

THE CHINCHILLA GIGANTA

The Premier Triple Purpose Rabbit

By Ron Stacey, Chairman, National Chinchilla Giganta Rabbit Club

The Chinchilla Giganta is undoubtedly one of the premier triple purpose breeds producing (1) an excellent carcass at a very early age, with a good meat to waste ratio being of fine bone with a long body. (2) An excellent pelt which a furrier cannot imitate by dying and finally (3) a wonderful rabbit for show purposes. Whilst it is not easy to produce a Giganta that comes very close to the Standard of Excellence, when one occasionally produces such a specimen, it is a delight to behold and invariably becomes the centre of much attention at the shows and usually receives its just reward in the duplicate classes when competing against other fur breeds under an experienced judge. The Giganta fancier is one of the most fortunate of rabbit breeders in that the National Club for the Breed is one of the most friendly in the country and although there is keen rivalry, particularly at the Club Shows, virtually all the exhibiting members are only too pleased to help new fanciers with advice and to assist them to obtain good quality foundation stock at a reasonable price.

What is a Chinchilla Giganta

The Standard of Excellence for the breed (i.e. a word description of the target we are aiming at) reads as follows:-

LENGTH & QUALITY OF FUR

POINTS

The fur must be uniformly dense and silky in texture but with resilience. Desired length not less than

1 1/4", but density to count more than mere length

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COLOUR

BODY The undercolour shall be a deep blue (damson)

as dark as possible, from the skin to at least half the length of the fur (excluding black guard hairs).

This to be followed by a clear band of pearl (off white), clearly defined, which shall not exceed a quarter of the length of the fur (excluding black guard hairs). The pearl band to be followed by a distinct black line, finishing on the surface in

-Carried forward-

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What is a Chinchilla Giganta (Continued....)

COLOUR

POINTS

BODY (Continued....)

-Brought forward-

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alternating blue/grey and silver/white tippings, heavily intermixed with longer black-tipped guard hairs to give a well mixed, bright and sparkling "Mackerel" top. Desired top colour considerably darker grey than the Chinchilla rabbit. The colour must be carried well down the sides to the belly, upon which surface of the fur shall be white, except for the blue/grey groin streaks

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FEET, HEAD & EARS

To be the same uniform shade of colour as the body. Ears to have black lacings. Eyes to be blue, grey or brown. Feet to be as free from barring as possible (badly barred feet to be penalised by not more than 5 points). White toenails shall not be penalised.....

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TYPE & SIZE

Long, graceful body, finely boned, with head, ears and limbs all in due proportion to the size of the body. Dewlap to be permissible in Adult Does. Adult Bucks to be of heavier bone with bold head.

MAXIMUM WEIGHTS: Adults12 lbs.

Youngsters up to 6 months -Does 8½ lbs.
Bucks 8 lbs.

Youngsters up to 5 months -Does 8 lbs.
Bucks 7½ lbs.

MINIMUM WEIGHTS: Adult Does.....9 lbs.

Adult Bucks.....8½ lbs.

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TOTAL:

100

FAULTS TO BE PENALISED

Bagginess, moulty coats, bad condition, partially lopped ears, short body, large triangle at neck, wide pearling, short coat on shoulders, "rusty" or excessively wide black line, flyback or woolly coat.

(Continued...)

DISQUALIFICATIONS

Failure to comply with any of the Standard Weights. Odd eyes, completely lopped ears, white feet or ill health.

I think it is necessary to clarify and enlarge upon some of the points in the "Standard" in order that newcomers to the breed obtain a clear picture of what they will be trying to produce.

Type

I make no apologies for starting with type first as in my opinion this is one of the major characteristics of the Giganta and for which nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ rd of the total points are awarded and yet it is one most often overlooked by breeders and judges.

If the animal is a doe, she should have a good length of body and of roughly equal width throughout (not pear shaped). Does should have long ears and a long, rather than broad, head but a pointed nose is a fault.

Adult bucks should be somewhat shorter in body length than does and considerably broader. Ideally, the head should be broad and bold and the ears shorter and broader than for does.

The Giganta, although one of the larger breeds, should be of a fine bone structure, particularly does. In other words we do not want the massive and solid body of the Flemish Giant with its large feet etc., nor do we want the excessively fine bone of the Belgian Hare.

To illustrate the importance of type, let me quote the comments that popular Judge, Fred Fuller made when asked why on two separate occasions over six months apart he had picked out the same buck from large classes and made it best Giganta. "Well it stands out, lovely type, bold head and ears, a real buck".

Remember type equals size and shape, not just weight.

