

A Heifer Selection Guideline

Silver Maple Dexters | Applied Breeding Guidance

Silver Maple Dexter's approach to heifer selection is grounded in the Dexter breed standard, linear classification principles, many years of breeding Dexters, and most of two lifetimes of cattle observation. Every heifer is evaluated as a potential foundation cow. To be retained, she must demonstrate correct Dexter type and the structural capacity required for long-term dual-purpose function.

Heifer selection is not a single event. It is a process that begins early and continues through repeated observation. By ten months of age, if questions persist regarding structure, capacity, or balance, the heifer should likely move into a cull category. This determination is rarely an abrupt one, but results from a pattern observed across multiple evaluations over time.

Timing of Heifer Evaluation

Structural evaluation of heifers is most reliable after weaning, once skeletal proportions stabilize and rumen development is established. Prior to this stage, rapid growth and changing weight distribution obscure traits such as pelvic structure, rib spring, and true body capacity. Silver Maple Dexters continually evaluates¹, but conducts our formal heifer evaluations for selection primarily between **six and ten months of age**, when structure can be assessed consistently and before later developmental changes introduce additional variation in condition and appearance.

How to Observe and Evaluate a Heifer

The best evaluation depends on an appropriate environment for position and repeated observation. Assessment should be done on level ground, in consistent light, preferably not directly overhead, and with the heifer standing square and relaxed.

Begin assessment from the **side**. This view reveals the topline, body proportions, depth, hook-to-pin, thurl position, and overall balance. Length and depth should

¹We have eyes on weaned heifers a minimum of two times a day from the date of weaning until they are either culled, graduate into the breeding herd, or sold for breeding stock.

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be in proportion, and the frame should carry weight evenly from the shoulder through the loin to the pins.

Move to the **front**. This position allows evaluation of chest width and foreleg placement. Adequate² width between the front legs indicates chest floor and heart girth. This view should be limited to chest width, foreleg placement, and symmetry, which are best assessed from the front.

Move to the **rear**. This view confirms pelvic structure, width, and overall body shape. Evaluate the width across the hooks, thurls, and pins, and observe the body's overall form. This assessment is strengthened by observing the heifer from above and as she moves away, where true width through the ribs, thurls, and pins, and the overall wedge shape are often more apparent.

Finally, observe the heifer **in motion**. Watch her walk away, return, and from side. This view allows further assessment of all components and tracking.

Evaluation should be repeated over time. A structure that is correct tends to remain so. Deficiencies and faults noted across multiple observations rarely improve or correct with age.

² Terms like “adequate”, “sufficient” “acceptable” and others are of course relative and somewhat subjective but as you assess more cattle, your application of these terms becomes more grounded and validated in your experience – this is why to become good at cattle assessment and evaluation, one must evaluate and assess many cattle. Not just those on your farm. This is “training your eye.”

Dual Purpose Type



Distinct dual-purpose expression refers to a heifer whose structure clearly supports both milk production and meat yield without exaggeration toward either extreme beef or dairy type. This appears as a combination of capacity, rib spring, and pelvic width, paired with sufficient muscle expression, bone substance, and balance to support growth, production, and carcass utility. The heifer should appear functional rather than specialized, with neither dairy sharpness nor beef compactness *dominating* her overall form.

Robust Femininity

Dexter heifers selected for breeding should exhibit **robust femininity**. This quality most reliably begins to emerge after six months of age. The heifer is neither coarse nor delicate. Her frame, bone, and balance suggest function, fertility, and endurance. The Dexter female reflects moderation and purpose throughout her structure. She should appear composed and complete, without exaggeration toward dairy refinement or beef heaviness. Her type signals utility and suggests longevity as a breeding cow.

³ Representative heifers shown meeting the structural and functional criteria described.

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This trait is the union of maternal type and structural strength. It is not frailty dressed as refinement, nor sheer mass mistaken for capacity. Rather, it is a balance: the kind of enduring power that sustains a true dual-purpose cow.

Evaluation in Heifers from Six to Ten Months

These traits are evaluated through a continuous, 360-degree visual assessment of the heifer, reading structure, balance, and capacity as the animal is observed from the side, rear, front, above, and in movement.

1. Dexter Type and Breed Character

- Distinct dual-purpose expression, as described above
- Moderate stature, *pleasing* proportions, and balance
- Feminine but not petite head, with a broad forehead between expressive eyes, a slight dish to face, and a well-set jaw
- Neck blending smoothly into the shoulder, neither tubular nor abrupt; head carried above the spine
- Bone that is neither fine nor coarse, but proportionate to frame and body
- Balance of muscle and depth, avoiding overdevelopment toward dairy or beef specialization
- Size and proportion consistent with the mature Dexter standard
- Breed-typical temperament: intelligent, calm, and responsive

2. Structural Soundness



- Strong topline with smooth, supported curvature through the loin, without dip or rising at the chine
- Smooth shoulder transition without coarseness or hollowing behind the shoulder and without points front or back
- Correct leg set with adequate angle at the hock and pastern
- Feet placed squarely beneath the body, neither post-legged nor sickle-hocked.
- Not toed in or out
- Thurls wide and centrally placed between hooks and pins
- Width across the hooks
- Pins wide, with a slight slope from hooks to pins ($\leq 13^\circ$, preferably $< 10^\circ$, and not $< 5^\circ$)
- Width carried from the chest floor through the flank

