

MEET THE FANCY'S PIONEERS

NO 4: THE ANGORA BY VICKY SOUTHON

This article on the Angora was written by Mrs Vicky Southon at the request of Fur & Feather; it was included for in their 1943 publication *Fur and Flesh-producing Rabbits* and has been adapted for our Pioneer series.

Outstanding among the various breeds of rabbit in existence today is the Angora. No other rabbit ever evoked such admiration, while no other rabbit is so eminently satisfactory to keep.

Not only does the Angora earn its keep over and over again by the wool it produces, but it can, if the need arises, produce wool, flesh and a most attractive pelt, all before it is an adult.

This is what the well known authority, Mrs Lloyd Parton, has said about the Angora:

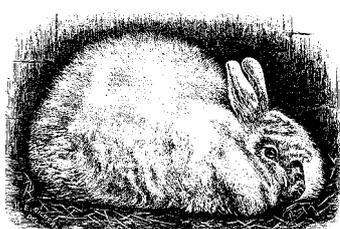
"This lovely variety is, to my mind, an ideal utility rabbit because breeders will not only be of use as stud rabbits but will continue for years to give a regular yield of wool. . . There is no difficulty in marketing the wool to wholesale buyers, or the wool can be spun on a spindle or wheel for home use."

That paragraph gives an indication of the general usefulness of the Angora, and justifies its inclusion in a book devoted to fur-producing rabbits. It is, however, in the Angora for wool and exhibition that most breeders are interested.

A well-bred Angora will go on producing a good supply of wool for years, and is, in fact, a little "goose which lays golden eggs". Stress is laid upon the necessity for the wool-producing Angora to be well bred, for it is only in this category that those with a dense, silky coat and quick-growing coat are found.

Careful breeding has brought the present-day Angora as near perfection as it is possible to get, and it is only by careful selection and attention to detail that the standard can be maintained.

The origin of the Angora is obscure, but it is said to date back at least two thousand years, and some evidence in support of this has been found in the form of engravings on the tombstones of the Egyptians.



Angora featured on the front cover of *Poultry, Pigeons, Cage Birds, Rabbits* Friday August 28 1885

The perfect show Angora simply must be seen to be believed. With a coat sometimes as much as ten inches in length, with the face and feet completely hidden, the effect is that of a gigantic snowball, and undoubtedly accounts for the white variety being the most popular, although in recent years the coloured Angora has made much progress in quality and the numbers bred.

If the pioneers of the colours could see the modern show specimens they would be very agreeably surprised. The ears are no longer tuftless, while the feet and head furnishings have greatly improved. The coloured can take its place next to the white on the show bench and sometimes even beat it. Among the coloured varieties are to be found the chinchilla, smoke, blue, golden, sooty fawn, brown and blue-grey.

The Angora is docile and amenable, due to its being constantly handled in grooming, etc., and nearly every rabbitry has at least one specimen noted for its more than average intelligence and understanding, and this fact accounts for its appeal to the true fancier and lover of animals.

The ideal show Angora should have as long a coat as possible with good density, i.e. as many fibres of wool to the square inch as possible and of a silky texture. The feet, ears and head should be well woolled, and its condition should be firm and robust. The carriage should be alert and upstanding, denoting good care and attention in breeding and feeding.

On seeing an Angora in its full glory in the show pen many people remark on the time it must take to keep the rabbit in such a condition.

It is obvious that the show Angora needs time, patience and care to keep it thus, but much of the pleasure derived from the keeping of this beautiful animal is in this frequent personal attention.

To produce a perfect show specimen is an exciting achievement and is, for many, a complete relaxation from worldly cares. To come home from a hard day's work and to spend a still harder evening's work grooming a few show specimens will seem the height of folly to the non-fancier, but to those of us who are fortunate enough to possess a few of these lovely rabbits, that evening's work makes the day's work lighter.



But if one wishes to keep Angoras and is not interested in the exhibition aspect of the Fancy then the extra time spent as compared with any other variety of rabbit is not so great as may be supposed.

When the young Angora's coat has grown to three inches it is clipped and no more attention is required until the next clipping. Anyone capable of handling a pair of scissors will have little difficulty in clipping the rabbit.

The wool is parted down the middle of the back in a straight line from neck to tail and then simply clipped off in layers until the rump is uncovered. With the rabbit on the grooming stool and facing away from the clipper, the head is lifted back and the chest clipped. The whole procedure should take about twenty minutes.

As with all these things, skill in clipping improves with patience. The wool is harvested in a tin or box and can be sent to a collecting agent forthwith.

Another method of taking the wool is by plucking, but this is rather more laborious and it is necessary to wait until the rabbit is in a natural moult before attempting it.

The great advantage of plucking is in the value of the wool to the hand-spinners. In clipping one takes off three or four lengths of coat at once, but in plucking the different lengths are taken off one by one. Thus in handling plucked wool the spinner can feed a more even flow to the spinning wheel.

A good Angora can produce up to one pound of wool in a year.

Because of their docile character Angora does are usually exceptionally good mothers but it is advisable for exhibition purposes to let the doe herself rear two only, giving any over that number to a foster doe whose mating had taken place a day, or at the most two days, before that of the Angora.

