

A Seedstock Program Requires Refusal: Not Every Heifer Should Breed

Silver Maple Dexters | Breeder Principles Series

This week, I found myself looking hard at three very recently calved heifers in the front calving paddock. All are by a bull we have not used in some time, but one that, over time, proved himself exceptionally well for us. They are out of very strong cows. They carry every reason for optimism. It is not difficult to let the mind run ahead of the cattle and begin imagining futures not yet earned. I had to check myself, because traveling that road is precisely when a breeder must check himself.

A young heifer does not become part of the maternal base of a registered seedstock herd because of pedigree, promise, or the residue of her sire's past performance. She does not enter it because her dam was excellent, and she looks promising. She enters it, finally, only, after calving, she proves herself in structure, udder, capacity, resilience, thrift, and production that she belongs in the breeding future of the herd.

Which leaves a hard question, one the breed asks, if at all, only reluctantly: *How many heifers have you culled from your breeding program to terminal use?*

Not sold as breeding stock to someone else. Not moved along with soft language and a lower price. Not described as "starter cow quality," "commercial," or "would make a nice cow for someone." Culled. Removed from the reproductive future of your herd and, by extension, from the future of the breed.

A seedstock producer is not defined only by what he keeps. He is also defined by what he will not breed and what he will not permit to enter someone else's breeding herd.

A common assumption is that nearly every registered female ought to produce somewhere. That assumption is incorrect; she need not. Rationalizations commence: "If she does not fit my program, she can fit another. If she is not quite what was hoped for, perhaps someone else thinks differently. If she carries faults, those faults will matter less elsewhere." That mind-bending is convenient. It is also the way weak cattle remain in circulation, and breed problems are redistributed rather than reduced. Papers do not correct weak structure, poor function, or misalignment with the breeding aims of a serious herd. What they do is increase the breeder's obligation to act carefully.

A seedstock program cannot operate on that faulty assumption. A seedstock herd is not a rescue mechanism for every registered heifer born with papers attached. It is not a clearinghouse for passing weak structure, poor udders, frailty, poor temperament, or cattle that simply do not move the herd forward, on to others. A seedstock program exists to apply selection pressure with intent. It exists to strengthen a breeding population over time.

That means culling is not incidental to the craft. It is one of the central disciplines of the work.

If a breeder is not operating a seedstock program, so be it. Dexters certainly have, and must have, a purpose beyond seedstock production, and grade stock has honest value. But the line should remain clear. Cattle that do not belong in the breeding future of the breed should not be carried into that future merely because registration papers make them easier to sell.

Here, the language often softens. Selection and culling begin to sound much more like the practice of sorting. Animals are sorted into categories of preference, price, and marketability. The best stay. The next tier sells as “breeding” stock. The weakest sell with a qualifier attached. Yet little is truly removed from the breed’s registered reproductive stream. The herd may appear curated on paper, but the breeder has not protected the breed from what he himself judged unworthy of retention.

That is not culling in any serious seedstock sense. It is redistribution.

One of the first truths of serious seedstock breeding is that the female side of the herd is not merely a repository for bull semen. The maternal program is the program. Bulls matter, of course, and can alter a calf crop quickly and a herd’s trajectory, leaving a visible mark. But the maternal base is the herd’s enduring structure. It is where a herd’s quality compounds and weaknesses may proliferate. The maternal base is where type, function, longevity, and productive usefulness are either fixed or lost. If a breeder will not remove females from that base when they do not belong there, then meaningful selection pressure is no longer being applied. They may still be producing registered cattle. They are not doing the critical work that seedstock breeding requires.

Bull culling is easy to discuss. Everyone expects it. Perhaps more telling, it is comparatively easy in consequence. Heifer culling is another matter. Scarcity, sentiment, registration value, economics, and vanity all begin to interfere. A registered female feels salvageable. The mind begins to negotiate. Perhaps the fault is not severe. Perhaps it will not reproduce. Perhaps she will mature out of it. Perhaps she will suit a less demanding home. And so, another female that should have been removed remains within the reproductive population of registered stock, if not in the breeder’s herd, then in someone else’s.

That is the hard truth beneath serious breeding. Selection requires refusal. If every heifer can be sold as breeding stock somewhere, then no real selection pressure is being applied. The consequences of judgment have merely been exported.

This should not be confused with the pursuit of fantasy cattle. Every breeder works with tradeoffs. Every herd contains compromise. Not every useful female is flawless, and not every flaw is disqualifying. But that is precisely why a breeder must have standards, goals, and priorities, with the ruthless willingness to act on them. The issue is not perfection. The issue is whether a female belongs in a seedstock breeding population.

That question should be answered without excuse or qualification. Does she possess the structure to remain sound and productive for generations? Does she carry the kind of udder, feet, body capacity, and functional balance required to carry on the herd and improve the

breed? Does she represent a step forward in breed type and production? Does she strengthen the maternal base, or merely add a calving unit to it? Would one be content to see several generations built from her? If the answer is no, then her role is not in the registered seedstock herd.

There should be no comfort in selling a registered female unfit for one's own breeding program to a buyer with lower standards. The fault does not become harmless because the registration changed hands.

This is important in small-number breeds, with a large base of new owners, where a few decisions can compound quickly. In numerically limited populations, the temptation is to preserve nearly everything. Every registered female starts to feel too valuable to lose. In practice, that usually means the breed retains too many weak females, too many poorly uddered cows, too many narrow-made cattle, too many unproductive animals, and too many females defended not because they are good enough, but because someone did not wish to cull them.