3. Body and Capacity

- The chest floor should be clearly below the point of the elbow and carry throughout at this depth; a slight rise at the flank is acceptable
- Generous heart girth for frame size, seen as both width and depth through the chest behind the shoulder when viewed from the side and front
- Spring of rib is evident through outward curvature and openness from the spine, indicating internal capacity. Ribs with a slight angle to the rear vs straight down
- Depth through the flank and length from hooks to pins
- Width at the hooks, loin, and barrel with a slight taper at the chine into the neck (viewed from above – the wedge shape)
- Loose, pliable skin through the neck and brisket, an indicator of capacity and elasticity without excess

4. Udder and Teat Development

- Indications of smooth fore udder integration into the body wall, reflecting future attachment strength
- Rear udder folds are broad and high
- Teat visible from four to six months of age, evenly and correctly spaced beneath each quarter, vertically oriented, moderate in size, and correctly shaped (feel them)

5. Movement and Balance

- Smooth, coordinated stride with correct hock and pastern flex
- Rear step tracking into the front
- Rear legs reaching freely from the hip rather than remaining tucked beneath the body during motion
- Even weight distribution – an ease of motion that is graceful
- No stiffness, post-leggedness, or excessive angulation

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- Correct proportion between body length and leg length, maintaining Dexter balance

6. Temperament and Disposition

- Alert but calm, manageable under normal handling conditions

7. Overall Impression

- A heifer that embodies Dexter type: moderate, balanced, and functional
- Feminine strength with clear maternal promise
- Structural capacity to raise calves over many years while remaining sound and productive
- Femininity expressed through balance and efficiency, without suggestion of masculinity or frailty

Spring of Rib and the Dual-Purpose Wedge



Spring of rib refers to the outward curvature and openness of the ribs from the spine. It is a structural trait that reflects internal body capacity and is distinct from body condition.

From the side, ribs with correct spring angle down and back from the spine rather than falling straight downward. The body appears deep through the heart girth and flank, with a rounded, open profile rather than a flat or slab-sided outline.

When viewed from the side or above, the functional dual-purpose female is lighter and narrower through the front and becomes progressively deeper and wider through the midsection and rear, providing space for digestion, pregnancy, and udder development.

Together, correct spring of rib and front-to-rear proportional development form the classic dual-purpose wedge, a foundational indicator of capacity and functional balance in Dexter females.

From the rear, adequate spring of rib causes the rib cage to widen upward toward the spine, creating fullness above the pins rather than a narrow or collapsing outline. The ribs should sweep outward as they rise rather than collapse inward.

Palpation may assist in distinguishing structure from condition. Structural spring feels expansive and consistent along the rib arc. Fat cover feels soft and spongy and may obscure rib definition. Thinness alone does not indicate poor structure.

Spring of rib is genetically determined and changes little once established. It is a reliable early indicator of capacity, efficiency, and longevity in dual-purpose Dexter cattle.

Depth and Capacity



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Depth and capacity describe the structural volume of the body cavity that supports digestion, reproduction, and sustained production. These traits reflect skeletal form, not flesh or fat cover.

Depth refers to the vertical distance from the top of the spine to the bottom of the barrel at the last rib. A heifer with adequate depth will carry her chest floor clearly below the elbow and maintain that depth through the rib and flank.

Capacity refers to the overall volume and openness of the rib cage from heart girth through flank. It is expressed through spring of rib, width, and internal space for rumen function and pregnancy.

Cattle with depth and capacity can consume and efficiently digest forage, supporting milk production, growth, and body condition without extensive inputs. Adequate internal capacity and volume contribute to calving ease and reproductive stability.

Pelvic Structure and Thurl Placement

Pelvic structure is most readily assessed through thurl placement, width, and relationship to the hooks and pins, which determine pelvic capacity, rear leg alignment, and long-term functional durability.

Thurl placement governs rear leg alignment, pelvic opening, and ease of movement.

From the side, thurls should be centrally located between the hooks and the pin bones. This creates a long, usable pelvis with a slight and even slope from hooks to pins.

Viewed from rear, thurls should be widely separated, contributing to a broad, level pelvis. Adequate width between the thurls increases pelvic opening, supports calving ease and anchors strength to support rear udder attachment.

Correct thurl placement allows the rear legs to position correctly beneath the body, supporting efficient movement and durability.

Thurls set too far back shorten the pelvis and are commonly associated with more difficult calvings. Thurls that are too narrow restrict pelvic width and compromise

fertility and soundness. Extremes of pin height disrupt pelvic balance and interfere with rear leg alignment and udder support.

The Art Within the Measure



Even with specific structures defined and traits described, competent evaluation is more than a checklist. Assessment skill develops through repetition, comparison, and experience.

No written guideline replaces time spent observing cattle. These criteria discipline attention and sharpen judgment, but they are learned fully only through repeated, direct evaluation of live animals across ages, conditions, and contexts.

The eye is trained not through isolated assessment but through sustained exposure to many animals over time, noting both consistency and variation. Each evaluation becomes a comparative reference, retained and refined as additional cattle are seen. Over time, this accumulated visual record allows the evaluator to distinguish structural truth from momentary condition, growth phase, or presentation; until the eye knows before the mind explains.

This framework reflects many years of observation and assessment. Applied accurately and consistently, it produces herds that are functional, efficient, durable, and true to the Dexter breed's dual-purpose function.

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