

Goat Care 101

Adapted from a resource created by our amazing mentor at Rockville Ridge

<http://www.rockvillieridge.com/Resources/#Basics>

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Goats are generally hardy and adaptable animals and not especially difficult to care for, but there are a few things they really need to thrive. Don't let this list overwhelm you. It might look like a lot, but it boils down to Shelter, Water, Hay, Minerals and hoof trimming. Buying from an experienced breeder can make things easier as those of us breeding goats are generally doing so for the love of the breed and are happy to answer questions. It is wise to ask your breeder about their philosophy and how they feed their animals as trying to maintain a similar diet for the goat upon moving to a new home can ease some of the stress of moving. Avoid any sudden changes to their diet if possible. If you follow these basics, and buy healthy animals to start, you should have an easy start to your goat keeping journey!

Companionship – Goats are herd animals and need other goats as companions. Other livestock or pets don't count as goat companions. You need at least 2 goats. When we started out, we wished we would have gotten 3 – that way, if anything happened to one, we wouldn't need to rush to find a same age friend that would acclimate quickly and we would avoid the issue of quarantining before introduction.

A "Wether" (castrated/neutered male goat) can be a wonderful companion to female or male goats and are generally not expensive as they cannot breed and don't produce milk. If you only want one female goat, a wether as a companion works well so she is not lonely. Wethers can also be companions to intact male bucks. However, an intact male buck should not be kept with females. If you decide to keep a male goat for breeding, he will also need a companion. Intact males and your females should be housed and fenced separately if you decide to keep both.

Housing – Goats need shelter to protect them from the weather. Goats especially hate being wet and will almost always stay in the shelter during rain.

- The shelter needs to keep them dry and draft free when it is cold.

- Ideally, shelters can be closed to protect your goats from predators, which is especially true for young goats. We lock our goats up at night in their “barns.”
- I like having a shelter that allows for feeding hay, minerals and water inside, so the hay and minerals stay dry and is available during bad weather. A “Lean-to” or carport tent on the side of an existing outbuilding works well. If you can’t feed inside the shelter, ensure the hay will be fed under cover to keep it dry as mold and goats are a recipe for disaster.
- Goats do NOT need heat lamps if they have adequate shelter. They develop a nice layer of cashmere under their coats for Winter, and they shed this undercoat in the Spring. Putting coats on goats when the weather starts to get cold will inhibit the development of their cashmere undercoat and make them colder.
- We have a solid floor barn covered in vinyl flooring. We use barn lime (\$6/50 lb bag at TSC) under a super heavy-duty tarp topped with pelleted pine bedding and straw. This method requires it to be cleared out every week (or two if you have less goats). Another method is to have a dirt floor and use a deep litter method. We haven’t tried that, but many swear by it. With that type, you have a base of barn lime and just add new bedding on top as it gets wet and cleans it out twice a year (which can be a big task). We prefer more frequent, quicker clean outs since we don’t have a tractor.

Fencing – Goats need a fenced area to keep them where they belong, and to keep them safe from predators. Goats are prey animals and are not generally good at protecting themselves, especially if they don’t have horns. Their instinct is to run. Dogs are the top killer of goats. The general recommendation is to provide at least 1500 square feet per animal of fenced space. This can be slightly smaller for miniature breeds. For Nigerian Dwarfs, we use Red Brand Square Deal Sheep and Goat Fence which is easily stretched to be very taught and is 48 inches tall. Cattle panels are also an option if your lot is generally flat. Many goat owners use Premier One electric fence netting as an alternative or addition to a fixed fence.

Food –When foraging, goats do not primarily eat grass (sheep do). Goats generally eat brush and leaves about ground level. Most folks don’t have enough forested browsing areas to sustain goats as the main source of food, so that is where hay comes in.

Hay and forage (browse) are the most important foods. Get as good quality hay as you can find/afford. Be wary of sellers offering you “goat quality hay”. This hay is often bottom bales that are dusty or moldy, or older hay with less nutrition left. Mold kills goats. Ask for “horse quality hay” and don’t tell them the hay is for goats. Many people don’t understand that dairy goats need high quality hay for good production and body condition. Orchard grass is ideal but could also be an Orchard blend (Orchard-Timothy, Orchard-Fescue or Grass-Alfalfa). 2nd or 3rd cutting hay is almost always better than 1st cut. The 2nd cut isn’t usually harvested until the last week of June, weather dependent. I will take a fresh first cut over last year’s 2nd cut. If you have does in milk, Western alfalfa hay helps support lactation and fetal development in late gestation due to its higher calcium content.