At three days old the Angora baby changes from pink to white, and at ten days the eyes are opened. If the mother is doing the babies well they may not come out of the nest until three weeks later, when they will make their first timid appearance at dusk.

From then on they will feed with the mother, nibbling away at hay and other food fed to the mothers.

Between six to eight weeks the youngsters can be taken away and put into wire-floored hutches, in pairs for a few weeks and then singly.

At six weeks, the babies receive their first grooming. The youngster should be held on the lap with its head resting between the knees, and the feet, legs, belly and the root of the tail carefully brushed. Next the front feet are pulled towards the groomer and the under-arms examined. If any little mats appear here they should be teased and brushed out.

The baby is now put on the grooming stool and allowed to sit there quietly for a while to get accustomed and prevent it from squirming off backwards. With a wire comb the whiskers are combed and behind the ears. Now with the bellows the rest of the body wool is blown, any mats being teased out with the fingers.

This grooming must be done every day, taking only a short time to begin with and increasing as the rabbit grows bigger.

By the time it is three months old the coat will have grown to a length of four to five inches and will, of course, take some little while longer to groom. The shoulders and the base of the tail are the parts most vulnerable to matting.

If one is lucky one may have a placid Angora which will mat very little. On the other hand, a "licker" will fetch all the bloom of the coat and even bite pieces out of it. These very rarely have a long show life, being finished or unfit for showing at six to seven

months, while the placid ones can be kept in tip-top condition until eight or even nine months.

It should not be necessary to use a brush on the coat until it is about four months old, and even then it should be used as sparingly as possible. Each flick of the brush takes off some of the coat, and the art of grooming is to keep as much coat on the rabbit without getting it matted. A wire brush with thin spikes is the best, because it goes through the coat without pulling out too much of the wool.

Those beginning to groom can be put into two categories. There are those who are over-careful in using the brush and allow their Angoras to become matted, and those who are too lavish in the use of the brush and consequently take off not only the essential bloom but most of the coat as well.

This bloom is the halo of the show Angora and consist of the longest fibres of wool, and, being very fine in texture, is easily brushed off. Therefore, the greatest care should be taken in the handling of the brush. Rabbits which would otherwise be well up in the cards are often put back through being over-brushed.

While on this subject of brushing it would be as well to mention that it is advisable to clip an Angora at the first sign of moult. Angoras are healthy rabbits, but trouble may sometimes be caused by the fact that they are apt to lick themselves, as their skin is irritated when the new coat comes through, and they are bound to swallow some of the wool. This forms a ball in the stomach or the intestines and causes a condition known as wool-bind, which can be fatal unless steps are taken immediately to relieve the complaint.

When an Angora has finished its show career and has been clipped it should never again be shown in full coated classes, although on rare occasions adult rabbits in a second full coat have won in these classes against young stock. They can, however, if in good condition and free from domestic duties, be shown in classes for clipped stock.

As these Angoras are almost a variety of their own it would be as well to give a brief amount of how they became recognised as show rabbits.

Realising that lack of time might deprive some Angora fanciers of the pleasure of showing, Mrs Wilbraham, the noted Angora breeder, evolved a standard for stud bucks and brood does which in 1936 was accepted by the British Angora Rabbit Society and the Universal Angora Rabbit Club, and which made it possible to show Angoras with a clipped coat. Thus the fancier with little time to spend on grooming full-coated stock can now exhibit in these classes.

At the outset it is well for the beginner to decide whether the main interest is going to be exhibiting or utility pure and simple, as in the opinion of the writer a somewhat different start is indicated for either.

For showing it is best to buy a three months Angora in show coat, getting advice from the seller as to grooming, etc., whereas for woolling one or more does in kindle is the correct start.

Generally, the two aspects will merge, as the show enthusiast will ultimately be selling wool and the wool producer will find that success at shows will enhance the value of the surplus stock that must accrue from time to time.

Well-bred stock will always command a good price, and it is essential, for success, to buy from a recognised strain at the start and to keep to that strain until sufficient experience has been gained to try outcrossing or establishing a strain of one's own.

Experiments are for the experienced breeder and are best left alone until one really gets an "eye" for a rabbit. A good Angora has details of quality which would escape the eye of one who has not seen and handled a considerable number.

Once this facility is mastered the way to the top of the Fancy comes into view and the fancier can take his or her place amongst those who, through the study and application of what they have learned, have made the Angora the useful and beautiful animal it is today.



Recommended reading

The Beginner's Guide to the English Angora by Barbara Pratley and Yvonne Hobbs (Coney Publications).

Softback, 56 pages, 17 chapters.

The Angora's history plus chapters on purchasing stock, housing, feeding, grooming, exhibiting, breeding, wool harvesting, records & pedigrees, spinning.

£5.50 from Fur & Feather



The Angora Rabbit: History, Science, Care and Crafts by Lesley Hordon (Coney Publications). Softback, 2014, 164 pages.

The author describes the Angora's journey from Roman times to the present day. There is a section devoted to the crafts associated with the Angora rabbit plus a directory of useful addresses, craft books and websites. In the Care category there are chapters on housing, grooming, clipping, plucking, feeding, breeding and health. £15.00 from Fur & Feather

