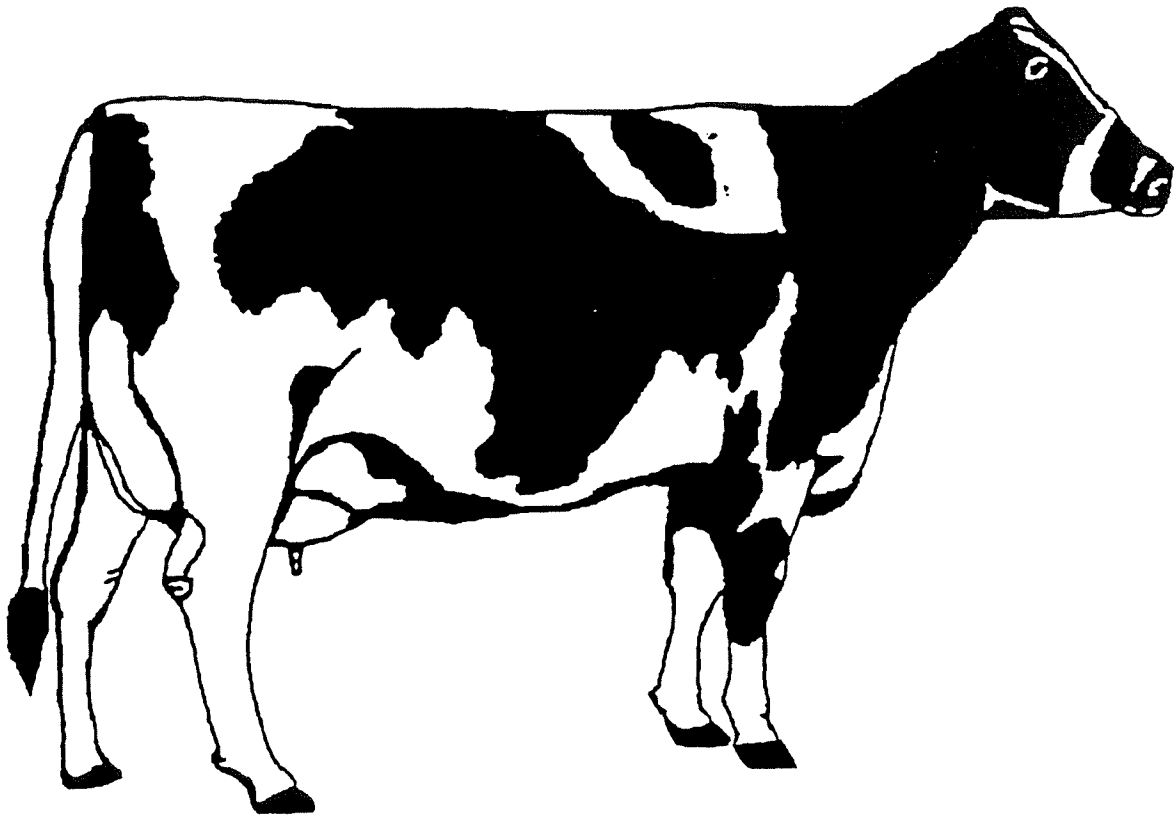


Choosing Your First Dairy Project:

A Parent's Guide



A Florida 4-H Dairy Program Supplement



Project Goal:

To involve youth in the project calf selection.

Subject Theme:

Learning good dairy conformation.

Life Skill:

Youth will experience the choices and consequences of decision-making.

What To Do:

- ◆ Investigate the desired breed, pedigree and age of a calf you wish to purchase.
 - ◆ Visit other 4-H'ers or local dairymen to observe various calf characteristics.
 - ◆ Complete appropriate transportation, housing, and financial arrangements before purchasing the calf.
 - ◆ Help your child select the calf project.
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GETTING STARTED

The first dairy calf project your child undertakes may spark a career interest in the dairy industry. It certainly will offer your child many exciting opportunities to travel, gain knowledge, learn responsibility, and form lasting friendships.

When selecting the first project animal, it is important to seek guidance and training from a person knowledgeable of quality characteristics, performance standards and the many requirements of raising and showing dairy calf projects. An experienced club leader, extension agent or local dairyman can be very helpful in making that first purchase decision. Selecting a quality young heifer challenges even the most skilled person, so working with and learning from the experience of a successful dairyman may help your child make the best selection choice.