Hay needs to be fed in a dry location, up, off the ground. Goats are surprisingly picky and will often reject any hay that falls to the ground. They are also notorious hay wasters. There are a lot of hay feeder designs for reducing waste. I recommend staying away from “keyhole” style feeders which can cause injury if the goat has its head in the keyhole and is rammed by another goat. These keyhole designs don’t allow the goat to see beside/behind while eating. It is helpful generally to have a feeder that requires the goat to put its head into the feeder and “commit” to eating, rather than a feeder that allows the goat to pull hay out to eat. For example, net and wall-hung feeders generally are stuffed with hay, and the goats go and “pull” hay out of the feeder – then, they drop half and pull more out. If the feeder requires the goat to put its head into a trough, they may still drop half, but it stays in the feeder.

Goats do not need “goat feed”, especially males. However, a good feed or goat specific grain mix is usually fed on the stand during milking or hoof trimmings to keep them busy and to provide calories to support good body condition during milk production. We feed Kalmbach feed and will add a sweet/textured goat feed if we need to put weight on a high production doe. The general rule for grain amounts is 1 pound of grain per 1-3 pounds of milk produced. So, for twice a day milking, that would be approximately 1 – 1.5 cups in the morning and again at the evening milking for Nigerians.

If you aren’t milking goats, I would recommend staying away from grain/goat feed and instead find treats like fruit, veggies, raw peanuts in the shell, etc. that you can use to cajole them when needed.

Water – Goats need fresh water every day – ideally twice a day! For all the “Goats will eat anything” rumors, they are quite picky. Goats won’t drink “stale” water. It is important that females (does) in milk are drinking plenty of water to support milk production.

We are on well water and ours, as is normal with well water, is high in iron. Iron binds zinc, making the zinc from minerals hard to absorb. Zinc deficiency leads to spotty, red, rough, itchy coats that people often mistake for lice or mites. To counteract the iron in the water, we attach an RV water filter (about \$30 on Amazon) to the spigot we use to fill the goats' water buckets. We change it twice a year (or more if we see any skin/coat issues developing).

Minerals – Goats have different mineral needs than cows or sheep – especially copper. They need loose minerals available “free choice”. Free choice means it is always out and available for them. Hard mineral blocks are not a good choice for goats as they can be rough on their sensitive tongues. Loose minerals are a better choice.

For our adult goats, we do supplement our loose minerals with the Purina Goat Mineral block (not as hard as the salt block types). They alternate between the loose and this compressed version. Minerals need to be kept dry, inside the shelter, and easily accessible. I believe the best minerals are Sweetlix Meat Maker and Purina Goat minerals – both have sufficient

copper and aren't mostly salt. Both are available at Tractor Supply. An excellent article about goat minerals can be found at the Thrifty Homesteader here: <https://thriftyhomesteader.com/goat-minerals/>

We also have baking soda free choice next to their minerals. If they feel bloated, they will often eat it. Some goat folks swear not to have it out, so do your own research and choose what works best for you.

Hoof Care – Goats need their hooves trimmed periodically. How often depends on the breed and age of the goat as well as your terrain. Just like us, some goats also grow nails faster than others. We end up trimming about every 4-6 weeks. If they are wearing down their hooves naturally due to your terrain (i.e. rocks), you will not need to trim as often. There is an excellent Facebook group just about goat hoof trimming called “Goat Hoof Maintenance 101”. This group is full of professional hoof trimmers and beginner questions. If you purchase goats from me, I will be happy to help you learn how to maintain your goats' hooves if you need help. General supplies required are a simple hoof brush/hoof pick and hoof trimming shears. My favorite shears are Silver Lines (black handle ones are smaller) \$37. Allowing hooves to overgrow can cause hoof-rot and ultimately lead to lameness.

