



keeping cattle



what is it?

It's tending cows, those familiar 4-legged bovine animals, for meat, dairy, or both – plus their by-products, leather and dung. The forerunner of domestic cattle was the auroch, which roamed Europe, Africa and Asia, and was ancestor to all European breeds, & African zebu cattle. Aurochs became extinct in the 17th century.

Modern breeds have been continually selected for beef or dairy, which when taken to extremes can cause problems. The Belgian Blue, for example, has been bred to be such a huge meat animal that caesarians are required to deliver the calves (after the first natural birth when they are crossed with a Dexter). Holsteins and Friesians on the other hand, have been selected for milk, and there is so little meat that there is almost no use for the calves.

Smallholders can preserve breeds, and choose those breeds for hardiness and ability to provide both milk and meat. Dexter cattle are an example of a breed that fits these criteria well. They are the ideal smallholder cow, as they are small, hardy and dual-purpose.

what are the benefits?

- traditional / rare breeds are usually easier to manage, with less to go wrong; they tend to be hardier, can be outside all year, and breed for longer (Belgian Blues can be bred for 7 years, Dexters for 15)
- can be grass-fed all year round, sometimes without even needing hay (if they do, you can usually get it locally, without having to use grains that have often travelled long distances)
- a few cattle on a smallholding can be looked after much better than a large herd. With 100 cows, you may not spot if one is unwell. If you have 4, and especially if you hand-milk, you will
- vaccinations can be reduced for small herds (see below). Diseases are often caused by overcrowding
- they produce manure – an excellent addition to the soil on any smallholding
- cattle can utilise land that's not much use for anything else. Traditional cattle are often used for conservation grazing. Mixing with other livestock can improve the land, animal health and yields. For example, cattle like long grass, and may leave cow parasites in their dung. Sheep prefer the shorter grass after cows, and have no problem with cow parasites. Then chickens can eat seeds and insect pests, and scatter the dung around the land



Dexter mother and calf on a smallholding in Lanarkshire

what can I do?

preparation: cattle are big animals and so need space, but they don't require much work. Make sure you have storage space for hay. It's cheaper to buy hay in bulk and store it yourself, than to buy it after storage somewhere else. If you have trees and hedges, you don't necessarily need a shed, but if not, you can build a 3-sided shed for them to find shelter from the worst weather. You'll need a trailer or a friendly local farmer / smallholders' group to borrow one from. Find one of these groups first if you can, and go and see cattle kept on a small scale, or go WWOOFing on a farm or smallholding that has cattle.

care: with beef cattle, if they can live outdoors all year, they don't need to be let out and locked away every day. You might sometimes have to trim feet or deal with a wound, but apart from making sure they always have water, some years there might be almost nothing to do. But occasionally you can have a situation that takes up your whole day out of the blue, e.g. a cow or bull gets caught in a fence (you'll have to rescue it, tend wounds, fix the fence etc.), so you have to be prepared. There's a lot more work if you're milking. You can leave calves with their mothers, or separate them for a while for milking. You can rotate cattle with other livestock (see 'benefits'). You can't keep just one cow, but you can keep a mother and calf. Calves can be sent to slaughter at 2, and the mother can have another calf by then. Find a local bull you can borrow for breeding. Sometimes, you will need to restrain a cow, e.g. for vaccination. This can be done using a 'cattle crush', which can be expensive, but can



be borrowed. With just a few cows, they will be tamer, and can be led with a halter and held between 2 gates.

meat: legally, cattle have to go to an abattoir for slaughter, but you can do your own butchery. Find a local friendly abattoir – they'll be used to large farmers, but could fit you in with individual beasts. If you want to sell the meat, you must have your premises inspected by your local Environmental Health dept. (it doesn't have to be all stainless steel – just clean), and you have to have approved labelling. From a decent-sized cow you could expect to get 3-400kg of meat. You'd need a refrigerated van to get your meat home from the abattoir, but again you could borrow one from a friendly farmer / smallholders' group.

vaccinations: 8 standard vaccinations can be given to dairy herds, and they can still be called organic. As mentioned above, these vaccinations can be reduced for small herds living outdoors on a smallholding. Everyone has to do TB testing (small injections every year for the first 3 years, then the regularity depends on local conditions – it could be around once every 4 years). Plus there could be occasional compulsory vaccinations nationwide if there's a scare (e.g. blue tongue).

paperwork: you need a holding no. (for your site) from DEFRA, and a herd number from the British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS). Contact them on for more information about registration. Tell them what you're going to keep, and they'll send you lots of information. It's aimed at big farmers,



cow passport - which is changing from the 'cheque book' style to a single page

but if you wade through it, there's lots of useful stuff. When you buy a cow, it will come with ear tags (one in each ear) and a 'passport'. Make sure the tag numbers match the number of the passport. You will also need to register with a vet. You have to keep a medication sheet – you can make your own, or get one from an agricultural supplier. It's a legal requirement to record medications, which animals received them, dates etc. If one of your cows gives birth, contact BCMS, who will send you a passport. Get some ear tags (find them online) – tell them your herd number and they will send them out to you. If you have pedigree cattle, there's extra paperwork from the society that registers the pedigree.

resources

- see LILI's website for courses, lists of breed websites, and more information, including WWOOFing (volunteering on organic farms); plus the following books and more:
- Peter King, *Introduction to Keeping Cattle*
- Val Porter, *British Cattle*
- Eddie Straiton, *Cattle Ailments: recognition & treatment*
- British Cattle Movement Service: bcms.gov.uk / 0845 050 1234
- Dexter Cattle Society: dextercattle.co.uk / 02476 692300
- British Cattle Veterinary Association: bcva.eu / 01452 886484
- the Organic Feed Co: organicfeed.co.uk / 01362 822900 - organic & GM-free animal feed



belted Galloway - another hardy, Scottish breed good for smallholders

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