

A former club secretary describes the Orange

“The rex with the champagne sparkle”

IT'S THE BREED which captivates you at first glance, draws you into a happy circle of the friendliest fanciers in the UK, takes you to far-distant places for those unique shindigs known as club stock shows, keeps you guessing every time a new litter makes its first skittish steps from the nest and surrounds you with that golden glow that says: “I’m special. I’m an Orangeade.”

Orange and Fawn Rex take on a different name during the summer agricultural season. To me they become the “Ooh” and “Aah” rabbits as, without a doubt, these are the colours which draw the most admiring gasps from the crowds of mums and dads and children who flock weekly to the rabbit tents at the big shows and take their first look at our beautiful rex varieties.

Orange is still a comparatively young breed. It first came on to the show scene in the 1930’s with great pioneering work done by the late G F Baker who helped to draw up the standard (much of which remains unaltered to this day) and who bred many stock show winners.

George once confessed in the club’s yearbook that his first Orange were far from ideal – many had bandaged feet to protect their sore hocks, weeping eyes from inverted eyelashes, thin coats and very pronounced agouti colouring with blue rumps and bellies, etc.

With painstaking care and devotion he and a number of other rex fanciers proceeded to put beauty in this ugly duckling. Within a few years they had achieved their ambition to put Orange and Fawn well and truly “on the map”.

From then on the two breeds have made encouraging progress, with glowing short coats, white bellies, bold head and types, and above all a colour with a truly champagne sparkle.

Orange are not all bred to the same “pattern” – each is an individual with its own faults, good features and characteristics. Skill in the breeding pen is an art which make take a few generations to master.

Some of the best Orange & Fawn of the past have been bred from does to which the novice would not give a second glance, but the expert will tell you that what goes into the stud must come out and that it is very often the litter sister rather than the big winner that will produce the goods. So when purchasing your first stock be guided by the breeder’s advice and don’t be afraid to ask questions.

Ideally, if “taking the plunge” during the showing season – and we are in the thick of it at the moment – I would look for a young doe that is suitable for showing now and breeding later, so that you can have a flutter straight away at the club’s stock shows. Here’s where you can see all the strains of Orange and Fawn on the table at once. This is where you will

learn to pick out the likely youngsters from the rubbish, where you can pick the expert’s brains and get advice from all-comers.

It is fairly easy to “pick winners” from the nest if going to a breeder who excels in good short-coated, plushy and brilliantly coloured youngsters. It is much harder to pick a good one from the strains which are slower to mature and, although as babies these look “potters” they often turn out to be that adult stock show surprise! Ideally, one should aim to breed a good youngster which goes on to even better things as an adult, but this is far harder than it sounds.

Don’t look at young Orange and Fawn whilst they are still in the fluffy nest coats, they are impossible to assess at this age, although you can pick out the likely ones by their already glowing colouring, bold heads and short ears. The back of the hocks is a good area to study for colour potential.

At eight weeks the first coat should be pushing its way through the paler fluff and by twelve weeks you should be able to give them your first critical going over. The first thing to catch your eye should be the colour. Place the babies in a row – as on the judging table – and study them from all angles, especially from the rear. Look for a bright orange rather than a dirty, dull orange to harsh redness.

Beware the ones with the top colour which, when the fur is parted, reveals practically all white underneath, or a blue base. The orange colour should go down the hairshaft as far as possible to reveal a gleaming white base.

Now blow into the hairshaft starting from the nape of the neck and working towards the rump. You may find that on the haunches and rump the white undercolour will give way to a pearl-grey or agouti-blue base, and here’s where you first puzzle begins. Is this – as in certain strains – a fault to be overlooked (it is a sign of good colour as an adult and will almost certainly disappear in the next moult) or is it simply moult, a sign that the coat is about the break into another moult?

Or is it a fault that is with this rabbit to stay – and as such will cost your exhibit many valuable points on the judging table as well as intensifying the fault in the breeding pen later? Only the breeder who has produced generation after generations from this particular line will be able to advise you.

Other colour points to look for are: glowing heads, especially on the cheeks and ears (ears must ideally match the saddle colour) bold unbroken white “spectacles” around the eyes, and sound front feet without any trace of white barring or frosting. Look also for clumps of white hairs which can lead to nothing but trouble if bred in. Finally, the belly should be sparkling white – not just on top but right down to the base.

Having placed your babies in 1-2-3 order as far as colour is concerned, now pay attention to the coat. Remember, there are 40 points for colour and 40 points for coat, so both are equally important. The very nature of the mixed-up beginnings of the rex has tended to give the Orange (and other similar non-self varieties) less hairs to the square inch than the denser selfs such as Ermines and Blacks and for the Orangeade it is frustrating to see these dense-coated varieties (especially when failing colour or length of coat) push the coloureds into coddling cards at the shows. However, if an Orange excels in the desired half-inch coat an experienced judge will be happy to give a quality Orange a fair crack of the whip.

So search carefully for that “flyer” – the baby with the coat as short as plush, half an inch long and no more, with exquisite velvety texture and plenty of resistance in the coat. Check for thinness and curl on the nape of the neck. Sometimes there is a distinct curl, in others it is a slight depression almost as if the delicate fur has been “crushed” which, when parted, will show a distinct waviness. If there is a certain amount of curl, it may also be apparent on the chest and belly, flanks and rump. I have always discarded rabbits with the slightest suggestion of curl as they also have a tendency to weak hocks, but other breeders find that these kind of youngsters have developed into decent adults.

Again, it is a question of “knowing your strain” and it plays safe for the beginner to discard the rabbits with curl and concentrate on the ones with plenty of resistance in the coat. I always look for a few guard hairs on the rump, and if I can find them in youngsters nothing delights me more although, of course, this like the blue undercolour is a fault in show-quality youngsters. However, a few guard hairs usually signifies a heavier coat later on, and is a likely prospect worth keeping.

Now to check your show potentials for that final consideration – type. Of the three considerations – coat, colour and type – I think type is the easiest to look for in the nest. This carries twenty points in our rex standard and I must confess that I never think this is enough.

That first glance at the rabbit on the judging table always has a lasting impression, and you want the biggest, boldest-headed rabbits you can breed, with wide back feet, neat cobby bodies, gently sloping hindquarters and a solid chest and front feet. You want a rabbit that will sit up on all four feet on the table, not slump over the judging cloth like a cast-off doormat.

I hope I have persuaded you to take up the challenge of the Orange, in standard or mini. We have a great club and our secretary keeps in touch with its members via a quarterly newsletter plus we have regular notes in *Fur & Feather*.