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Let's Talk Sustainable Turkey



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By now, most of us know that the Thanksgiving story we were fed as kids strays a little [too far from the facts](#). And the commercialization of Christmas has been a hot topic for nearly a century. Most of us try to avoid the pitfalls and honor the holidays as seasonal celebrations and opportunities to practice gratitude and giving. But celebrating is a little harder if you suspect that your celebratory feast is causing harm.

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Fortunately, it is possible to feast according to your values, right down to the iconic turkey at the center of the table.

Skip the Turkey

One of the most common reactions new vegetarians hear is the horrified exclamation, "But what about Thanksgiving?!" The rise of [meat alternatives](#) makes it easier for some people, but [Thanksgiving](#) is already one of the easiest days of the year to be a vegetarian. With literally dozens of traditional, hearty, seasonal side dishes to choose from (salads, squash soup, potatoes with mushroom gravy, Brussels sprouts, garlic green beans, and so many pies), vegetarians can pile their plates and stuff their faces without missing the main dish at all.

But even if traditional main dishes rule in your house, with a little planning, you can add gratitude that your holiday turkey had a healthy, happy life.

Choose Humanely Raised Turkey

Although many people feel that animal agriculture is inherently inhumane, everyone can agree that some farming systems are kinder than others. There are numerous certification systems for [humanely-raised meat](#). Only two third-party labeling systems require animals to be pasture-raised, that is, grown primarily outdoors: [Animal Welfare Approved](#) and [Global Animal Partnership](#), steps 4 and 5.

All domesticated turkeys descend from wild turkeys indigenous to North and South America. But a couple of centuries of domestication developed many different breeds, most of which are now going extinct (or already gone). Nearly all of the turkeys you will find at the grocery store belong to one of two breeds. Like the Red Delicious apple, these Broad Breasted White and Broad Breasted Bronze turkeys meet the needs of commercial producers more than consumers. And they are no longer able to live like normal turkeys. [Heritage breeds](#) are naturally mating, able to breed for multiple seasons, and slow-growing. Any farm that offers heritage breeds is doing more than protecting biodiversity. It is also offering its birds a better life than their more industrial counterparts.





If you can't purchase a heritage breed, look for the labels Animal Welfare Approved or Global Animal Partnership [step 4 or 5](#), to make sure your turkey is pasture-raised, like these Broad Breasted Whites.

Look for Organic Certification

Conventionally farmed turkey is already one of the [more sustainable meats](#). Look for [USDA Organic](#) certification to make sure your bird has even less environmental impact. A [certified organic turkey](#) may have been purchased from a conventional hatchery, but it will have been grown on organically managed land with 100% organic feed and will not have received [routine antibiotics](#), a practice that contributes to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Even pasture-raised turkeys require supplemental feed – usually [corn and soybeans](#). Organic feed is important because conventional corn farming contributes to [air pollution](#) and the [Gulf dead zone](#) and soy contributes to global [deforestation](#).

Pasture-raised turkeys are surely happier birds, but with outdoor livestock come additional environmental concerns. Paddock rotation is an important practice for maintaining healthy soil in a free-range livestock operation.

Buyer Beware

[Greenwashing](#) is rampant when shopping for poultry, including turkey. Beware of meaningless labels like “cage-free” (which only applies to eggs; meat birds are never caged). “Hormone-free” is also universally true of turkeys, since the USDA [forbids treating turkeys](#) with hormones. Unless a turkey is certified organic or labeled “USDA Process Verified,” don't trust antibiotic-free labels either.

Find a Local Farmer

Labels like USDA Organic and Animal Welfare Approved can be very helpful in finding a more sustainable turkey. But some of the most sustainably raised birds may not have any labels at all. Very small farms often don't have the resources for certification. But they do have the advantage of authentic conversation. You can talk to your farmer directly, and sometimes even visit the farm, to find out exactly how they raise and slaughter their birds. Finding a local farmer can take some work; check with your locally owned grocer, visit your nearest farmers' market, or even [look online](#). Once you find a farm you trust, you can build a years-long relationship and start a new holiday tradition.



The most sustainable turkey may be one you purchase from a local farmer.

Whatever bird you buy, [food waste](#) is one aspect of your holiday turkey that you can control, and it has a [global impact](#). Don't buy a bigger bird than you can finish, use those leftovers, and compost the rest. And if you really want to control how sustainable your holiday turkey is, you can even be the farmer yourself. [Raising turkeys](#) is not so very different from raising [backyard chickens](#).

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