

GOT GOATS?

These browsers can fill a small-acreage niche

Katie Shockley

Goat ownership is increasingly popular for many small-acreage landowners. Goats are inexpensive, small, and easy keepers, making them a good alternative to larger livestock, like cattle.

Goats are browsers and not grazers, making their eating habits different from cattle. Cattle tend to consume more grasses, whereas goats are better able to digest food sources such as shrubs and small trees. Goats aren't picky eaters and when put in a pasture with cattle, they will likely eat what the cattle leave behind, like weeds.

Here are a few considerations for goat ownership.

General Care

Parasites, such as worms, may be an issue. There are medicated feeds that can be given to them or they should be dewormed with the use of alternative applications at least once a year. The Veterinary Feed Directive guides the use of medication given to animals. See <http://bit.ly/vfdrule> for more information.

The floppy ears some goats have help regulate heat; however, they are prone to frostbite during winter. Goats with bigger ears may need a shelter to help prevent frostbite. Lamancha goats, the only breed developed in the United States, are known for their distinct, short ears, which can reduce the chance of frostbite.

Goats need minerals in their diet to stay healthy. In some areas of Wyoming, goats won't get enough of these in their diet just by browsing. For example, in the Laramie area, goats can experience copper deficiencies. Supplements can be used to prevent these mineral deficiencies. If goats are growing, milking, or pregnant, they may also need grain to help maintain energy levels.



Consider your primary goals for goat ownership to help choose the correct goat breed.

Like all animals, goats need access to clean water. Goats tend to not like to drink cold water and access to warm/room temperature water in the winter will encourage them to drink and stay hydrated.

Goats' hooves should be trimmed periodically. Overgrown hooves can make walking painful, leading to other foot and leg problems, such as arthritis, joint, and tendon problems.

Disbudding is a common practice used by many goat owners. It's important to remove the "buds" or tiny horns when they are babies. They are easier to handle without horns, eliminating safety concerns for both people and other goats. Goats often head butt each other to help determine hierarchy. Goats with horns can severely harm other goats in the herd or they can get their horns caught in a fence. The main reason to leave horns on is to allow them to have protection from predators. However, the herd should remain uniform in whether or not they have horns. Allowing one or two goats to have horns while the rest have been disbudded can put those at great risk for injury.

Fencing

Keeping good fences is important if you want to keep neighbors happy. A goat will be able to jump upward to 4 feet and could easily get out if the fence is shorter. Goats also enjoy climbing and leaning on fences, so the wire needs to sustain their

weight. Choosing a wire goats can't get their heads or horns stuck in is important.

As mentioned earlier, goats often rub against the walls and fences, so ensure these structures are sturdy. The fence posts should either be 8-foot wooden or metal posts and should be spaced 8 to 10 feet apart and buried at least 2 feet deep.

Woven wire is a popular fencing choice but can be expensive and hard to install. Choose a 4-inch opening to keep goats from sticking their heads through the fence. Cattle or goat panels with graduated spacing are another option. Electric fencing can also be used to contain goats. Goats are more likely to go under a fence than over, so it's important to put the bottom wire close to the ground (about 6 inches) to discourage this.

Playing

Besides good fences, goats don't require a lot of supplies. They do need some form of entertainment. Providing toys they can play with or things they can climb on will help keep them out of trouble. Many goat owners will build playpens for goats to enjoy. Various playpen designs can be found online or simply providing goats with a few tree stumps or rocks will give them enough opportunity to run and jump around.

Goat Breeds and Uses

Goats are used primarily for dairy and meat production. Consider your primary goals for goat ownership to help choose the correct goat breed. If the primary goal is weed management, an inexpensive goat will work. A dairy wether (neutered male) goat can be found at a local sale barn and is fairly inexpensive, making it a great choice to help with weed management.

The typical dairy goat breeds found in Wyoming are Nubian, Alpine, and Lamancha. Nubian goats have the highest butterfat content to produce flavorful milk. The breed is adaptable to heat, and they have a prolonged breeding season, allowing them to be milked nearly year-round. Alpine goats are very hardy and adapt well to most climates. Lamancha goats are very friendly, and the milk has a relatively high butterfat content.

Dairy goats require milking twice a day. With many dairy goats, purchasing milking equipment can ease and speed up the process. Goat's milk can be used to make ice cream, soft cheeses, milk, soaps, and more. There are state guidelines governing the use and sale of products. See the Wyoming Department of Agriculture pamphlet at <http://bit.ly/wdafoodfreedom>.

Raising goats for meat production is another option for those interested in starting a herd. Goat meat is one of the most consumed meats in the world. Goat meat is low in fat. Boer and Kikos are the two common

breeds used for meat production. Boer goats adapt well to most environments. They are intelligent, gentle, and likeable. They are reported to work well for low-input goat production. Some say they work well in rough-country environments and require less maintenance than some other breeds.

Meat goats are likely to be more stubborn in nature than dairy breeds. Dairy goat breeders are likely to bottle feed the kids (baby goats) making them more accustomed to people.

Whether using goats for weed management or production purposes, they can be a great option for small-acreage landowners. Not only can they offer a source of milk, meat, or weed management, they can also become a great friend, with lots of personality to provide countless days of entertainment and enjoyment.

Goats tend to attract certain predators in Wyoming so learn and plan for that contingency. More information about managing goats is available at UW Extension offices across Wyoming.



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