That road does not lead to improvement. Closed populations do not improve through indulgence. They improve through disciplined use of what is sound, useful, and heritably valuable, coupled with the removal of what is not.

The phrase terminal use also requires plain understanding. It signifies that a breeder has decided a female should not reproduce. That is all. In a serious breeding program, terminal decisions are part of maintaining integrity. Not every heifer born should become part of the maternal architecture of the registered breed. Some should serve in production only roles. Some should not breed at all. Some should contribute value through beef. That is not a waste. It is one of the ordinary and required costs of selection.

Unfortunately, in our breed not every female sent to beef has been culled in the sense of seedstock. A breeder may first attempt to sell her as breeding stock and only later describe the outcome as culling. That is not the distinction at issue here. The culling under discussion here is the prior decision that a female should not remain in the breeding population, prior to the marketplace making that decision for the breeder.

A seedstock producer should be able to answer a hard question with a clear conscience: Have I culled heifers from my program to terminal use? What percent of my live calved females from my registered herd have been culled?

If the answer is no, or hardly any, year after year, then one of two things is likely true. Either the herd is of near-mythic quality, unmatched in the ordinary history of livestock, or the threshold of culling is too low to sustain the claims to be in the registered seedstock business. The second explanation is most often correct.

This matters because the future of a herd is not built just through acquiring good cattle and their reproduction. It is also built by refusing to let the weaker ones from that base reproduce. That refusal costs time, money, and stings. But it is where a breeder is doing the work. Not in slogans or pedigree talk. Not on websites or Facebook groups. In action.

The Crucible

The first-calf heifer presents one of the clearest tests in a seedstock program. She has bred, calved, and raised a calf. Many breeders treat that as justification for retention. It is not. First calving does not settle the question. It clarifies it.

Often it is only after first calving that the full practical truth of the female comes plainly into view. Her udder shows itself. Teat size and placement are no longer hypothetical. Her maternal steadiness is tested. Her recovery, thrift, body maintenance, disposition under pressure, structural resilience, and usefulness as a young cow can now be judged in fact rather than hoped for in theory.

Some young cows prove themselves; others do not. A heifer who calves and raises a calf, yet freshens with weak attachments, poor teat placement, inadequate capacity, faulty structure, or the sort of frailty counter to the breed, should not be retained merely because she has made it thus far without incident. Reproduction is necessary. It is not sufficient.

A disappointing first-calf heifer may still have a salvage value. She may still serve usefully in commercial production. She may still contribute beef value. What she should not necessarily have is another opportunity to deepen the breeder's investment in mediocrity by producing registered offspring.

The Economics of Female Culling

Weak females are costly. A mediocre female consumes forage, feed, labor, veterinary attention, management, and physical space equal to those of a better one. In many cases, she takes more. If she is weak in structure, unsound in udder, poor in feet, narrow in make, thin in constitution, or unreliable in maternal performance, the breeder is not merely carrying a lesser female. He is spending scarce resources to preserve a lesser future.

A female retained for registered breeding is not simply a body in the pasture. She is a claim on the herd's and breed's future. She produces daughters who may replicate her weaknesses and sons who may scatter them farther.

In seedstock herds, the bottom line is not confined to pounds of beef or number of calves on the ground. Factors that are unique to seedstock breeder economics include reputation, trust, herd goals and priorities, buyer confidence, and the cumulative quality of the maternal base. A breeder who repeatedly retains or sells all females degrades their reputation and trust, and, over time, their breeding program.

Purebred seedstock breeding is not a quick-pay enterprise. It has never been. It requires land, feed, labor, time, and perhaps most difficult, a tolerance for long time frames. A breeder carries females for years before their worth is fully known and invests in bloodlines that may not pay soon, or at all. In many operations, the seedstock side is supported for long stretches by

production income, commercial cattle, or off-farm earnings. There is no failure in that. It is often the economic truth of the thing.

The danger begins when a breeder tries to force the seedstock side to pay for itself too soon by lowering the threshold of retention. Then, every registered heifer begins to look like it has recoverable value. Every marginal female becomes “good enough to breed” or “good enough for someone.” At that point, economics has negatively distorted the breeding program.

If an operation cannot withstand honest female culling, then the answer is not to propagate more weak females under registration papers. The answer is to recognize that the production side, or some other source of capital, must carry the burden of breeding with integrity.

Breeding With Discipline

Breeds under pressure tend to generate the same excuses. The breed is too small. The cow might improve. Someone else may want her. She’s a great ‘starter’ cow. She deserves a chance. The calf was nice enough. She is out of a good line. We need the numbers. We can breed it out.

Breed decline is often narrated in exactly those phrases.

A seedstock herd’s maternal base is built as much by what is refused as by what is retained. Breeding through weak females invites compromise and erodes both standards and breeding goals. Numbers without discipline are not a strength. They are dilution.

Not every heifer should breed. Not every first-calf heifer should stay. And not every animal sent to terminal use counts as a cull. The question is not what became unsellable. The question is, what did the breeder himself refuse to perpetuate?

What did the breeder do with the females that should not have remained in the breeding pool? There is no seedstock future without a credible answer to that question.

Seedstock breeding is not the exercise of finding a breeding excuse for every registered female born into the pasture. It is the harder discipline of deciding, with honesty and consequence, which females deserve to shape the future of the herd, and which do not.

For all their promise, I do not **yet know** what I truly have in those three heifers romping in my front paddock.

That is the breeder's responsibility, and where breed stewardship begins.