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Preserving The Past For The Future

Staff Report

Many grassroots organizations around the country have been working diligently to preserve endangered breeds of livestock and rare plants. Many of these groups believe monopolization of the gene pool by corporate agriculture is dangerous to the agricultural prosperity our country has enjoyed. As scientists continue to research disease resistance, improved strengths in dietary quality and all types of cures through the exploration of gene identification, it only makes sense to conserve as much of the world's animal and plant species as possible. This issue will look at some of those farmers and organizations that are working to preserve agriculture's genetic diversity for future generations.

Lucinda Christian of Birchwood Conservancy in Georgetown has been involved with livestock preservation for 15 years. She became involved with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (www.albc-usa.org) and soon realized her emphasis was international, not just American. In 1992, when the collapse of the Soviet Union began, her mother and father, who were of Russian heritage, were contacted by some friends who had been members of the Russian Equestrian Team. The friends told them about the dire need to rescue a rare Russian breed of horse called the Orlov-Rostopchin. The family then began raising money to help preserve the breed.

"These Russian horses are the real 'Black Beauty' horse, even-tempered, hardy, tough, and they have been bred for the Olympic discipline," said Christian. Many of Russia's 400 cooperative farms closed in the early 90s, and only one farm there maintained the breed. Christian's family, with help from world-leading horse geneticist Dr. Gus Cothran, formerly of the University of Kentucky's Gluck Equine Research Center, were invited by the Russian Ministry of Agri-



This Orlov-Rostopchin mare is an Elite class 1 champion of Sport Horse Conformation in Russia and in the U.S. Her sire was an Olympic dressage champion, and she has given Birchwood Conservancy three exquisite daughters in her own image. She is 16.2 hands tall. Photo courtesy of Birchwood Conservancy.

culture to participate in the first international breeding partnership to rescue the breed. Christian extracted 14 horses in 1997 while her family lived in California and has been breeding them since then.

"We are also working to protect the Don horse, a rugged, athletic, old-world military horse of which there are less than 400, and the Akhal-Teke, a desert breed of Turkish origin, and a hybrid of the two called the Golden Horse, which is a metallic palomino that is suited for the Olympic discipline," said Christian.

Birchwood also began to see the need to preserve other breeds of livestock and is currently working with Scottish Highland and Ancient White Park cattle, Gloucestershire hogs from England, American Jacob's sheep, Oberhasli dairy goats, tufted Roman and California Buff geese, giant Cochins and Brahma chickens and several species of peafowl. Birchwood is also working to preserve several "working" German shepherd and Bernese mountain dog lines since most of the shepherding genetics of these dogs have been bred out in favor of "show" lines.

Birchwood is not in the business of selling the unique animals as they continue to build up their program, but they are available as an educational resource to help others learn how to acquire and preserve rare breeds of livestock. "We encourage people to research thoroughly the breed they are interested in and carefully consider their choices. Make sure the animal is suited to your environment and then begin working to preserve the heritage of the animal. It's a long-term project, but the rewards are well worth your efforts," said Christian.

For more information about preserving rare breeds or organizations devoted to rare breed preservation, e-mail Lucinda Christian at birchwoodfarms@mindspring.com or Warren Beeler of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture at warren.beeler@ky.gov.