

# Peck 'n' Berry Acres

## Free-Range Turkey in Alberta, Canada

by Pamela Irving

For many prairie folks north of the border, turkey is not just for special occasions. Some people prefer turkey to chicken because they get a bigger bang for their buck with a larger bird, meaning more meat left over for sandwiches, casseroles, stews and soups.

Annette and Willie Issler of Peck 'n' Berry Acres have frozen turkeys for sale right up until just before Christmas and are usually sold out completely by the end of January. The turkeys are ready for market in the fall and are available as long as supplies last.

The Isslers raise 300 free range turkeys from chicks on their farm 15 minutes east of Leduc in central Alberta, where they own three acres and rent another 18.

“Our customers are happy knowing that we treat our animals with respect. They get to run around outside and aren't given growth hormones and chemicals,” says Annette.

The turkeys are sold frozen as opposed to fresh and range in weight from 12 to 33-plus pounds.

“We have some customers who always insisted on buying fresh turkeys — but they now prefer our frozen turkeys over the fresh ones they've purchased elsewhere. That's kind of nice to hear,” says Annette, who is in charge of marketing.

“We raise mostly bronze turkeys, which are a descendant of the wild turkey,” explains Annette. “They take longer to mature and don't get as big as the white turkeys.”

They also raise white turkeys for customers that want a bigger bird. The white turkeys range from 20 to 35 pounds and mature at 18 weeks, while the bronze turkeys mature at 24 weeks. All turkey is sold for \$3 per pound, the same price it has been for over two years.



*Willie Issler holds a dressed 35-pound white turkey, while Annette Issler holds an 18-pound bronze turkey.*



*At Peck 'n' Berry Acres, animals free-range and are very sociable. Here, a Romney sheep nuzzles a bronze turkey.*

The Isslers decide their asking price by calculating the cost to raise each turkey and adding in the amount of profit they would like to make. They try to keep prices reasonable and affordable. They compare what others are charging, both in the grocery store for conventionally raised turkeys as well as certified organic turkeys, which is a superior product because of the organic feed.

“We try to find a happy medium and create a win/win situation for both the consumer and for us, the producer,” explains Annette about their pricing strategy.

Willie feeds the turkeys every afternoon. Fifty percent of their diet is grass, which creates healthier meat, increasing the vitamin content as well as the omega content. The other half of their diet is a wheat/barley mix with a vitamin/mineral/protein supplement.

“Up to this point, we’ve been able to purchase barley and wheat from within a 10-mile radius of our acreage. We pay the market price, whatever it is, at the time of delivery. We have enough storage for about two years of our present rate of consumption,” explains Willie.

Willie starts the turkeys in an insulated brooder house in April. As they get closer to 6 weeks old, he lets them out on a small yard on warmer days, putting them in at night. Depending on the weather, they are moved to pasture at 6 to 8 weeks of age. Moveable tarp-covered shelters provide shelter during miserable weather.

“We feed them in these shelters as well. Our experience has been that the bronze breasted turkeys prefer to be outside and would rather roost *on* the shelter than in it,” explains Willie, who therefore built “bleachers” for the turkeys to roost on in the evenings.

“Every time they see me, they jump down and come running up to me. They’re a very sociable animal,” laughs Annette.

Willie chooses butchering dates according to the moon phases when the muscles are more relaxed, creating tender meat. Planting gardens and butchering animals according to the moon are practices that have been around for thousands of years, and the Isslers are becoming reacquainted with the ap-



Free-range bronze turkeys at Peck 'n' Berry Acres.

proach. Willie’s father and uncle spoke of planting their gardens according to the cycle of the moon.

According to the book *Raising with the Moon* by Jack R. Pyle and Taylor Reese, the best time to butcher an animal is within a week after a full moon or the third quarter, in which case, “the meat will release the fat as it is cooking, basting and tenderizing as it cooks.” The meat is also more tender from turkeys that eat grass.

The Isslers also raise 15 steers on 15 acres of pasture. They are finished on grass or hay which creates leaner meat with a higher vitamin and omega content. This year they introduced registered Berkshire pigs to their diversified farm operation. Berkshires are a heritage breed with very high end-quality meat that they also plan to sell as breeding stock.

There are also Muscovy ducks to help control the fly population in summer, 10 Romney sheep were bought last fall for lambing, and 150 free-range laying hens produce fresh brown eggs for local customers.

“We have a new batch of hens that are just starting to lay eggs now. Our customers come to us by word of mouth. Some come to pick up their eggs while others have their eggs delivered in the Leduc or Edmonton area once a week.” Eggs sell for \$3 dozen.

The Isslers have a large customer base. People can place their orders by e-

mail or phone and pick up their orders the day of butchering.

“It’s a real blessing when our customers rave about the quality of our products and pass our name on to friends and family members. It is sincerely a privilege to provide healthy food to our customers,” says Annette Issler.

Peck 'n' Berry can be contacted by appointment only at 780-986-1451.

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