

Self Lilac - the subtle Self

by Ian Cinderby, 1992

Indulge me for a moment if I begin this article for 'Libel Monthly' by relating a short story, the point of which will, I hope, become clear later.

Some ten or twelve years ago I showed a couple of young Adult Lilac boars at a Kent Cavy Club Show in Belverdere. They finished fourth and fifth out of five and were encompassed in the dismissal 'a poor class; all looked beige' (under a judge who shall remain nameless - but he has now sunk onto the dog-show circuit).

A few months later they headed large classes to win the ESCC ASS and London Championship Shows at Alexandra Palace under the late lamented Roy Watson and the up-and-coming Joan Radeaglia. The winning pig ('The Runt') went on to be pipped (I think that sounds better than 'soundly beaten') by a Golden boar in a Self Boar class of 32. The victor, incidentally, was co-owned by Extremely Nice Bryan in an earlier incarnation as a Golden fancier.

Lilacs do seem to be enjoying an upswing in popularity of late, having for most of their history been of interest to a minority of Self fanciers. This has been due in no small part to the controversy which continues to rage as to the correct colour. It is understandably disheartening to newcomers to have their exhibits dismissed as 'too dark' by one judge and 'too light' by another - sometimes at the same show!

For me, when the colour approaches its ideal, there is no more attractive cavy; it has a subtlety all of its own.

I hope, then, that this article goes some way to clearing up the confusion rather than muddying the waters still further.

History

The first Lilacs cropped up in a litter of Beige bred by a Mr. Reynolds in the late 1920's (name and date supplied by a Beige Breeder who gleaned it at her grandmother's knee). It is obvious from such origins that the actual colour must have changed over the years from those first animals, where the distinguishing factor from their litter-mates was one of 'pinkness' to today's (almost!) universal insistence on a 'blue tinge'. Even twenty years ago your overriding impression of a good Lilac would have been of a pink rather than at best a grey animal.

The Lilac cause was not helped in the early '70s when, in a well-intentioned attempt to improve size and type, Whites were introduced by a Southern luminary. This it duly did, but to the great detriment of colour. It resulted in animals of a washed-out, stone-coloured appearance which had a tendency towards smuts and introduced dark rims to the ears. Thankfully, these have now almost completely disappeared from the show scene.

In my experience (due to my erratic lifestyle - some might say itinerant - I'm now on my fourth attempt at Lilacs, some of the best Lilacs of the past were those of a Cornish fancier Barry Staines who sold me half of his stud in 1972 (the other going to Bryan Passmore for his son Geoff) and those of Ken and Joan Phillips who provided the basis for my third stab at things in the early eighties. Moving North other stalwarts have been John Day, Edith Metcalfe and Sylvia Seaborne.

What makes a good Lilac?

When it comes to type there is no real reason why Lilacs should fail to rival any Self, being the dilute of Blacks (i.e. they are a Self Black carrying the pink-eye

gene, which lightens body colour). They can be big, bold pigs. Coat quality is variable, can be bred for, and at best is the equal of any Self, barring Chocolates.

It is when we look at colour that the fun starts. The Standard calls for 'an even medium Dove Grey colour with no suggestion of Beige'. It further notes that 'The colour of young Lilac (and Beige) cavies is appreciably darker from that expected in an adult exhibit'.

Right. 'Dove Grey': 'Medium'; 'Young - appreciably darker'. Still open to interpretation isn't it? Lilac to me consists of two ingredients: blue and pink; and if it hasn't got the latter, it's a grey guinea pig. The colour I try to keep in mind is that of the breast feathers of the collard dove and not that of your standard London pigeon! We'll try and deal with colour first.

Colour

Thirty points of course. In Lilacs undercolour is not usually the problem; but a level top-colour is. As a general rule if a Lilac looks level when it is born, it will finish as a reasonably level adult. If, however, it has an attractive smut, blaze down its nose, fetching stripes or as patchy as granny's quilt; don't expect these to miraculously disappear as it ages and lightens up. They won't. Lilacs only lighten proportionally.

Forget Hans Christian Anderson - ugly ducklings make ugly ducks.

For a Lilac to achieve its correct colour as an adult it is virtually impossible for it to be too dark as a baby. They lighten that much. The Standard would be more informative if it stipulated 'very much darker' rather than 'appreciably'. The odd (level) baby that remains too dark as an adult should still be retained as the stud's tendency will be to get lighter over generations and these darker cavies are worth their weight in gold in checking this.

