

HOW I EVALUATE (CULL) TANS

Provided by Blue Ribbon Rabbitry

I have had a really prolific breeding season. That has meant that I have had to be stricter with culling than ever before. As I have discussed my litter numbers with fellow breeders at shows lately I consistently get questions about the process I use to cull. First off, I want to note that cull DOES NOT mean kill. This article is not about what happens to rabbits once I determine they do not meet the cut to be retained in my herd. That is another topic for another day. This article is merely about *how* I make those determinations.

I am one of the rare individuals that has lots of patience when it come to breeding. I do not feel the need to immediately rustle through nestboxes and count babies and worry about what colors I have. Rabbits can handle birthing and raising young with minimal human intervention. I also do not really worry about determining sex until it's time to show and I *must* know that information for my entry form. I also find that "blind culling" with no regard for sex is helpful for me. Does are more valuable than bucks and I find if I do not know the sex in advance that I am equally hard on all animals and do not let a rabbit with a fault slide just because it's a doe.

Personally, I have a small enough herd and I know my animals well enough that I do not make many notes throughout the evaluation process. When I raised New Zealands I found detailed notes to be critical, but I also maintained a significantly larger herd and was still new(er) to raising to rabbits. With my present herd I really have no problems keeping all rabbits straight. I can easily remember the pros and cons of all animals. If you are new to rabbits OR new to the breed OR are not gifted with a great memory (mine is abnormally good) I would strongly recommend taking notes. It is an important tool and will really help you learn. You can do this in any fashion -- iPad, pen and paper, computer, whatever works for you!

Birth to Weaning

Most of my initial evaluations are done on a litter by litter basis. If you are out-crossing, this is a useless step as your litters will have a great deal of diversity. My herd is so linebred that each litter tends to be amazingly consistent in terms of quality. It really took over a decade of breeding to get to this point. This is not to say all of my animals are perfect, just that they are exceptionally similar within a litter. The downside to that consistency is that it also means if I have a rabbit that is not so great it's likely the entire litter is not so great. It works both ways.

From birth to weaning I am mostly watching the animals move around their cage with mom. Depending upon my numbers and how I feel my time will be best spent I may get does and litters out on the running table. This is more for exercise and really not for serious evaluation.

So what am I looking for? Mostly type. Color and markings will come later. I make a mental note of which litters are flashy and showy. The really excellent litters stand out very early on. I do not make ANY determinations regarding which animals go and which stay. I do keep an eye out at all times for runts, faders and other problems. I have never raised a runt that has gone onto to be a staple animal in my herd, so I feel comfortable culling these animals early on.

6 Weeks to 3 Months

Once rabbits are weaned they get out on the running table frequently. I consider:

- Disqualifications
- Tan factor evenness
- Severe angularity in the hindquarter
- Narrow hindquarter
- Narrow chest marking
- Weak development
- Frostiness in dilutes

Animals that exhibit these traits are removed from my herd. These are not qualities that will improve with age and they are next to impossible to breed out. I may have a rabbit that is stunning overall and a high point value rabbit, but if it has a fault that is one I or another person will be haunted by down the road I cannot in good conscience retain that animal.

Please note that I do not evaluate depth of tan factor or markings at this age. They will improve drastically, so my initial impressions are pointless. I also make a mental note but do not cull animals that have mild angularity in the hindquarter as these animals do tend to improve drastically over the remaining few weeks.

3 Months - 4 Months

At this age I still look out for the above mentioned faults, but I also start to consider:

- Depth of tan factor
- Evenness of guard hairs
- Texture and density of coat
- Excessive length in the shoulder or midsection
- Lack of hind limb
- Angularity in the hindquarter
- Narrow or cow hocked tracking

These animals are removed from the herd. Angularity in the hindquarter is the most egregious of these faults. It is next to impossible to correct through selective breeding. Uneven guard hairs are also a big problem as fur structure is difficult to correct through breeding. The other traits are more easily fixable, but I prefer to keep animals without those faults.

4 Months

At this point I ask myself: Do I feel pained by the thought of not keeping this rabbit?

If the answer is no, the rabbit goes. I get that such a standard is really high. That is intentional. Few rabbits meet that standard. Last year I did not retain a single black doe from my Convention breedings. Out of over a hundred animals born for Convention I only kept five -- two chocolates does and three black bucks. Nine months later I only have two of those rabbits left in my herd.