Length & Quality of Fur

The next characteristic I look for in a Giganta is length, density and texture of coat as the Giganta is after all a fur breed. In the old days of real money, the old hands used to say that you should be able to bury a penny in the coat in the middle of the back. The old penny was one and a quarter inches wide so this meant the length of coat was not less than one

Length & Quality of Fur (Continued.....)

and a quarter inches anywhere on the animal, with the exception of the shoulders. I still consider this is a good guide to the ideal length of coat. The nearest coin we can use nowadays is the 50p. piece which is $1\frac{3}{16}$ inches maximum.

Density of fur (i.e. number of hairs per square inch) is also very important and the ideal specimen should have both length and density of coat. The most difficult thing to define is texture and a man who works with his hands at a manual job is unlikely to be a good judge of the required texture. The ideal is impossible to describe but it will not be of a woolly texture, nor will it be in any way harsh or a springy, 'fly-back' type of coat. Somewhere between these two extremes lies the ideal texture 'soft and pleasing to the touch'.

Body Colour

The standard allocates less than one-third of the total points for undercolour, pearling and definition, and while they are of importance, they should not be over emphasised at the expense of others.

I take undercolour to be the most important of the group, as without a sound base of the required length (at least half the length of the fur) you haven't really got a Giganta at all. Ideally the undercolour should be a deep damson blue down to the skin but the consistency of the under colour throughout its length is more important than its actual shade. By this I mean that a solid undercolour which lacks the 'damson blue' is preferable to a bright undercolour which fails at the base. Once undercolour is lost in a strain it will take years of selective breeding to regain it.

The width of the pearling is not defined in the standard but it must be clear and distinct. One-eighth of an inch would be rather narrow and one quarter of an inch would be too wide. Remember pearling is not white, therefore a band of pure white should be penalised as a fault rather than treated as a point of merit as a few judges do, presumably because this makes the definition (clarity of division between undercolour, pearl and black line) appear sharper and more distinct and also emphasises the blue of the undercolour.

Body Colour (Continued....)

One point to watch with the pearling is that it doesn't get too wide on the shoulders, which is a fairly common fault.

The pearling should be topped by a black line, clear and distinct. On light to medium topped Gigantas with fairly wide pearling it is possible to obtain a fine line, but on dark topped Gigantas, this black line will be thicker but this is not a fault providing it is a line, not bar or band of black.

Top colour is one of the obvious attractions of a really good specimen. Ideally, this should be of a dark grey, heavily interspersed with long black guard hairs and silver tipped hairs on the sides, the whole giving a 'mackerel' effect. The colour should be carried down to the belly fur (which should be white) with no shading off in colour.

Gigantas still tend to have two different types of top colour. One is a rather light grey which looks like a dark topped Chinchilla. The other is of a much darker grey and is, in my opinion, the desired colour.

While the lighter topped animals are useful in the breeding pen and will also be accepted by some 'all-rounder' judges, the winners at club shows, where specialist breeder judges are officiating, are almost invariably the dark grey topped specimens.

It is important to try to keep the triangle at nape of neck as small as possible. Pale colour on chest, compared with the rest of the body, is another common fault particularly on does.

Breeding

First let me make it clear that Gi's are very adaptable so they will thrive equally well inside a shed or outside in the open provided they have good ventilation and protection from the wind. I would stress the importance of ventilation in a shed, otherwise a few hot days in summer will cause the ears of youngsters in the six to twelve week age group to droop and they will then be of no use for show purposes. If your stock is housed in a shed keep your youngsters in the upper tier of pens and cover the top of the cages with wire netting to allow the heat to rise. I also suggest that you insert a couple of lift-up sections in the roof so that you can increase the ventilation in fine weather. (Continued....)

Breeding (Continued.....)

The ideal breeding pen is not less than four feet by two feet, but the actual shape is not important. For instance, I use a number of breeding pens which are three feet three inches by two feet six inches with plain wire fronts and no nesting compartments or boxes. Single animals, particularly young bucks, can be housed in two feet by two feet pens. What is most important in housing your Gi's is the height of the hutch. All my pens are two feet high and I consider this essential to ensure sufficient circulation of air. I usually remove the doe and litter when about four weeks old into a large pen measuring some five feet by two and a half feet and when the youngsters reach eight weeks I then return the doe to her breeding pen.

