

Buying Your Next 4-H Project

HUNTER NICKELL, LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION AGENT

This past weekend, the Neosho County beef leader invited me down to speak to beginners in the beef project on how to navigate picking their calf and how to feed it. In conjunction with Chanute FFA Instructor Caitlyn LaHaye, we brought these kids an informational program that even had prizes to test their knowledge. This group of kids was very knowledgeable of the beef project, and even reminded me a little of myself when I showed my first bucket calf in 2010. While most of the selection criteria are tailored to beef, most apply to all species.

The first thing to do when starting every project is to set a goal for the year. Some goals could include: making a successful project, determining your end goal (State or County Fair), setting a budget, knowing who you are buying from, setting aside adequate time for your project, and don't get discouraged. If you set even just two of these goals, you are on track to success. There are lots of factors other than the ones mentioned, so if you have your own set of goals, you are already on your way to success! The biggest takeaway from the day I wanted the kids to remember was to not get discouraged because these projects take time, and they are worth it.

The next thing we discussed was when to buy and how big to buy the calf.

Typically, this time of year, producers are starting to wean spring-born calves and the show calf producers are beginning to halter break, lead, and wash calves. Most of the county fair's in the Southwind District are in July so the kids want to start looking for a calf from September-January that is weighing 550-600 pounds. Another thing to remember is a moderate framed calf that will finish at 1100-1250 pounds might be more feasible for a younger 4-Her to show. If you don't find your calf before the end of the year, you just need to make sure they are in the 700-750 pound mark so you have about 200 days to get the 300-400 pounds on the calf it needs to make weight and show well.

While multiple factors go into selecting calves, the general selection criteria are as follows: Structure, Frame Size, Muscle, Balance, and Disposition. The factor that is of utmost importance is structure; without a good structure, the rest of the calf will be hard to grow and move how you want. As mentioned above, frame size is important for a younger 4-Her and just how much feed it takes to finish a steer. Muscle and balance go hand in hand because even muscling through the entire calf is desirable. The ideal calf would not slope downhill or uphill, he would have straight legs with some angle at the hock joint so he can move out and stride along with a straight back. Finally, disposition is another selection criterion, especially for a younger 4-Her. To provide the best experience for a 4-Her, finding a calm and level-headed calf for the first project is a must. You don't want a calf that tries to run someone over every time they are in the pen with it; at that point, it is a safety issue for the parent and child trying to show.

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So, now you have a calf picked out, now what? You have to feed it! There are general three stages of feeding that calves go through; starter, grower, and finisher. Generally, most calves will have been on a starter feed at the farm that consists of 12% protein, 1% fat, and 26% fiber to get them used to being on feed and recognizing the mouth feel of feed. The grower is from 500 pounds up and is around 13.5% protein, 3% fat, and 13% fiber. The grower allows them to continue developing and gain fat and muscle. Finally, the finishing stage is from 800 pounds and on with 12% protein, 2% fat, and 15% fiber. Feeding calves will largely depend on the calf itself and no two calves will eat the same.

Once you have picked your calf and your feed, continue to work with them to get them used to you, your family, and loud noises and you will be on your way to success in the show ring! If you have any questions, please contact Hunter Nickell, Livestock Production Extension Agent, at nickell99@ksu.edu or 620-365-2242.