



Mack Hill Farm's heritage animals (l to r) Toulouse ducks, American milking Devon cow, Icelandic sheep and Chantecler chickens.

Good Fencing Makes Good Farming

THE ADVENTURES OF A HERITAGE BREED FARMER

Story and Photos by Lisa Richards

We've made it a point to pick the breeds of all of our animals off of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) endangered lists. They are among what is called "heritage breeds" and we have a whole host of them: Tamworth pigs, American milking Devon cattle, Chantecler chickens, Toulouse geese, Saxony ducks, Percheron horses and midget white turkeys, among others.

Why do we prefer heritage breeds? We like the thought of establishing breeding groups to help preserve them. We like their hardiness. We like that they breed by themselves and raise their own babies. We like that they survive outside all year-round in three-sided sheds. They do well on pasture; grass when it's green and hay when it's not. Only the birds get grain and even they mostly forage when it's green outside. These heritage breeds are

yummy. They're personable. They're cute. They're friendly. And they're smart.

That's the rub. There's a reason farmers bred the "smarts" out of most domestic breeds. I visited a 100-cow grass-fed dairy last summer. The farmer moved the non-heritage breed cows from paddock to paddock every 24 hours, and to and from the milking parlor, with only a single strand of electric wire fence to keep them in line. My heritage cows and horses would jump that fence without even noticing it.

Don't fence me in

That said, I should note that here at Mack Hill Farm we should, but don't, have a whole lot of good fencing to keep these smart critters contained. While we love our heritage breeds, and they

love us, they are always scheming to leave.

We finally built a back paddock to hold in the sheep. We fenced it last spring, and the wire we chose was cheap because we needed so dang much of it that we pinched pennies. That was really stupid. (It collapsed under the snow load.) We have tried electric fencing there, which was a total waste of time. Our sheep will not stay behind an electric fence.

Our turkeys are no better: The midget white turkey herd decided one day to go on walkabout a half mile to a neighbor's house. These turkeys are quite obnoxiously loud. Rude, even. Our neighbors are very nice about these breakouts, but we really try to keep the animals contained to our farm. Our Icelandic sheepdogs love keeping them in line, and can do it alone, but it's a pain in the neck that our dogs get so much practice.

Then there are the escape attempts by our Saxony ducks, Toulouse geese and one Tamworth pig named Parvati. This pig just would not stay inside the fence and broke a gate to the back paddock, so it's barely patched up right now. The ducks and geese found the pond in the front of the paddock and now jump over or go under that gate, routinely. Oh well, my flower garden was about done, anyway.

Heritage breeds are personable, cute and friendly. And they're smart.

That's why I'm really starting to question our sanity with all of these heritage breeds. A few stupid critters would come in handy these days.

But we'll keep them (if they'll stay)

There are reasons we wanted to stay diversified with heritage breeds. Being able to run the birds after the sheep in the pasture helps break the parasite cycle. This is our fourth year of not worming the sheep at all, and not losing any sheep to parasites. We wanted the Tamworth pigs to root up rocks and stumps, and they are brilliant at the job.

But someone needs to tell farmers who are considering heritage breeds to also consider the quality of their fencing before they take the plunge. These breeds take wonderful care of themselves and think for themselves. Unfortunately that includes thinking they'd rather be somewhere else. 🐾

Lisa Richards farms in Marlow with heritage breeds of geese, ducks, turkeys, chickens, sheep, cows, herding dogs and guardian dogs, all outside, year-round.