As Gigantas are a large breed, the gestation period is normally 31/32 days. The youngsters are born a slate colour which turns to black within twenty-four hours, but the belly remains pink for some days. It is not uncommon to occasionally produce some very long coated animals of the Angora type which we call "woollies". These should be discarded as they develop slowly and are useless for breeding. However, many fanciers maintain that unless you produce a few of these woollies you will eventually loose length of coat. These woollies can be identified at 3 weeks old by their sunken eyes, very dark topcolour and long fur on their faces compared with "normal" Gis in the litter. At about five weeks old the youngsters should be in their 'nest' coat and this will be the first opportunity to see whether you have a potential champion in the litter. At this age the base, or undercolour, should be a rich deep damson colour right down to the skin, followed by a narrow band of pearling. Some babies at this stage have a pronounced ginger colour at the saddles (brownbacks), and many fanciers consider these are the best youngsters. This brown tingeing normally disappears completely when the youngsters moult into their first 'full' coat at about three months. Incidentally, 'brownback' babies will also have a ginger tinge to the pearling and black line, but this will also moult out.

Gi's usually get their third or Intermediate coat at about five months and by this time it would be possible to eliminate for the pot any stock not required for future breeding purposes. If bucks and does have not already

Breeding (Continued....)

been separated, this matter will need urgent attention at this age. Gigantas are normally good mothers and one important characteristic of the breed is its docile nature. I rarely separate the bucks in a litter until they are four months old and the does can be left together until they are adult. As you can see, Gi's are very economical on hutch space in that litters can be left together until they are killed off for the pot or used for future breeding.

The Adult Giganta

The full beauty of the Gi's will not be seen until they moult into their adult coat, somewhere between seven and ten months, depending upon season of year and time of birth. At this age the rabbit should be at its best and although the definition of some bucks will improve in their second adult coat, the length, density and texture of coat will certainly never be better. The undercolour may not be so bright or polished as it was at five months (i.e. very like the matt or eggshell finish compared with gloss paint).

With each subsequent moult the undercolour will tend to become weaker, therefore any fading at the base in the first adult coat should be viewed with concern, particularly in stud bucks. Adult does usually lose undercolour and density of coat after their first litter but it should be possible, with selective breeding over a period of years, to improve this feature and some established breeders are having considerable success in this direction at the present time.

A few words of advice on starting with the breed. Many prospective fanciers start with a mated doe, whilst others prefer a young trio (two does and a buck). My advice is to purchase the best quality stock you can afford and for the first two or three years stick to one breeder for the supply of additional foundation stock which will be required.

Established breeders have spent many years building up their own 'strain' and the indiscriminate interbreeding of stock from different 'strains' usually leads to frustration and disappointment with the results. Remember that as you build up a stud, it will be necessary to keep at least two really good stud bucks. Even then you will find it necessary to obtain the services of other bucks in order to match some of your does.

Breeding (Continued.....)

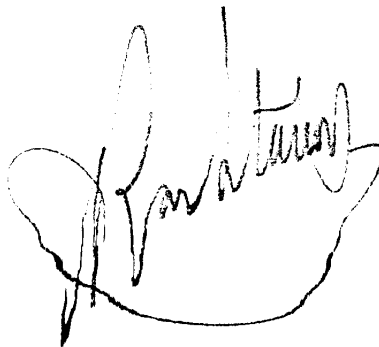
I keep at least five stud bucks, each one excelling in certain characteristics so that if, for example, I have a doe of good type and short dense coat with rather wide pearling and light top colour, I mate her with a buck which excels in length of coat and top colour, although his failing may be rather narrow pearling and not such a dense coat. One then hopes that if one produces a youngster that combines all the best features of both parents, one will then be that much closer to producing the perfect specimen.

Diet

I have not dealt with diet in this article as I feel that each fancier has his own pet ideas on this subject which are often influenced by local conditions in his area. However, I personally favour the feeding of pellets, hay and plenty of water to growing young stock and nursing does, but for resting does and stud bucks I use whole oats instead of pellets. I also feed various sorts of greenfood, when available, in small quantities. If feeding wild greenfood, you will not go far wrong if you use a mixture of various plants, but make sure they have not been fouled by other animals, particularly dogs.

You will find that breeding Chinchilla Gigantas is a very interesting and satisfying hobby and that the members of the national club are a very helpful band of fanciers. I therefore look forward to welcoming you to our breed and its national club. Our secretary, Mr. Sam Richardson, of 20 Union Street, Farnborough, Hants. will be pleased to enroll you as a member. The annual subscription is £1 (50p for OAP's and juveniles).

Finally, may I appeal to all club members to make an effort to advertise good quality surplus stock in FUR & FEATHER. Remember this is the fanciers' own newspaper to which prospective rabbit fanciers refer when they start keeping rabbits. Unless Gigantas are advertised for sale, the chances are they will take up some other breed if they cannot readily acquire foundation stock.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Richardson', is written over the bottom right portion of the text.