



Baldies Bring Benefits

For this Kentucky commercial operation, Hereford-influenced cattle provide premiums and quality.

by *Christy Couch Lee*

For decades Ben Roberts has witnessed the benefits of a Hereford-influenced cattle herd. And for more than 10 years, he's been putting that theory to work at Brookfield Farm Agency, Lexington, Ky.

Originally a horned Hereford operation, Brookfield Farm Agency has been owned by the

same family for more than a century. And since 1991, Roberts has managed the operation that today consists of 500 black baldie mother cows on 1,800 acres.

Just before Roberts began managing the operation, the farm began the transition to an Angus-polled Hereford crossbreeding program.

"It took eight or nine years to replace the horned Hereford herd with a black baldie program," Roberts says. "Once we got to about 75% Angus, we started breeding those replacements back to polled Herefords."

Roberts says this transition was designed to increase the marketability of the offspring.

"I always understood that an F1 of an Angus-Hereford cross is as good of a cow as you can possibly get," he says. "In my mind, we were trying to take the best of the Angus and best of the Hereford and put them together — and not in a haphazard way. We want to stay as close to an F1 as we can possibly get."

By following a strict program, Roberts is achieving his goal.

"We are very religious and consistent with our breeding program," he says. "You can't approach it haphazardly. You need to build your breeding program with some thought. By doing that, I believe we've gotten the best of both worlds."

Roberts says the herd has gotten docility from the Hereford influence and frame size from the Angus genetics.

"We keep all Angus-sired cows bred to Hereford, and all Hereford-sired cows bred to Angus," Roberts says.

All first-calf heifers are artificially inseminated (AI) on first breeding.

"We synchronize and AI each first-calf heifer on the first heat, then turn out a catch bull for 60 days," he says.



Ben Roberts says an F1 Hereford-Angus cross is the best of both worlds — combining docility of Herefords with the frame size of Angus.

Roberts retains replacement heifers and only purchases herd bulls off the farm. He also raises nearly all feed for the farm's herd — only purchasing some concentrated feed for weaning and to supplement females through the winter.

A key to the success of his operation is the genetics behind it, Roberts says. He purchases all Hereford and Angus bulls from Boyd Beef Cattle, Mays Lick, Ky.

Genetics make the difference

"We've been buying bulls from the Boyds for at least 15 years," he says. "I can one-stop shop with them, as they offer both Hereford and Angus bulls. He has a great reputation, and I can trust them to make selections and offer input. It's been a great situation, with them being so close and so reputable."

Charlie Boyd Jr. believes in their relationship and the quality of Roberts' herd, as well.

"Ben runs a strict breeding program on a Hereford-Angus rotation," Boyd says. "As a rule, he tries to follow an AI program with bulls with similar EPDs (expected progeny differences), and in some cases, similar pedigrees. He's pretty astute, and I would consider his operation one of the top commercial herds in the state, and in this part of the country."

For Roberts, genetic data is critical for the development of his herd.

Knowing the numbers

Roberts says he utilizes EPDs in the selection of his herd sires and AI bulls.

"We try to go for as even of an EPD as we can — we don't want to go overboard on anything," he says. "Birth weight and calving ease are probably the main determining factors on the Hereford sires. With crossbreeding, we try not to use anything over a 1.0 on calving ease, which may sound odd to some purebred breeders. But with anything higher, we've run into problems with calving later."

Keeping this goal in mind, Roberts says, he tries to select for weaning and yearling weights that are as high as possible, too.

"We like to get in the mid-20s on milk and not go overboard there," he says. "The udders don't seem to last as long with higher numbers for us."

In addition, he says, the Boyds and KABA/Select Sires also provide their input on sire selection.

"They know our operation and know what we're doing," Roberts says. "They're a lot of help."

The resulting quality of the herd is reflected in the sales of the offspring.



Roberts has transitioned to an entirely spring-calving operation to condense AI and calving season; and to simplify winter feeding.

Getting them sold

Roberts markets two potloads — about 160 head — of black baldie steers each year through Internet auctions. And, he says, they are easily sold because of their quality and consistency.

He explains about 20% of their calves will be born as "rednecks" or red baldies. However, he's found a great market for those genetics.

Each May and October, the Kentucky Hereford Association hosts the Kentucky Certified Hereford Influenced Sale, where Roberts says he can earn a premium for the red-hided calves.

In fact, it's been reported that these sales bring premiums for all consignors, providing an effective outlet for Hereford-influenced cattle.

