

HOMESTEAD GOATS WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO GET STARTED

By Teri Page

Raising your own **homestead goats as dairy animals** is a great way to get connected to your food source. Goats are not only a fabulous source of high-quality milk, but are an incredibly versatile animal on a homestead. Homestead goats can also provide meat, fiber, carry a pack, clear brush, or serve as a livestock companion. Dairy goats have endearing personalities, which make them a joy to keep on virtually any size homestead.

WHAT BREED OF HOMESTEAD GOATS SHOULD I CHOOSE?

When choosing the right goat for your homestead, consider the following factors:

- 1. How much milk will you need, and what will you do with it?** Are you interested in making cheese or butter, or do you just need enough milk for fresh consumption?
- 2. How much space do you have available?** If you have plenty of acreage, perhaps a larger breed of homestead goats, like a Saanen, would be a good choice. If you are raising goats in your backyard, you might consider a small breed, like a Nigerian Dwarf.
- 3. Your personal preference.** Perhaps you love the floppy ears of a Nubian, or the colorful markings of an Alpine. Since you will be spending lots of time caring for, and milking your dairy goat, be sure to choose a goat that you will enjoy being with.

FIVE POPULAR DAIRY GOAT BREEDS FOR THE HOMESTEAD

Alpines are a medium- to large-sized breed that originated in the Alps of France and Switzerland, so they tend to do well in cold climates. Alpines are known for giving good quantities of milk, but the percentage of protein and butterfat are not as high as other breeds. They come in a wide range of colors and markings. Our family has primarily raised purebred Alpines, and we love the flavor and quality of their milk for drinking and for cheese making.

Nubians are one of the most popular breeds in the United States. Their milk is very high in butterfat, with a creamy flavor. With their floppy ears and Roman noses, Nubians are a distinctive looking breed. They tend to be very friendly and gregarious, as well as quite vocal! They are a good choice for families with young children.

The **Nigerian Dwarf** breed has only recently been recognized as a dairy breed, but has rapidly gained popularity among backyard farmers. Despite their small size (around 18-

20 inches!), Nigerian Dwarves can produce up to 1-2 quarts of milk per day of very tasty, high protein, and high butterfat milk. They are a great choice for homesteaders without a lot of acreage, or those wanting to keep goats in an urban environment.

La Mancha goats can be distinguished from other breeds by the virtual absence of external ears. La Manchas are hardy animals, and high yield milkers, with high protein and butterfat content.

Saanens are an all-white to cream colored goat, and tend to be quite large. They have calm and cooperative dispositions, and with enough space, are considered to be easy to manage, despite their large size. While Saanens are known for their high milk production, their milk is lower in butterfat.

BASIC GOAT CARE – WHAT DO YOU NEED TO RAISE GOATS?

SHELTER

Homestead goats do not need elaborate housing, but their shelter should be dry, well ventilated, and draft-free. Shelters may range from a traditional enclosed barn to a three-sided open shelter. Consider these points to plan your goat shelters:

- Is it easy to clean?
- Where will your milking parlor be located?
- Does your feeding manger have an open floor plan, so goats are not trapped in corners?
- Do you have a kidding area, or a space where you can separate an injured or sick goat?
- Does the barn have electricity or access to running water? Situating a barn close to your house may make cold winters or kidding season much easier to manage.

FENCING

Good fencing keeps wily goats in and predators out. Fencing must be strong and tall. Goats are very inquisitive, and known to test gates and fences! Popular options for goat fencing include woven-wire and electric fencing.

WATER

Access to fresh water at all times is extremely important for dairy goats, particularly in hot weather, and when does are in milk. Watering systems need not be elaborate – a simple 5-gallon bucket will suffice – but they must be kept clean and full. If you live in a cold climate, consider how you will keep goats' water from freezing in winter. **Automatic watering systems** are available, and can be a great option for homesteaders that work off-site.

FOOD

Goats are browsing animals, not grazers like cow and sheep. Rather, a goat's natural predilection is to sample a diverse range of plants, shrubs, and trees. Offering your goats access to browse will maximize their health and wellness. However, because few homesteads have adequate acreage to provide their goats with year-round browse, hay is often given as a dietary staple.

Good quality, grass-based hay should be kept dry and free of mold. When does are in milk, they are often given **alfalfa** which typically has more protein, vitamins and minerals, or supplemental grain, such as corn, oats, and barley.

Salt, and minerals are important **supplements for goats**, particularly if your local soils are deficient in minerals. We like to give our goats a salt and mineral lick and baking soda on a free-choice basis.

ADDITIONAL GOAT RESOURCES

A great source of goat health and husbandry information: <http://fiascofarm.com/goats/index.htm>

A good all-around goat care book: **Living with Goats: Everything You Need to Know to Raise Your Own Backyard Herd** by Margaret Hathaway.

Goats are hands down my favorite homestead animal. Their endearing personalities, versatility on the homestead, and delicious milk (not to mention goat milk ice cream!) make for a winning combination.

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