Also, you can help your child achieve success by explaining that *knowledge* and *planning* are two key requirements for a successful and fun project for everyone involved. Part of this planning involves understanding the basic selection process.

There are many variables to consider before purchasing a project animal. Of course, you need to plan where you will keep the growing calf, transportation home from the farm and financial arrangements. Financial assistance is often needed when a child purchases the first dairy project animal. Many children save their own money to purchase their animals. As a parent, you may be willing to loan the purchase amount to your child.

However, it is also important to remember that this project is a hands-on learning experience for the child. Therefore, involve the child in the planning and selection processes, and especially the final decision.

PLANNING THE PURCHASE

Still, there are other factors that require planning and should be decided before visiting the calf farm. Knowing specific features of the desired calf before shopping for it will save money, time and effort. These features include the *breed*, *pedigree*, and *age* of the calf you plan to purchase.

BREED

The five major dairy breeds are Holstein, Jersey, Guernsey, Ayrshire and Brown Swiss. A good, quick reference to use is the Dairy Cow Unified Score Card available from your local extension agent. The Holstein and Jersey breeds are more popular in Florida and easier to find. Holsteins are also easier to market as two-year-olds after calving. However, Jersey heifers are also good project animals because they are smaller than the other breeds and usually prove easier for children to handle.

Guernseys, Ayrshires and Brown Swiss breeds can be purchased through the Purebred Dairy Cattle Association (PDCA) calf sale each year or privately through a local dairy.

PEDIGREE: Registered v. Grade

This decision involves selecting a registered animal or a purebred grade animal. Generally, a registered calf 2 or 3 days old will cost between \$150 and \$250. For each additional month of age you can add about \$50 to the cost of the animal. A grade heifer of the same age can be purchased for \$75 to \$125. Remember these are only estimated amounts of an average heifer. High quality calves can cost much more.

Primarily, the registered animal will be more expensive at the time of purchase, but if cared for properly will be worth more than a purebred when sold. Also, a registered animal has more ancestry information than is known about most purebred grades. This may be of some value as you make decisions about breeding her.

In addition, a registered animal can be shown in more places than a purebred grade. For example, only registered animals are allowed to show at the open shows such as a PDCA show and the Florida State Fair.

Nonetheless, a purebred grade animal will be a good learning experience for your child's first dairy calf project. It is important to get identification papers on the purebred. You need to have records of the calf's date of birth, the sire's identification, the dam's identification and the breeding date that resulted in the heifer you plan to purchase.

AGE OF THE CALF

If the animal is being selected to show, you need to consider the age and birth date of the calf before you purchase it. Animals are placed in classes by their age and breed as they enter shows, so it is important to know the exact age of the calf.

In Florida, calf classes begin March 1, June 1, September 1 and December 1. Calves that are born near the beginning of one of these four months will usually have an advantage in size and growth rate over animals born later.

Selecting an older calf has some advantages over a newborn calf. A calf that is 2 or 3 months old will be easier to care for and will have fewer

problems adjusting to a new home. Older calves that have been weaned and appear healthy indicate that they have already gotten off to a good start. Also, death losses are usually minimal with older calves. Another advantage of older calves is that you can better identify and inspect specific structural qualities of the animal.

The big disadvantage of an older calf is the initial cost is greater than that for a newborn calf.

CALF INSPECTION

Your next choices to make include calf quality and a good location to buy the calf. You can start by asking other 4-H'ers or leaders for personal recommendations, and also by calling a dairyman to arrange a farm visit.

An important advantage of selecting a calf on the farm is being able to observe and compare other animals raised in similar conditions. You can also see the dam of the selected calf to determine its potential of becoming what you want and expect for a successful project.

When visiting the farm, ask to see the calves that meet your decided criteria of breed, pedigree, age and price.

- ◆ Observe all calves for growth and thriftiness.
- ◆ Observe the overall health condition of the calves.
- ◆ Note physical features such as a smooth hair coat, vigorous appetite and normal movement.
- ◆ Ask the dairyman if the calves are fed colostrum within the first 12 hours of birth and if their navels are dipped with an iodine dip at birth. These practices are important to ensure a healthy, immunized calf.

As you observe each calf, look for the following traits recommended for potential show-winning calves. The diagrams show the differences in poor, average and good qualities. Further instruction may be supplied by your extension agent or dairyman.

