

An Introduction to Raising Meat Goats

Goats are ideal for those new to keeping livestock as they are small (therefore require less land per head than cattle), fairly easy to handle and multi-purpose; potentially providing milk, meat and land management. Goats are ruminants, which means like cattle they have 2 stomachs and use bacteria in the stomach to break down grasses, scrub and other green material.

At the census of 2002 carried out by the US Department of Agriculture goats raised for meat had increased by 58% over a 5 year period. Given the buoyant market for goat meat from Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Hispanic, West Indian and West African communities this looks set to continue. Alternatively for the hobby farmer, raising meat goats for showing is an ideal way to enjoy goats.

Where will you sell your meat?

Different markets have different requirements. For instance Italians prefer younger goats; Muslims want very lean kids with milk teeth only, at certain times of the year; the Cabrito or veal goat (fed on milk only) is popular in the Hispanic communities¹. Adequate provision should be made for slaughtering and you need to factor in these costs plus the cost of transporting your animals.

Land Requirements

Goats can be reared intensively on small acreage by using supplemental feed. If using an extensive system, 2 to 10 goats per acre is a rough guide depending on the supply of grass and brush. Goats are top down browsers and will select from weeds, leaves and grasses to meet their own requirements. They can also help to improve marginal areas encouraging re-establishment of grassy species so providing low cost environmental management as well as meat.

Choosing your stock.

Choosing healthy stock is important but difficult for the beginner. The best advice is to buy from a reputable goat producer in your area. That way the animals will already be acclimatised. Expect to pay a premium for pure-bred show animals. The most common meat breeds are below.

Spanish goat - originally coming to the U.S. via Mexico, this term applies to pure and cross breeds. Their small teats and udders make them hardy and able to browse in adverse conditions. Popular in the Texas Hill Country, also in the southeast and border states.

The South African Boer Goat imported via New Zealand in 1993 is a true meat breed, with a heavy, high quality carcass. They can be reared intensively or extensively. Also popular for showing.

Kiko goats are from New Zealand feral goat stock. This is a hardy, large framed and early maturing animal.

Nubians are primarily a dairy breed, developed in Africa from British goats crossed with Indian or African bucks. They have a low slung udder, making this breed less suitable for browsing on heavy scrub land. A medium weight breed.

Myotonic goats are found predominantly in Tennessee and Texas. They have a peculiar tendency to go into a state of temporary paralysis when startled. Known variously as "Tennessee Stiff leg", "Tennessee Wooden-Leg" and "Fainting Goat". It is a muscular and meaty breed and is a good cross with the Boer goat as the "fainting" gene does not exhibit in the cross bred stock.

Fencing

Save your self a lot of goat chasing and invest in proper fencing at the start; goats like to escape. You can use woven wire fence i.e cyclone fence 6x6 woven wire or re-enforced chicken wire, or 5 strand barbed wire or 3 strand high tensile electric wire. The latter is the cheapest in terms of capital outlay but this has to be balanced against the ongoing maintenance required which can be costly in terms of labour over a large area.

Nutrition and Diet

For optimum breeding and kidding, goats need the correct balance of protein, vitamins and minerals. You can purchase commercial supplements for goats. Good quality hay which provides protein and roughage should be given when and where necessary e.g. during winter in some areas. Access to clean water both in the field and in the pens is essential.

Housing and shelter

Goats need field shelters to protect from extremes of weather. Penning the goats at night can reduce predator attacks and enable you to observe and handle your animals at close quarters.

Predators

The main predators are coyotes, bobcats and dogs. Barbed wire fencing and penning at night, with the use of guard dogs, mules or llamas can deter predators.

Herd Health

Vaccination against Tetanus, Clostridials, Caseous, Lymphadenitis and Chlamydia are recommended. As with sheep, worm control is essential. Seek advice from your vet to set up and maintain an adequate parasite control regime. Regular foot trimming is required. Finding vets with experience of goats can be difficult, so get referrals from other goat producers.

Breeding

Kidding (the birth of young goats) is one of the joys of keeping goats. For optimum performance the buck (male goat) should be isolated from the does (females) and only put with selected does in good condition. The gestation period is on average five months, which allows you to monitor the does when kidding time approaches.

Still interested in rearing meat goats?

Visit goat producers and ask lots of questions; read as much as you can; don't get any goats until your fencing is in place!

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