically diverse turkeys, these groups are working to ensure the survival of the species. Heritage turkeys are raised outdoors, roam freely on pasture and eat the varied diet nature intended them to eat, unlike most turkeys today. While conventional wisdom would suggest that the heritage turkey might be stringy and the Broadbreasted White juicier, in a blind taste test quite the opposite turned out to be true: [Heritage birds--the Midget White and Bourbon Red in particular--proved superior in flavor](#) to factory-farm birds. Heritage turkeys are more expensive because there is such a small number of them, and in many cases you must order in advance. Many farmers raise only enough turkeys to cover demand, so most consumers order their birds months in advance.
2. **What about organic?** If you aren't able to get a heritage turkey, another option is to buy an organic and/or sustainable bird. To be certified organic by the [USDA](#), turkeys must be raised with no antibiotics, no growth enhancers and only organic feed, and they must be given access to the outdoors. The animals can be a heritage breed or the more common Broadbreasted White.
3. **Beyond organic, are there other labels to consider?** [Organic farming](#) generally falls within the accepted definition of [sustainable agriculture](#). However, it is important to distinguish between the two, since organic products can be unsustainably produced on large industrial farms, and farms that are not certified organic can produce food using methods that will sustain the farm's productivity for generations. Some organic dairy farms, for example, raise cows in large confinement facilities but are able to meet the bare minimum requirements for organic certification, while a small farm that is not organic-certified might be using organic guidelines and be self-sufficient by [recycling](#) all the farm's waste. Farmers who raise sustainable turkeys are not overseen by any group or agency and have no legal guidelines to follow, though many actually exceed USDA organic standards. "Sustainable" refers more to a philosophy about agriculture than "organic," which is bound by its legal definition. "Sustainable" has thus come to describe the practices of farmers who preserve the land, treat their animals and workers humanely and help support the local community. Sustainable turkeys can be a heritage breed or the Broadbreasted White. Though there is no single set of standards for sustainable agriculture, there are several labels for which high standards have been set, and farms have been third-party-certified for having met them. These include:

**Animal Welfare Approved:** Sets high standards for health, shelter and handling, including a requirement that animals spend most of their life in pasture. Prohibits growth hormones; allows antibiotics only for sick animals.

**Certified Humane:** Sets high standards for health, shelter and handling; prohibits growth hormones; allows antibiotics only for sick animals.

**Food Alliance Certified:** Requires low- or no-pesticide policy; advocates worker welfare, habitat protection, well-managed agriculture and humane care of livestock.

**American Grassfed:** Requires that animals eat grass only, and if they receive antibiotics due to illness they must be removed from the program. Growth hormones are prohibited.

To learn more about these and other poultry labels, see [Smarter Living Label Lookup: Poultry and Eggs](#).

### **Buy a local bird.**

Thanksgiving is a celebration of the local harvest, so whether you are buying a heritage, organic or sustainable turkey, make sure it's from a local farm. Great directories to local food sources include [Local Harvest](#) and the [Eat Well Guides](#).

Use this great recipe when preparing your Thanksgiving bird: [Heritage Turkey with the Three Sisters](#).

Photo: [Brandon Siedel](#)/Shutterstock

<http://www.mnn.com/food/healthy-eating/stories/eco-tips-for-buying-a-thanksgiving-turkey>