A small percentage, say 5%, of young will be born with some quantity of golden hairs - from just a few to a patch, golden foot or blaze. This is a manifestation of Sod's Law since these babies invariably possess otherwise excellent colour. As in Blacks and Chocolates such animals can be used in the breeding pen provided the golden area is a small one - and I'd steer clear of using boars so afflicted.

The ideal youngster, then, should be almost a slate colour, but with a maroon tinge (no, I'm sober). It will change coats at about 8-10 weeks and will continue to lighten for the rest of its life. If you take this into account you will realise that, for the 'medium colour to apply, your exhibit really has a very short adult showing life of between 15 months to, say, 2 years - 2 years maximum. I always try to take the relative ages of adult exhibits into account when judging animals of comparable levelness - but off-white is out!

Improving colour

The only way to improve colour is by selective line-breeding. There is no out-cross which will improve it.

For both type and colour the most important half of the equation is the boar. After all, his influence is going to be more widespread than that of a single sow.

Your initial boar(s) should for preference be a shade dark, typey and even. This is easier wished for than accomplished, since the most evenly-coloured ones tend to be those which are too light.

Some concessions can be made to type in the boar if the sows are strong in that department, but at least try to ensure that your boar has good eyes and ears and width between both. Sows may also be allowed some slight unevenness as long as good type is present.

Until you have fixed the colour in your stud - and even after you think you have - you will see a variety of shades within your litters similar to those experienced in Creams. Retain the darkest most evenly-coloured, keeping lighter ones only if they are sows of exceptional type whose influence will be easier to monitor.

Improve type

At least you have two options. Whichever alternative you choose should depend on how level the colour is at the start, and your determination to improve the type of your stud. You are better off getting the colour reasonably level before you attempt method b, since colour wise the outcross will not provide any miraculous improvements, and indeed you may have to spend time eradicating patchiness which results:

METHOD (a) Gradually and selectively improving type from existing animals and their progeny by line-breeding.

METHOD (b) The MPH method this involves contacting Mayoh, Phillips or Handley's - or other breeders of good Blacks - and persuading them to let you have a pig or two to cross with your Lilacs. The result of these matings will look like Blacks, but with generally inferior undercolour. These are then mated back to Lilacs obtaining, on average, a 50/50 split of Blacks (carrying Lilac) and Lilac. Mated back to Lilac again, each time selecting those best balanced on type or depth and levelness of colour, you achieve substantial improvements on type.

Preparation

For me to hold forth on grooming would be to akin to ENB lecturing on diplomacy! Reiter's disease affects all points bar the supping elbow. The only thing I will suggest is that grooming, especially when carried out intensively, is done before rather than after bathing as any scurf that arises will be largely removed after a good bath - or two in the case of boars.

Neither method is accomplished overnight!

Observations

To backtrack to the beginning of this article; the only variable between the two shows - cleanliness of judges spectacles and natural slight lightening of the animals involved aside - was the light. On the first occasion it was an overcast day and the artificial lighting inadequate; on the second it was excellent. Artificial (yellow) lighting absolutely 'kills' Lilacs - even decently coloured ones. They don't look very clever under canvas.

The answer is obvious, whether assessing your own animals, judging - and certainly when buying stock; take it to daylight. If it still looks beige, of course, you-the exhibitor or vendor-are in trouble!

Size can be improved as in any avenue of livestock breeding if you avoid the temptation to breed your animals too early. 5 months is the absolute minimum for sows - older if she isn't of sufficient size to cope at 5 months. In addition I never use the boars until they're 5 months either - unless they have a 'practice' when

I've forgotten to remove them at 4 weeks for a day or two! Feeding once in a while also!

The majority of decent pigs I've bred have been boars. The sows, with a few exceptions (usually at the point where I've had to sell up of course), have often looked really promising as u/5's and intermediates but rarely retained their levelness of colour and have 'gone-off' after a litter. Don't ask me why. Having a small stud where sows cannot be designated as solely 'show sows' doesn't help of course, but I believe that the only way to improve your stud is by breeding from your best animals, regardless of the disasters which inevitably often befall you on occasions.

Boars hold their fitness better anyway; so long as they're not being forced (?) to run with several sows as well as being show animals.

I've tried to avoid it, but I'll have to say it: Many judges don't seem to appreciate just how dark a youngster needs to be to have a hope of achieving the correct colour as an adult.

By highlighting the difficulties of the breed I genuinely hope I haven't put you off attempting it, since at its best it truly is an aesthetically pleasing cavy which does have the potential to challenge for major honours. Good luck.

Ian Cinderby (1992)