BREED CHARACTER

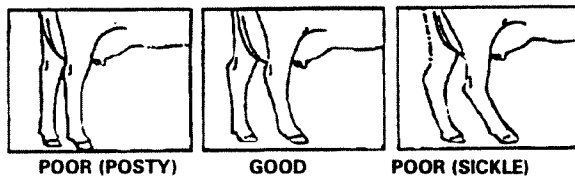
Breed character as shown in the head and neck and specific color markings can help identify purebred calves. (Again, a good reference to use is the Unified Score Card.) It is especially important for the grade animal to have the appropriate markings and breed character of the breed it represents.

SIZE

Also, the size and stance of the calf each have a major impact on its ability to do well in the show ring. Select a calf that is tall for her age and tends to walk up-hill, or that appears to be slightly taller at the front than at the rear.

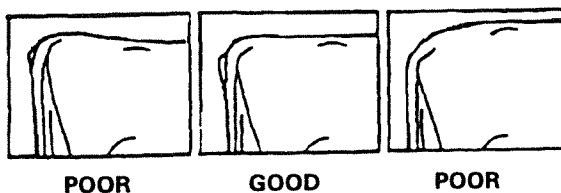
REAR LEGS

Most calves improve leg strength as they become older. However, calves with a deep heel, strong pastern and good set to the rear legs will likely retain these traits over time. *Avoid calves which have problems with their feet and legs.*



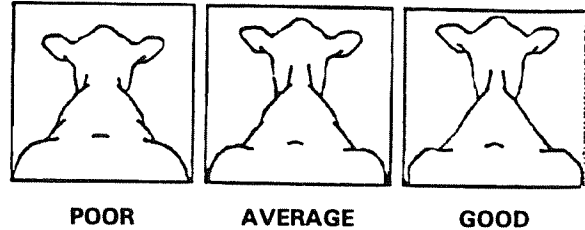
RUMP

The width of rump, especially as shown by the pin bones, can be evaluated at this point in the calf. The same is true of the length and flatness of the rump. The correct slope of the rump should be approximately a one-inch drop from the hip bone to the pin bone from a side view. Flatness of the rump may change as the animal matures and has a calf. *Avoid an animal with an extreme slope to the rump. This condition usually makes the legs set too far under the animal. In addition, you should avoid a calf with a reverse slope, where the pin bones are higher than the hips. A reverse slope will worsen over time.*



DAIRY CHARACTER

Select a calf with a long, lean neck that is sharp over the withers, and that has good openness and sweep to the ribs. *Avoid calves that are rounded over the withers or that are open at the top of the shoulders.*



BONE SUBSTANCE

The size of the bones in the legs, pasterns, and shoulders suggests the animal's potential structural scale. *Extreme coarseness should be avoided.*

MAMMARY SYSTEM

Although you cannot determine the quality of the udder on a young calf or what her first calf will look like, it is important to examine the mammary area carefully. The teats should be of uniform size and shape and placed squarely on the udder. If the dam of the calf is available, look at her udder to predict the future udder shape of your heifer. *Avoid calves with extra teats that cannot be distinguished from the functional ones. The extra teats can be removed if they are small and known to be non-functional.*

Extra consideration should be given to the heifer's future ability to produce milk. This is especially important for the 4-H'ers who intend to keep the calf and develop their own herd.

In addition, if the child plans to sell the animal as a fresh cow or springer, the animal's value will increase if she has high potential to milk well. Because you cannot predict future milk production by direct observation, be sure to look at the production records of the dam. The dam should be an above average producer in the herd from which she came.

Dear Parents,

I can still remember the day that I selected my first 4-H project...a dairy calf! I was eight years old, and my father and I had decided to ask the county agent, our friend, to come and help us with the selection.

There were four or five calves in the barn, and it was my responsibility to feed the calves. My father said I could pick one calf from that group and I liked the one named "Boots."

When the county agent arrived, he helped us evaluate the calves. He said that the oldest calf would be the prize winner because it was bigger and more developed than the others. My father said that I could make the final decision - and I did. I really didn't like that big calf; I liked Boots.

So, after hearing all the good advice, I turned to my father with tears in my eyes and announced, "I don't want that big calf. I want Boots as my project! I don't care if I get a white ribbon at the fair!"

Perhaps I was afraid that he would say no, but he didn't. In the end, Boots did receive a white ribbon. But I felt so proud of my first 4-H project because it was a choice I had made for myself, even though it meant winning only the white ribbon.

---A former 4-H member

1. This document is 4HDAP01 of the Florida 4-H Youth Development Program, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Published August 1996; Reviewed June 2002.
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