

Breeding Chinchilla Gigantas – Nikki

White

I saw my first Chinchilla Giganta in the late 1990s. It was a British import belonging originally to Rosie Coggins (Rosedale Stud) and then Jean Hill (Rojeana Stud). This doe used to come to shows in a tub. Unfortunately she would not breed. Many years later, when I was stewarding at the Sydney Royal in the early 2000s, I came across them again. Or rather, I was detailed to bring a Flemish Giant to the table and found that instead of being Steel, as per the standard, the rabbit was Chinchilla coloured. The judge was as unimpressed as I was and sent it back with a message to the exhibitor that this was a Chinchilla Giganta, not a Flemish Giant.

And that says it all really. As far as I know there are no longer any purebred ChinGis left, at least not in fanciers' hands. People have had to make do with Chinchilla coloured rabbits cropping up in Flemish Giant litters in order to recreate the breed.

In 2006, Christina Holt and David McKechnie of Lana's Homestead stud in Sydney decided to move on their Chinchilla Gigantas as Christina was pregnant and they were moving house. They offered them to me and brought them to me at the Abyssinian Cat Club of Australasia's annual specialist show in Forestville in August of that year where I was ring co-ordinator (card-writer). I remember someone coming up and saying some people were in the car park with some big rabbits wanting to see me. I went out with what seemed like half the cat show streaming out behind me and all these cat breeders and exhibitors wanting to stroke them and exclaiming how soft they were. Well, naturally, cats aren't bred for fur.

They gave me three does (Beryl and Audrey who were nearly four, and Samantha who was nearly three) and a buck. He was a bit undersized and didn't winter well in Canberra and got very skinny. They were only a generation or so away from Flemish Giants.

I next discovered a breeder in Queanbeyan who was working on the breed as a meat rabbit, seeking to make it a more efficient eater. He had no time for the "mandolin" shape which some overseas breeders advocated, saying it was useless in a meat animal. He was aiming for the type Christopher and Grace Wren had as exemplified by Grace Wren's doe "Showgirl", which is to say, flatter, more like a British Giant. Some of his foundation stock had come from a place up in the Adelaide Hills some friends of his had stumbled upon while out driving where there were heap of Chinchilla Gigantas (again, probably not someone in the rabbit fancy but a breeder who was keen to keep the breed going). They brought him back one. The others probably came from Lana's Homestead as he mentioned their Flemish Giant background. He, himself used Brown/Grey British Giant does.

I got a young buck from him I named Silver Spar. He was a much better type and size than the Lana Homestead buck who went to a pet home the following October. I put Spar with the does and got litters from the two older ones. Samantha never did produce anything and it turned out she had a tumour. She was euthanized. I moved the older does on to pet homes and kept one promising doe, Reguli Silver Dollar. I mated her back to her father and she had a number of litters with him and also his successor, Sempronius (from the same Queanbeyan breeder). Spar died in 2009.

Many of these kits are rather pale, especially at birth, almost ghost Chinchillas. Their top coat should be darker than a standard Chinchilla so I tend to discard the light ones and go for the darker ones. Others often have some rufousing which usually grows out and they become quite presentable ChinGis. Silver Dollar also produced a couple of BEW Giants in 2007 and 2008 and a REW in 2010 and one of her daughters, Silver Circle produced a REW Giant in 2012. These have the type and sturdy legs and bodies of British Giants so must be a throwback to the BritGis behind the sires.

I have bred some ChinGis with dark top coats – Reguli Silver Cloud, daughter of Silver Dollar and Silver Spar, her son, Reguli Silver Surfer (sire Sempronius) and his daughter Obsidian Snowflake Silver Lady (mother a Flemish Giant). However, I have found that in trying for this, you can start to lose the pearl banding on the hair shafts. Surfer's banding is not too bad, but Silver Lady's is almost non-existent. This makes for a rather dark rabbit without that sparkle the pearl banding imparts. My mate in Queanbeyan has also lost the pearl banding, too.

Edward Smith, in his book, *Chinchilla* (Winckley Publishing, 1981) makes the observation that if the "top type" (as he calls those Standard Chinchillas with the darker ticking derived from Chinchilla Gigantas) were "bred together over a period of time, a noticeable deterioration would take place. Apart from loss of texture and density, pearling would also tend to go smudgy, or might even disappear altogether." He recommends breeding in – at regular intervals – what he calls the "bottom type" (these are the ones with the good even if wide pearling and sound under-colour. They may even be a little pale)

So several things here: First be sure to open up the coat and check for pearling. It should be there, even if a bit faint in really young kits. It is easy to be misled by the top colour. Indeed I can think of some judges who gave top honours to Silver Lady as she looks and feels impressive. But opening up her coat tells a different story.

Don't discard pale kits if they have good if rather wide pearling and ticking. They will be useful to breed with your dark top coated ones. Avoid breeding dark top coat to dark top coat. I would rather have a paler ChinGi with good pearling (like a standard Chinchilla in colour) than a dark one lacking pearling or only having very faint pearling.

Another important thing is the coat. I have used Flemish Giants occasionally to improve the density and roll-back of the coat but it does carry some disadvantages in that you don't want the Flemish Giant head or ears and it can cost you the pearling if used too much.

I have been working on them for 7 years now. I have to say my breeding program would be much further advanced if I did not have to contend with the problem of moving on surplus stock and the small, fickle market for Giant rabbits. For some reason, Giant rabbits (whether British, Flemish or Chinchilla Giganta) attract the most terminally stupid flapdoodles you wouldn't sell a pet rock to, never mind a living creature. Either you can't give the Giants away and the suddenly the Fidgets all come out from under their flat rocks as they have decided a Giant rabbit is the next must-have. They pester you when you don't have them but directly you do, they disappear again. There have been years when I haven't mated them at all. The bad myxo outbreak we had in 2011 where I lost Sempronius and Silver Cloud set the program back as well. Losing Sempronius was a real blow as he had good pearling.

Another area which needs work is the wide neck triangle. I have been trying to reduce this. You don't want white "socks" on them, either. Pet out any like that. Mine don't have this problem

but I have seen some which do. Barring on the legs is yet another area which needs work but as leg barring is an issue with other colours in other breeds e.g. Orange it isn't as high priority as pearling and neck triangle.

The strain I have is placid and friendly. Even the does don't go moody and lunge at you when you touch their food dish as some British Giants can do.