

It's all about breeding the cow that best suits your system and your business

Horses for courses

The trend towards cross breeding means that the gene pool has widened considerably for many UK producers when they're looking for sires to use on their Holstein herds. So which breeds are they using and why?

Read on and find out.

text Rachael Porter

Breeding isn't just 'pure' anymore – it's about breeding the right cow for your system and set up, and breeding a cow that has longevity. So says Avoncroft's David Matthews.

"Cross breeding is growing in popularity. It's really taken off during the past year or two," he says. "Swedish Red, Montbeliarde, MRI, Brown Swiss, Jersey, British Friesian and Fleckvieh are just some of the breeds being used on what had previously been pure-bred Holstein herds. These producers want to improve fertility, longevity or simply all-round robustness."

So why are so many Holstein breeders looking outside the pure-bred gene pool when selecting sires? Why are producers, who if you broke them in half you'd see the word Holstein written through them, cross breeding?

"There are many reasons, but fertility is a big one. Producers using Swedish Red sires, for example, may be looking to reduce their involuntary culling rate by improving fertility. While those using Jersey sires may want to improve milk constituents or perhaps they want to

breed smaller cows that are lighter on their feet when out at pasture. It's usually a combination of things," says Mr Matthews.

Early adopters

Geno UK's Wes Bluhm agrees. He too has seen a huge increase in sales of semen for cross breeding purposes and says that fertility is the biggest driver among his customers. "This is vital whether you're running an extensive grass-based system or a more intensive set up. And for fertility we tend to suggest Norwegian Red sires. But which breed will work best varies from herd to herd. There's no right or wrong breed when it comes to cross breeding. It really is a case of 'horses for courses'."

Producers are waking up to this idea and the stigma

or snobbery about cross breeding doesn't seem to be there anymore, according to Mr Matthews.

"Some producers were a little afraid of cross breeding, worried that it may reduce the value of their stock or perhaps unsure of which direction to take for the best. But it seems that the blinkers have fallen away and that more and more people are waking up to the potential benefits of using other breeds to cross with the Holstein.

"They want to breed cows that really do suit their system. They're using their eyes and experiences and forming their own opinions. And for many it's not about pure breeds anymore.

"Their focus has shifted and now it's all about what type of cow will produce milk efficiently and easily on their units.

"But it's important not to get carried away. Many producers are crossing with different breeds and it will be interesting to see if they get the improvements they are looking for," says Mr Matthews. "But most are now selecting bulls with fertility, longevity and health traits within the Holstein breed. The Holstein will still be, by far, the most popular breed in years to come."

The image of cross breeding has also changed. High-profile early adopters have led the way and producers look to these herds, see the success that they've had and want some of that for themselves.

Robust cows

Richard Park is one of those early adopters. He has been cross breeding for the past 12 years. His family's 160-cow herd, based at Low Sizergh Farm near Kendal in Cumbria, was pure Holstein until, in

a bid to improve health traits, he introduced Swedish Red bloodlines.

"We were considering switching to an organic system so we wanted to breed cows that were less susceptible to mastitis and other problems and would look after themselves a little more than the milk-production-focused Holstein," he explains.

He bought some Swedish Red cows from Sweden and Swedish Red sires were used on the existing herd, with a view to breeding until the herd was pure Swedish Red. "But it didn't really work out like that. The second-cross heifers and cows were no where near as good as the first cross, so we had a re-think."

He read about some research carried out in the US on three-way crossing and using Holstein, Montbeliarde and Swedish Red bloodlines he gave it a go. "It was quite a leap for me at the time, but then I'd already made the first cross and I wasn't overly impressed with the second cross. So it was worth a shot," he says.

And it paid off. That was back in 2005 and today his herd is very different to what it was then. It comprises 45% Swedish Red cross, 35% Montbeliarde cross, 8% pure Holstein, and 12% pure Swedish Red and pure Danish Red. And it's still evolving.

"That's part of the attraction for me. I'm still learning, moving forward and trying new things. I've recently started using Fleckvieh sires to replace some of the Montbeliarde sires that I'd been using."

He saw some Fleckvieh crosses on a recent visit to the Netherlands: "I liked what I saw. They had

great udder quality and good temperament too." After a decade of farming organically, the herd is now back to being run conventionally. Block calving in autumn, Richard looks for cows that give plenty of milk, but get back in calf easily before being turned out to graze in the spring and produce milk as cost effectively as possible off grass.

Calving interval

Fertility is king here and with this mix he's certainly got that. The herd's service to conception rate is 1.5, pregnancy to first service is 67%, and the calving interval is an impressive 363 days.

And production is good too. The herd is averaging 8,100 litres at 4.2% butterfat and 3.3% protein: "That's close to what the Holstein herd was producing back in 2000, only it's easier to do it with this herd."

Little wonder that Richard now has visitors to his unit, wanting to know more about cross breeding and to look at his herd. "In my experience, they're usually looking to increase their herd's fertility, improve feet and reduce health problems."

He has no worries about the value of his herd either. "We did sell a few cows a couple of weeks ago that didn't fit in with the calving pattern – some second and third calvers and we saw more than £1,800 a head. We didn't get the top price, but there was plenty of interest."

He knows that some producers get a lot of pleasure out of their pure-bred cattle – he used to be one of them. "But why not have your cake and eat it? Keep your best cow families pure and pedigree and then do some cross breeding with the rest. |



Richard Park:
"I'm still learning and trying new things"



Fertile future: cows in Richard's cross-bred herd are so much easier to manage