Parasite Management – Goats are susceptible to several internal and external parasites. Learning to check a goat's eyelids for signs of anemia (FAMACHA technique), paying attention to their coat, and having a relationship with a large animal veterinarian can be a huge help in identifying which parasites you might be dealing with – if any. We do not deworm on a schedule. Overuse of dewormers and antibiotics leads to drug resistance. We only deworm or treat coccidia if there is a fecal done to confirm what parasites we are dealing with, and the number of parasites mixed with clinical symptoms requires treatment. Knock on wood, we haven't had to deworm our goats. All goats will have some parasites; the goal shouldn't be to have zero parasites, but instead to have goats who are able to avoid clinical illness and who are resistant to parasites. Management of grazing can also help avoid parasite issues. This is a much larger conversation, but goat owners do need to consider how they will manage parasites in their herd.

We apply Ultraboss down our goats' neck and back every 4-6 weeks at the same time we do hoof trims during the mosquito, tick, and flea season. We also use horse fly spray on our goats during the fly season.

Vaccines

We give CD&T and rabies vaccines annually. You can administer CD&T (buy at Tractor Supply) but a vet must administer the rabies vaccine. We prefer to use a 20-gauge 3/4 inch needle for these SubQ vaccines.

Our kids' dams were given CD&T 30 days before kidding to provide pass through immunity. The kids will need a 2nd dose around 30 days old and again 30 days after, then annually after that.

Toxic Plants and Food

Look up toxic plants native to your specific area. Some are especially deadly: mountain laurels, azaleas, rhododendron, and wilted cherry tree leaves. For poisoning, have activated charcoal on hand.

Do not feed pit type fruits like peaches, cherries, avocados, plums). Do not feed anything moldy. They love apple pieces, celery, broccoli stalks, orange and banana peels, and carrots. Be sure to cut them into pieces they won't choke on.

Bottle Babies

Note: Make sure all visitors, family members, everyone knows – no fingers in the baby's mouth to avoid the spread of bacteria. Bottle babies are very mouthy and will suck fingers.

If you're not using goat milk, we suggest using WHOLE cow milk from the store. Do not use formulas or milk replacers. Warm the milk in a pan on the stove or submerge bottles in hot water. Do not microwave bottles. Ideal milk temperature is 103 degrees, but you can use the milk on the wrist techniques like we do for human babies to make sure it isn't too hot or too cold. We always let them drink as much as they want at a feeding. Just watch for over eating – their tummy will get large and hard and when tapped on the left side will sound like a drum. If this happens, put some baking soda in their bottle to help with the bloat. We do not believe in religiously following the bottle feeding by weight charts, but we do refer to them as a low-end general guideline.

We feed 3 bottles a da (aiming for ~36 ounces total per day) until 4-6 weeks old (can go longer if you wish), then drop to 2 times per day (16-18 ounces each feeding) at that point (if they are gaining size, having firm poop, and eating some hay/drinking water) and then once a day as early as 8-10 weeks. They can be weaned shortly after going on one bottle or stay on one bottle for up to 8 months. If your schedule requires it, you can move to 2 bottles earlier – just be sure they are getting as much milk as they want at those two feedings, they are drinking water and eating some hay.

Bucklings can be totally weaned as early as 8 weeks old. Does should be fed milk until at least 12 weeks if possible but the longer the better for their growth during that first year to be able to breed earlier. To wean, reduce the amount per bottle until each feeding is 2 oz and then stop OR drop one bottle and then gradually reduce the remaining bottle.

Always have hay to nibble on and water available as well. Offering hay and water early on encourages kids to start eating solids. Eating solids is what triggers the development of their rumen, which is necessary for them to digest food.

Banding/Castration (aka Wethering)

If boys are to be neutered and are with females, band/castrate at 8 weeks old. If they are not with females, you can wait until 12 weeks old – just watch their testicle size to ensure that aren't getting too big to fit in the bander (if using that method).

We offer two types of castration if you wish to return to us for that: Banding is where a specialized rubber band is placed around the testicles, cutting off the blood supply and they eventually fall off. Another option is a Burdizzo (emasculator) which is used to crush the vas deferens leaving the testicles intact but non-functioning.