"I'm very happy with a redneck mother," Roberts says. "Those rednecks make very good cows."

Roberts says they cull females strictly. "If they don't make 60-65% of their weight at breeding age, they're culled," he says. "There's no reason for us to feed them all winter. We sell them as feeders, because that's where they need to go."

He says he manages the commercial operation as a purebred operation — castrating, tattooing and tagging at birth. In addition, the farm helped the Kentucky Beef Association develop its electronic identification program.

When Roberts began with the farm, it was 75% spring calving and 25% fall calving. Today, it's an entirely spring-calving operation.

"We only have to AI once and calve once," he says. "With only three full-time workers, anything we can do once instead of twice is a great help. In addition, it's harder to feed cows during the winter, with calves on them all winter. With spring calving, calves

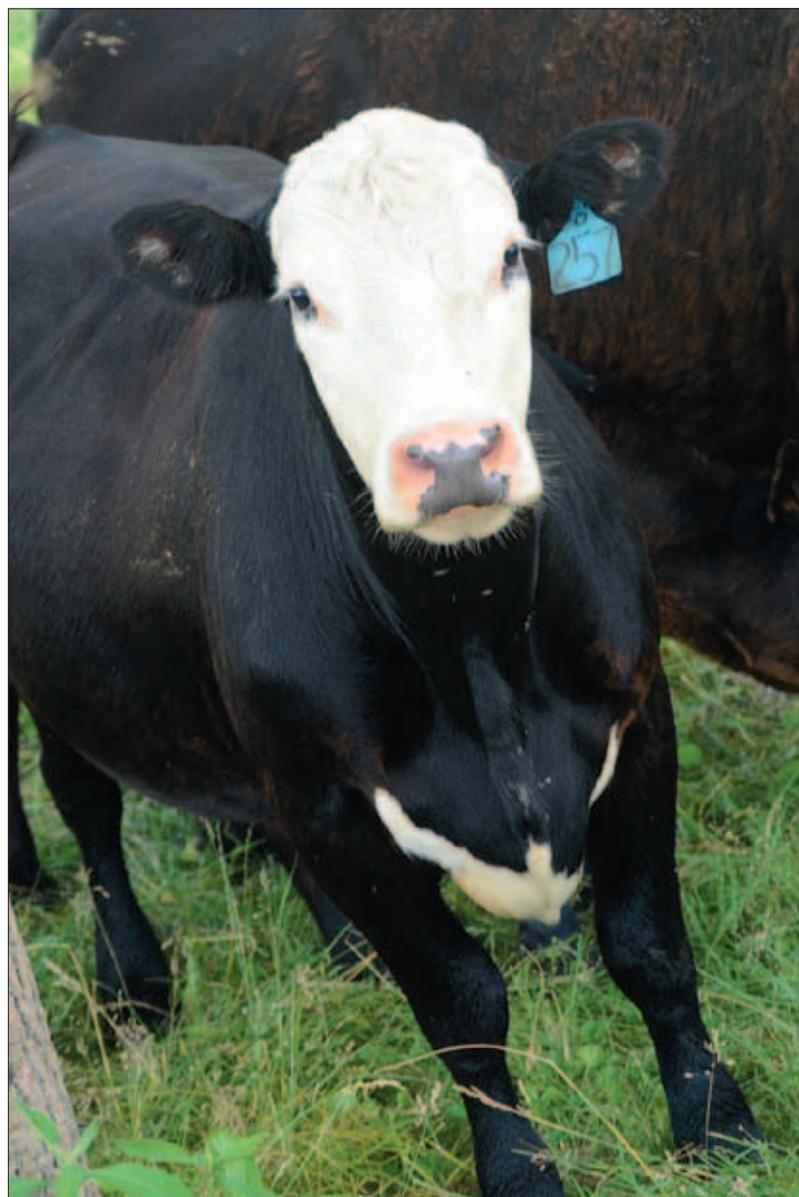
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are only on them for about 40 days on feed, so it's easier for us to feed them."

Roberts says spring calving, which often begins about Feb. 20, can cause some problems with calving during ice storms or other inclement weather. To help with this issue, Roberts hires a night watchman to check cattle through the night.

By approaching his operation with a strict plan and calculating each move, Roberts is seeing success in his commercial operation. For him, Hereford-influenced black baldies do, indeed, bring benefits. **HW**



Roberts retains replacement heifers, only purchasing herd bulls off the farm. He selects for moderate EPDs — not going to extremes on any one trait.