

The Self Chocolate cavy

By P Avery

I was attracted to the Self Chocolate before I ever saw one, the very word "chocolate" to me has a pleasant connotation. Unfortunately not everyone shares my enthusiasm. As the public walk along the pens at large shows, few give a second glance to the chocolate cavies nor do many children favour them when looking for a pretty pet. It would seem that like dark Bourneville Chocolate, the self chocolate cavy is an acquired taste, but I can assure you, once you have seen an outstanding chocolate, with good size and type, set off by the silky sheen of the rich, dark coloured coat, you will recognise it as one of the aristocrats of the Fancy.

Where I live in the North East there are not enough chocolates to merit their own classes at shows; they usually have to enter Self AOC and compete with reds, beiges, goldens, lilacs and sometimes even creams. However, in this company the chocolate can hold its own, I think it is one of the most rewarding of the AOCs.

Of course, if you have your sights set on BIS wins or even "Best Self", then you had better not take up this colour, for I find that the winning chocolate is very seldom placed in duplicate classes. But, having said that, we can console ourselves that there is no dispute about the correct shade of colour required, nor about the colour of ears and pads of feet, and variations in light are not as hard on the chocolate as on, for example, the red. Given good basic stock one has every chance of producing winners without having to keep a selection of breeding colours.

I suppose Judges would say that even a good chocolate just cannot compare in type with a black or white and so in breeding chocolates one must always keep type in mind. There are about some very short faced pigs which I used to welcome at birth as show specimens, but I soon learned that they are often short of ear, lacking size and failing in undercolour. However, used sensibly in breeding with the larger, longer-faced pigs they can improve head type and contribute to producing the well balanced ideal animal.

Colour in a self cavy of course, carries more points than any other single feature. I find most Judges will put a really good coloured pig over one with better type but weaker colour. In breeding we must aim for a rich, deep chocolate with matching undercolour. Body colour is usually even but occasionally lighter shading occurs on the muzzle or around the eyes, such pigs should be avoided. As chocolate cavies grow older, say over two years, they seem to sprout noticeable long white or red guard hairs which of course spoil them for exhibition. Baby chocolates always appear darker than they will be as adults, so it is best to keep only the darkest youngsters with undercolour to match. Like many A.O.C.s chocolates are notoriously difficult to groom for exhibition. Because the undercolour of an adult very rarely matches the top colour perfectly, any heavy grooming will give a shaded appearance, in fact a fit pig can look streaky on its bulging flanks when the underhairs are revealed. I do find it best to groom the coat quite short about 14 days before a show and then just rub over each day to remove loose hairs.

Comparing coat qualities of chocolates with those of my self blacks, I think most chocolates have a much finer, silkier hair, however, they are more susceptible to broken back and flakey skin. Diet must be care fully controlled to avoid overheating. Some chocolates seem prone to loss of hair just on the nose end, this is an undesirable feature and as it is probably inherited, such pigs should be discarded.

When I began with Chocolates, I was told that self black blood could be used to improve type; I personally would strongly advise against such a practice. Several generations must be bred before any chocolate pigs are obtained and then these are usually inferior in both type and colour to the original chocolates. There are enough good chocolate breeding stock about without introducing blacks or any other breed.

In temperament I have found adult chocolates to be independent and often aggressive. Many sows will not live together very amicably with their own sex, and mothers with large litters soon grow impatient. I usually take young boars from the litter at 3 or 4 weeks old and put them with an older boar. The boar will not harm them at this age and they eat and thrive better with adult company.

I will not trouble here with advice on feeding and management, we all have our own methods, I will however, recommend the Self Chocolate as an ideal breed for regular exhibition; though there may be little chance of hitting the high spots, still there is a good chance of a class winner in many of your litters, and I look forward to the day when a Self Chocolate will be Best in Show at one of our Championship Shows.