



EXHIBITION GROOMING

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The exhibition Angora has an impact on the general public quite unmatched by any other breed. A first class specimen, expertly groomed and presented, whether it takes top honours or not, will always steal the limelight, and many of our enthusiasts today owe their introduction to the Fancy to seeing one at a show. Breeders of other varieties airily dismiss the breed as one for people with time on their hands. This is not so. In the ranks of Angora enthusiasts we have folk from all walks of life, the majority of whom put in long and uncertain hours at work, have families and homes to look after, plus a job, but still find great relaxation and satisfaction in the grooming of an Angora. It is a breed which offers a challenge, calling for extreme patience, perseverance and tenacity of purpose from those who take it up. It can provide heartbreaking disappointments, yet the fruits of success seem doubly sweet when eventually attained. Success cannot be bought. The most wonderful champion can have its show career abruptly ended by one careless grooming by a novice, and though very occasionally the born groomer does appear, for most of us it means a long hard plod to the top until we have mastered the art of grooming. The show career of the English Angora is very brief, seldom lasting beyond the age of 7 ½ months, the exception being some coloureds, which can sometimes be shown for two or even three years if plucked when moulting. Once enslaved by the charms of the Angora, so many of us become devoted to the breed for life, whether successful or not.

It is essential to take up the breed on a very small scale until a good deal of experience is gained, and I would suggest obtaining a single baby of show quality from a reputable breeder at first. If you purchase a pair of rabbits, get them from the same breeder, otherwise the resulting offspring may inherit the faults of both strains.

Grooming requirements:

- 1) A waist high table (or Victorian plant stand) with a top about 12" – 15" square, covered with towelling, hessian or similar, to prevent the rabbit from slipping. Make sure it is on a firm steady base. If you cannot provide a grooming table, a box firmly placed on top of a chair will do
- 2) A brush for general purposes and we recommend the Maison Pearson handbag sized nylon bristle brush, it was last a long time and is well worth the investment.
- 3) A soft baby brush
- 4) A small nit comb for handle, if possible
- 5) A powerful blower. A good hairdryer will do until the coat gets long. I use an old vacuum cleaner (not upright) converted to blow instead of suck. For economy, if you have to make do with the household cleaner, and cannot get a spare hose, run it for a minute before using it on the rabbit to ensure all dust is removed first.
- 6) Baby talcum powder
- 7) Tissues

Starting with a show baby of 8-10 weeks, grooming should be done daily. Before grooming for the first time, sit your baby on the stool and study it well. Note the frontal – one clear straight line with no "bites" out of it, the full wool round the head and shoulders, the round shape of the rabbit, as viewed from above. Above all, note the delicate lacy edging of the coat, the overlength, or tips. These are the ends of the guard hairs interspersed in the wool. The stronger these are, the longer you are likely to keep the rabbit in show coat. You are now looking at a miniature of the rabbit you should see in some five months time. Poor grooming, too much use of the brush, or overhandling, will affect that outline and be obvious to the judge. The preservation of the overlength, or tips, is the most difficult to achieve, particularly in stock over five months old. A rabbit which retains its tips has a distinct

advantage in coat length and a pristine freshness about it that will place it far ahead of its competitors. It is the most difficult grooming skill to acquire. Do not despair if you lose the tips, though. Your rabbit will probably still win if it has all other points – provided it does not meet one with overlength intact. The front, too is very vulnerable.

The rabbit is born with a good front and it is up to the owner to preserve it. This also goes for shoulder coat. Take a mental picture and resolve to do your best to keep your baby in this state of perfection. An Angora resents a human touch, its natural instinct being to lick away the strange scent which has been transferred to its coat. While a certain amount of licking is necessary for a rabbit to keep itself clean, excessive licking can do a great deal of damage, especially as the coat becomes more frail as it lengthens. These are three golden rules:-

- 1) Never handle the rabbit unnecessarily, avoiding the top coat under all circumstances
- 2) Restrict all handling to one person. If more than one member of the family is interested, then decide who should groom, feed and clean out which rabbit from the outset and keep to those animals
- 3) Use a brush as a last resort, only when efforts to remove mats and webbings, with blowing or careful use of fingers, have failed.

Most people can stage an Angora quite free from mats – but the art of grooming is to keep on the rabbit, as far as possible, every strand of wool it was born with.

To avoid unnecessary grooming at any age, first blow through the coat. For the first time it will be essential to hold the rabbits ears lightly, but after the first grooming session no further restraint is usually necessary, and most babies will sit patiently for long periods. Blow all over the coat systematically, through the top coat, well down the sides and under the chin, making a mental note of any places where the wool does not blow clear to the skin, then transfer your attention to the underside of the rabbit. Take a firmer grip on the ears and raise the rabbit so that it is sitting on its hindquarters, then blow through from under the chin right through between the hind legs. Commence the next stage by dealing with any webby parts on the underside. You will need to sit on a low stool or box which will give you a raised lap. Very decisively, turn the rabbit over onto its back so that it lies on your lap with head away from you, and lightly grip the ears between your knees. The ear grip will not be needed as the rabbit grows older and gets accustomed to grooming. The brush may be used carefully on the feet furnishing and on the tail (both sides), but if there is webbing elsewhere it must be dealt with differently.

