

Getting and Keeping
Show Coats on Your Woolies
By Teresa Wooden

There are a number of factors which help to determine the type and condition of a rabbit's coat, including genetics, nutrition, grooming and handling techniques, and climate. Here are a few things to consider when trying to get your Woolies into top condition (called "prime") for your next big show.

Genetics:

"If you don't got the genes, you don't got the means." No amount of feeding, grooming, priming or praying will bring a coat into condition if it is not in the rabbit's genetics to have what is considered a prime coat. If the parents lack in texture, density, length, or color, then the offspring probably will also. With this in mind, use wisdom when planning your breedings. Don't breed a soft coat to a soft coat, thin density to thin density, and so on. Genetics also affect the ability of the rabbit to use the nutrition it receives to achieve and maintain a prime coat. Some lines just never seem to come into condition, or can't seem to hold a coat when they get one. You may want to move these animals out of your herd if you are concentrating on improving the wool in your lines.

Nutrition:

This is also a biggie. You get back what you put in, so to speak. Feeding a good quality pelleted feed and providing plenty of fresh water every day is a must. Many breeders use some form of additional feed supplement (in very small amounts, like a Tablespoon per rabbit) to help bring their rabbits into prime... Such things as oats, barley, sunflower seeds, calf manna, and prepared supplements such as Doc's Rabbit Enhancer are common. Use caution, though... you can have too much of a good thing. Most supplements are high in protein and fat and can cause your rabbit to go into a molt or even develop digestive problems that could be fatal. In particular, NEVER feed supplements to young rabbits under the age of 12 weeks, just as a precaution, because their digestive systems are more fragile than an adult's.

An important tip is to drop the protein level of the diet as the rabbit reaches prime, in order to maintain the condition of the coat. If you continue to feed high-nutrient supplements even when the rabbit reaches prime, it will go ahead and cycle on through a molt. Instead, go back to the basic pellet and hay diet, and you'll have a better chance of the rabbit holding its coat for awhile.

Hay is also an important element of the Jersey Wooly diet. The extra fiber provided by hay helps the rabbit to move ingested wool through the system, guarding against wool block

(which can cause the digestive system to virtually shut down). In our opinion, there is no such thing as feeding too much hay, and our rabbits receive it daily. A small handful is sufficient. Make sure to feed grass hay (timothy, orchard grass, brome, oat hay) rather than alfalfa hay, which is too high in protein and mineral content for a diet based on pelleted feed.

Many breeders feed their rabbits very small amounts of fresh greens (dandelion leaves are a favorite, along with blackberry/raspberry leaves, green kale, plantain leaves, parsley) and swear that it helps to keep their herd in top condition. Just remember to feed such foods sparsely, perhaps no more than a couple times a week, as too much could cause diarrhea and subsequent problems.

Regular Worming:

We keep our herd on a regular worming schedule, because most rabbits do carry pinworms. If your rabbit is carrying a moderate to heavy infestation of parasites, it won't be able to utilize the nutrients in the feed and the coat and flesh will fail. Rotate your wormers so the parasites don't become resistant. We use Piperazine, thiabendazole, and Ivomec at different times. We worm once each season.

Climate and Environment:

I have heard it said that the Northern breeders have an unfair advantage, particularly when ARBA Nationals roll around in November, because our rabbits get that nice cold weather that grows a thick coat. Well, "Nyah, nyah, nyah!" Haha! You're right. :)

When

the weather changes between seasons, though, we really suffer so there is some justice in the world. Rabbits respond to sudden changes in temperature by dropping their coat (going into a "molt"). Even a few hours in an overly warm environment is said to cause a molt if the rabbit is used to colder temps, so if you can keep them in a controlled environment you'll be in much better shape. A couple years ago, we had a fall season in which the temperatures fluctuated wildly from 60 degrees to below freezing for a few weeks... needless to say, every Wisconsin rabbit was in a full molt at nationals. We should

have had a special "ugly bunny" class just for fun. :)

Sun fading is also a consideration if your rabbits are housed outside. Exposure to the sun will fade the color on a rabbit's coat, and this can be a major fault at showtime. Try to provide some protection from the direct rays of the sun, and from reflected light off metal pans or light surfaces.

