

Lesson 2: Breeds of Dairy Cattle

Compared to beef cattle, few breeds of dairy cattle exist. Most dairy cows are purebred. The primary objective of selecting a breed is to find cattle that will produce large amounts of milk over a long period.

Breeds

Six major dairy breeds are used in Missouri. They are Ayrshire, Brown Swiss, Guernsey, Holstein, Jersey, and the Milking Shorthorn.

Ayrshire - This breed is red and white in color. Ayrshire cows are generally excellent grazers with high quality udders. Ayrshires are not used extensively in the dairy industry because of their low milk production in comparison to Holsteins and Brown Swiss cattle. The breed originated in Scotland and was imported into America in the early nineteenth century.

Brown Swiss - Brown Swiss cattle are light to dark brown with black noses and tongues. The cows are large in size. They rank second to Holsteins in average pounds of milk produced per animal. Brown Swiss cattle are recognized as a heat-tolerant breed and are often used in tropical areas of the world. They can be used as a dual purpose breed for milk and beef production. This breed was first brought to the United States from Switzerland in 1869.

Guernsey - Guernsey cattle are pale yellow and white in color. Milk from Guernseys has a golden color due to high levels of beta-carotene, a source of vitamin A. Guernseys are second to Jerseys in the percentage of fat and protein in their milk. This breed was first imported into the United States from the Isle of Guernsey in the English Channel in the early 1800s.

Holstein - Holsteins are the most popular of all dairy breeds. Worldwide, Holsteins are the most numerous breed of cattle. They are black and white, or occasionally red and white. Holsteins are the largest of the dairy breeds in size. Cows of this breed rank first in average pounds

of milk produced per animal. Holstein cattle were first imported into the United States from the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century.

Jersey - Jersey cattle vary in color from fawn to light brown, gray, or almost black. Jerseys tend to be the smallest of the dairy breeds in size. Cows produce milk that has the highest percentage of milk fat and milk protein of the breeds. This breed is recognized as more tolerant of heat stress than Holsteins. Jerseys were imported into the United States in the early nineteenth century from the Isle of Jersey in the English Channel.

Milking Shorthorn - Milking Shorthorns are red, white, or any combination of the two colors. They are known as a dual purpose breed because the cattle can be used for both beef and milk production. Milking Shorthorns were recognized as a breed in the 1940s. The breed originated in England.

Breed Selection

Selecting breeds to be used in a dairy operation depends on the goals of the producer. The primary goal of most producers is to maximize milk production, which is why Holsteins are by far the most popular dairy breed. However, other breeds have desirable qualities that the producer may wish to add to his or her herd. For example, many producers have herds primarily consisting of Holsteins, but they include some cows from other breeds that produce more milk fat and milk protein to boost the levels of these components in their milk. The selection of individual animals is important as well because animals from all breeds can be high producers.

Conclusion

The major dairy breeds are the Ayrshire, Brown Swiss, Guernsey, Holstein, Jersey, and Milking Shorthorn. Most producers seek to maximize milk production when selecting one of these breeds for their dairy operations.

Introduction to Dairy Production

Credits

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