Starting on the skin side of the tangle, gently separate each strand of wool, gradually working towards the wool tip. This fingerwork requires a great deal of patience, but it is the secret of perfect grooming. To deal with mats on the front and in front of the forelegs, both very vulnerable spots, reverse the rabbit so that its legs are away from you and rest its head in the crook of your arm. The wool between the legs is usually easier to tackle from this second position. When underside is free, return the rabbit to the stool. The neck wool will always need attention, due to perspiration and friction when the rabbit turns its head, but the wool is also exceptionally fragile here, and finger work should be relied on, though a very light brushing is often necessary. Most judges look at this point first and if the neck wool is spoiled and there are missing patches it is quite a handicap. Finger work should also be used all over the top coat, when necessary, paying particular attention to spots around the shoulders and down under and near the tail, remembering that the use of the brush is a last resort.

The very soft brush may be used on the ear tufts and on the crest (Fringe) of the head. A further blow through to see that you have done your job thoroughly, then return the rabbits to its hutch. I usually reward mine with a slice of apple or a square of wholemeal bread after grooming – a psychological ploy to make them associate grooming with treats!

The first grooming session may seem very arduous to the beginner, but in a very young rabbit little is needed beyond blowing all over and attention to the neck wool – a matter of a few minutes daily. However, more time

will be required as the coat lengthens. At the age of six or seven months, grooming may take 20-30 minutes a day.

When attending a show you will find that lack of time and busy, noisy atmosphere will not allow much detailed grooming, and it will probably be necessary to use the brush. Groom as thoroughly as possible before leaving home, but the rabbit will usually lick en route, so a touch up will be required. Brush very lightly if you have to. A light brushing on a show day does give a sparkling finish, but it should be reserved for shows and not made a daily routine or the coat will soon be damaged.

The Angora goes through a series of moults during its brief show life. In other breeds we encourage the old coat to come away to make way for the new growth. In the Angora, however, we try to keep in the old coat and allow the new ones to grow with it. Thus an Angora in its prime at about six or seven months has a coat which consists of three or four coats, all growing together, with density increasing all the time. With a coloured Angora the sequence of these coats is very obvious, each new growth being darker at the tips than the roots of the previous one, giving the impression of banding. As the new growth develops the coat preceding it commences to die. It gradually becomes more fragile and loose in the skin, yet we have to groom on without losing a single strand, if possible. It can be appreciated that using a brush indiscriminately at this stage would result in the outer coat being damaged as, at the slightest obstruction, the brush would remove the entire length of wool. This is why finger work is so essential in all stages if we are present a rabbit to judge beyond criticism. Only perseverance can give you this skill. A very few manage it with their first rabbit, but the majority of us have to try, try and try again. Some never do acquire the art of grooming after as long as twenty years even, but still keep their Angoras and plod on, getting as much fun and satisfaction from grooming their stock as do the more accomplished.

If the rabbit is groomed daily there is far less to do. A slight webbing left more than a day can have become a solid mat the next day – difficult to remove without losing some wool. A few experienced groomers who understand their stock may be able to get away with grooming on alternate days only, up to a certain age. It should be remembered that a rabbit approaching adult age requires rather more grooming than a three month baby, making it advisable to keep only one of an age group in show coat, with a space of at least 6-8 weeks between them.

When show days are over, of course, it is not necessary to do any grooming. Once clipped, the following coats are coarser, and not so liable to mat and, if the wool is harvested regularly as soon as it becomes 3" long, no time need be spent on it. The wool grows at the rate of 1" per month.

With a white rabbit we always have the hazard of staining by urine, however clean the hutch is kept. A long-coated rabbit has only to sit awkwardly in a corner to saturate its coat. Many judges are very hard on this, even though an inspection of the feet would show that the rabbit was obviously kept in spotless conditions. It is remarkable how many mishaps can occur either overnight or on the morning of the show. If the urine is still wet, isolate the affected patch of wool with tissues and sponge on warm water. Dry by squeezing with further tissues, use the warm hairdryer and apply talc to complete the drying. Stains which have dried on are much more difficult to remove, and it may mean having to remove the surface of the wool from the stained patch. A last resort would be to mix some 20vols peroxide to a thick paste with talc and apply this to the stained part the night before the show. In the morning it should be dried thoroughly with a warm hairdryer then carefully brushed out. It does make the coat rather brittle so is not recommended except in an emergency.

With coloured Angoras I usually sponge away any urine stains daily to avoid build-up since peroxide cannot be used on these as it turns the stain a permanent bright orange! SO BE WARNED! The application of any proprietary brand of dry foam or aerosol dry shampoo (obtainable from pet shops or chemists) rubbed well into the stain, dabbed with a tissue and then covered thickly with talc may help. Be sure the fur is quite dry before

applying the talc, or you will end up with a gooey mess! Use the warm hairdryer, if necessary, to complete the drying process. The talc is brushed out just before placing the rabbit in the show pen.

The rabbit's toenails must not be clipped until it is over five months of age or it may be disqualified by the judge.