Stress can also cause a coat to molt. For this reason, many serious exhibitors decide against going to all the local shows for a period of time if they have a major show (like nationals) coming up in which they want to compete. Going to shows every weekend is very hard on your rabbits, and makes it much more difficult to keep them in top condition.

Separate your juniors into their own cages as soon as you can to avoid coat-chewing brought on by boredom, crowding, or hormones. A chewed coat ruins the rabbit for show until an entirely new one grows in.

Handling Woolies:

The Wooly coat is delicate and subject to breakage if handled carelessly. For this reason, we never "scruff" our Woolies. Scruffing is the action of grabbing a rabbit by the skin over it's shoulders to pick it up and move it or turn it over. Unfortunately we see some Wooly breeders and even some judges that don't realize the damage this can do to a wool coat. Instead, learn to gently but firmly grasp the rabbit from behind the head, pressing your thumb and fingers on either side of the jaws, to control the animal. In addition, we seldom grab the ears in a scissor-lock grip as is often done, due to the potential damage that could occur to cartilage and/or nerves. The only time we use this approach is when control is difficult and absolutely essential, as with a vicious rabbit or when some type of medication or work must be completed.

Grooming:

Stains:

Urine stains ("hutch stain") on a coat are a fault and can be difficult to get rid of. The best approach is to keep the cage clean and keep the urine guards wiped down so the rabbit doesn't sit up against them and make itself dirty. Sometimes it just can't be avoided

though, especially with bucks that like to mark a lot.

I wrote an article comparing different methods for getting stains out of coats, and posted results of what seemed to work best. This article is located elsewhere on this site.

Using a Blower:

Though not absolutely necessary, a blower can really help to open up the coat and rid it of

webbing, matting, and debris. Blowers can be expensive. Ours is a combination blower/vacuum that we also use on the horses' coats, and cost about \$200. Blowers that only "blow" can be purchased for around \$100, last time I checked. I've also heard of people using hair dryers (on cool setting only) and shop vacs, though I don't believe they'd

do the same job.

Set the rabbit on a secure surface (carpet square, your lap, on the ground) and always keep

one hand over the rabbit's head and ears. This is both to keep it from leaping away and getting injured, and to protect the ears from forced air.

Start at the base of the tail and work the blower back and forth through the coat slowly, blowing out debris and looking for areas where the fur is matted or felted near the skin. The blower can help to open these areas up without the damage that would be done by pulling them with a comb or brush.

Be prepared to look like a snowman... the dander that is blown out of a coat will cover everything in the near area with a fine dusting of white powder, as well as drifting tufts of loose wool. People who have asthma should be aware of the dander problem and stay away or wear a mask.

Using a Brush or Comb:

Get yourself a roller comb and a small slicker brush. Use the roller comb first to loosen and help dislodge matted clumps of wool, and use the slicker brush on the tips of the guard

hairs. Start at the base of the tail, hold open a section of the coat and brush out a small layer at a time, working your way up over the back and being careful not to overgroom on

the back area (the most fragile section of the coat). Then do the same up both sides, turn the rabbit over and groom the chest and belly area.

Pull any mats apart with your fingers before attacking them with your comb or brush. If they are very severe, just clip them out.

Do not overgroom! Don't pull out all the rabbit's undercoat with your brush and comb, or you will have a very thin coat that will be faulted for lack of density. This is the most common mistake made by beginning Wooly exhibitors.

Show Prepping:

If you've got the coat in prime condition, have groomed it well, and kept it clean, then all you need to do is a final prep before setting your rabbit before the judge.

Just before your class is called, give the coat a once-over with the slicker brush, starting at

the tail and "fluffing" the coat all around the body. Now your rabbit looks like a giant puffball. If possible, avoid mashing the fluffed coat on the way to the show table.

On senior coats (this doesn't work on soft junior coats), you can wet your hands lightly with water and run them back and forth over the coat until the water evaporates before flipping through with the slicker brush. This can limit static electricity in the coat and makes it feel fuller.

I've also read of people using dryer sheets rubbed over the coat to take out static electricity

that tends to mess up the appearance of the wool. We've never tried that method.

Remember that no other products, other than water, are allowed to be used on the coat according to ARBA rules.