

EBLEX Improved Herd Awards 2011

Allacott Herd wins Most Improved Award For British Blonde breed



David Skinner and son Toby with the Allacott British Blonde Herd.

The Allacott Herd owned by David and Sue Skinner, and their son Toby of Beaworthy, Devon, has been recognised by EBLEX as the Most Improved Herd of British Blonde cattle for 2011.

The award is presented by the EBLEX Beef Better Returns Programme (Beef BRP) to the recorded herd that shows the greatest genetic gain for commercial traits over a 12-month period. There is a separate award for each of ten UK breeds.

The Skinner family has farmed at Shebbear for three generations. David has worked with commercial sucklers for more than 20 years, using British Blonde bulls to cross with their cows. Liking their conformation, fast growth and easy calving attributes, they decided to breed their own pedigree cattle - initially for their own use only. Established in 1996, they now also sell breeding stock to other pedigree and commercial producers as well.

Allacott Farm is a set in 142ha (350 acres), with 16ha (40 acres) of cereals for winter feed, 8ha (20 acres) of woodland and 12ha (30 acres) in Higher Level Stewardship.

The rest is a mixture of permanent pasture and grass leys for making round bale silage and hay. In addition to the pedigree herd of 30 British Blonde cows, the Skinners have a beef suckler herd of 70 continental crosses, and a flock of 150 commercial breeding ewes.

Performance recording was started in 2003 when the Skinners could see that cattle breeding was becoming more professional. They wanted to have figures to use in their own breeding decisions, and to support the stock they were offering for sale, particularly as buyers were becoming aware of Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs), and asking for performance figures.

Having the information has helped them to select for key traits such as quick growth, easy calving and good milk production. Since concentrating on these traits, EBVs across the herd have improved markedly on the maternal side. Any animal with a bad calving value is not used if at all possible.

Calving takes place mostly in early spring for both herds, although some pedigree cows calve in the autumn to produce bulls for the key spring sales. Most of the pedigree cows run with the bull from May or are selected to be served by AI.

Breeding decisions

The Skinners select which heifers to retain when they reach 12-14 months. They look for good temperament, conformation, easy-fleshing traits, and those sired by bulls with good figures for milk production. They also take into account the family line.

Bulls are selected at housing when they are weaned, with the Skinners looking for above average performance figures, particularly for easy calving, growth rates and maternal values.

“We are currently using three stock bulls – one for the pedigree herd and two for the sucklers,” explains Mr. Skinner. “Depending on performance, a bull may stay here for eight or nine years.

“Two bulls have had a significant influence on overall herd performance recently and may have contributed to us winning the award this year,” he says. “Both have higher EBVs than have been used in the herd before, and an AI bull with high values has certainly increased 400-day weights.”

Half the stock is sold through private sales, mainly to commercial customers and a few to pedigree breeders. The rest is sold through registered spring sales such as the Worcester Blonde Sale and the Sedgemoor Show and Multibreed Sale, which is linked to the South West Blonde Club.

Show winners

The Skinners like to use shows as a ‘shop window’ to the herd, and see it as a chance to measure their stock against other breeders. They have won in several classes and were awarded the Champion Suckled Calf at Beef South West in 2010.

“Thirty pedigree cows is a good number for us to manage alongside the suckler herd,” says Mr Skinner. “It also provides us with the right number of bulls for sales and shows.”

The breeding objective is to keep on improving - concentrating on fast growth and easy finishing, whilst maintaining easy calving traits. The aim for the suckler herd is to finish the youngstock at 20-24 months, with steers achieving 400kg carcass weight and heifers 340-380kg, grading U, U- and E, and all sired by homebred British Blonde bulls.

“Winning the EBLEX award came as a bit of a surprise,” Mr. Skinner admits. “But we are really pleased. It is nice to have a bit of recognition and to know that the herd is heading in the right direction.”

Worthy winners

“The Skinners are worthy winners of the Most Improved Award for the British Blonde breed this year,” says EBLEX breeding specialist Samuel Boon.

“They are experienced and consistent breeders, striving to provide top quality, high value breeding stock that will produce commercially desirable progeny. The fact they run both a pedigree and commercial herd means they truly understand the needs of their commercial customers.

“Their focus and use of records and information to attain top end results has been richly rewarded.”