

Getting Started With New Beef Cattle Projects

Deciding which type of beef project to exhibit can sometimes be the most difficult decision the 4-H member is asked to make. Haltered show steers and heifers demand time, discipline, expense and work. Market steer and commercial heifer programs are outstanding beef training projects. These projects educate 4-H members on economic strategies to feed and manage animals to market or for commercial cow-calf production.

After deciding on a type of project, it is time to begin the selection process. Practice, patience and experience will help the 4-H member properly select the project. It is a good idea to evaluate several young projects before deciding on one. It is very important for each 4-H member to ask someone else to accompany and assist them during the selection of projects. Usually, County Extension Agents, Agricultural Science Teachers, ranchers, breeders and experienced exhibitors offer the best advice.

There are selection criteria each 4-H member should consider during the selection process of market steers or commercial heifers for show. Before selecting the steer or heifer for show consult your County Extension Agent for county, regional, state or national rules governing the exhibition of your project. Then age, frame size, weight and breed are all important to coordinate for specific shows and dates for the show. Rules of the intended show should be studied carefully for specific guidelines, such as ownership dates, minimum and maximum weights and ages and class divisions. Important selection criteria are age, weight, frame size and breed or breed types.

Age: Actual age and birthdates are very important. The age of a steer or heifer when placed on feed will vary from 6 months to 10 months. Most calves are weaned approximately 6 to 7 months of age. Steers can reach slaughter point from 14 to 20 months of age and heifers should reach puberty to breed between 14 to 16 months of age.

Most steers are exhibited at 16 to 20 months while heifers may be shown to 24 months of age.

Weight: Steers intended to be exhibited at major fall shows (those from September to November) are normally placed on feed in December to February, weighing approximately 400 to 600 lbs. This should allow the steer to reach 1100 to 1300 pounds in October, accounting for reduced weight gain and shrink due to training, fitting, conditioning and hauling. Show steers are normally on feed approximately 270 days and gain between 2.0 and 3.5 pounds a day. This rate of gain and growth can be slightly controlled by regulating the feed ration and amount fed for faster or slower gain.

Frame Size - A numerical frame size is generally correlated with growth and can be used to predict final height that correlates with definite mature weight ranges. On average, steers grow approximately 3/4" height per month from weaning to finishing and gain ranges from 2.0 to 3.5 pounds per day. The 4-H member can predict the final height of a steer by knowing the exact age and height of the animal at any given time. Referring to a Beef Cattle Frame Chart, match up the age in months with the hip height in inches. The most popular frame sizes are 4 to 6 for ideal show cattle height on show day.

The following tips should be helpful in developing future champions in the show ring:

1. Cattle are creatures of habit and have good memories. Develop a routine and follow it each day. A daily routine makes chores much easier. For example, exercise the calf, show it by setting it up, and make it stand properly, then brush it and feed it last.
2. Weigh the calves periodically to monitor gain. Decide on which weight class (steers) you want to show your calf and shoot for that weight. Old class breakdowns from previous shows are very helpful in determining desired weights.
3. To be a good showman you need a well trained calf. A calf should be taught to stop and lead, with his head up. A good daily practice is to pull the calf's head up to a stop so both front feet are placed squarely under the front end. Using a show stick with a blunt point on the end, teach the calf the use of a show stick by stroking its underline while tied. Stroke the animal, then place the foot in the correct place. After the calf sets its feet properly when tied, then it is ready to be led and have its feet placed while being held by the exhibitor. Teach the calf to keep its Top Line level and to lead and walk freely.
4. When training calves or working and brushing hair, it is best to tie them to a high rail rather than placing them in a blocking chute. Working cattle in this manner makes them easier to handle and more accustomed to strange movements at the show. Before washing the calf, remove dirt and manure from the hair with a comb or brush. An electric blower will help in this process.

Steven M. Jones

Associate Professor – Animal Science