

Selecting a 4-H livestock project? Consider a heritage breed!

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County fair is not until July, but there are things now that 4-H youth can consider doing to ensure a successful county fair season. Often times, we see 4-H that participate in several projects. Livestock is a very popular 4-H project, but livestock require more care outside of just the month of July. Though livestock is a great option, consider checking out a heritage livestock breed. What is a heritage livestock breed? A heritage livestock breed is defined as a “traditional” livestock breed according to the nonprofit, the Livestock Conservancy. Often times these livestock breeds are considered endangered due to their small and limited purebred breeding populations. Normally heritage breeds may be also considered the local breed to an area or region, such as the Gulf Coast Native Sheep is native to the southeastern part of the United States. These heritage breeds are normally not commonly raised in all places of the United States as they may be a local breed unique to a region. “Heritage” is not recognized by the USDA as a marketing label, though you may see these marketing tactics on store shelves.

According to the USDA there are hundreds of livestock breeds in the United States, but in each livestock industry there may be only a handful of major breeds of livestock that are used in production. Often times we think about the most common cattle breeds such as Angus, Hereford, and Simmental. Or even in swine, Duroc, Yorkshire, or Hampshire. But did you know there are so many more livestock breeds out there that you can have as a 4-H project? There are so many possibilities! One popular breed, the Belted Galloway, known for its white belts across their stomachs is considered a heritage breed. Your 4-H youth may call it an “Oreo” cow, but would make for a memorable 4-H project experience.

These heritage breeds of livestock may not grow as fast as the livestock breeds you may be more commonly used to, so don’t select these livestock projects with the goal of winning a market class. What is really valuable about a heritage livestock breed is that they contain different genetic traits, such as different wool types, marbled pork, docility, etc. Though we may not want to rely on a lard type pig like the Large Black for lean pork, we may raise them to make soap and for their bacon. Do not start raising heritage livestock breeds expecting them to grow fast, or being easy to care for.

It’s best to start small if considering raising a heritage livestock breed. If you are not sure on the livestock breed, there are even poultry and rabbit breeds considered heritage breeds that have been popular among youth projects. Examples of rabbits include: American Chinchilla or Silver Marten. Examples of chickens include: New Hampshire or the Rhode Island White. You don’t have to necessarily choose a critically endangered breed as a livestock project. You can choose to have your 4-H youth select a breed to research for a 4-H demonstration or veterinary science poster for example. The opportunities are endless when it comes to an educational experience like 4-H.

For more information, check out the Oklahoma State University Breeds of Livestock website at: <https://breeds.okstate.edu/> . Or the Livestock Conservancy at: <https://livestockconservancy.org/heritage-breeds/>