



goats



Anglo Nubians: a popular dairy breed.

what are they?

The domestic goat (*Capra aegagrus hircus*) is a subspecies of the wild Bezoar Ibex, and was domesticated 10,000 years ago. A ruminant mammal, related to sheep, it differs significantly in its behaviour. Goats forage a variety of shrubs and trees, and chew on anything woody. This has given goats a reputation for eating anything, but goats can be very fussy about their food, rejecting anything from a bucket that is not perfectly clean.

Good fences are essential. Goats are intelligent and curious, good climbers and notorious escape artists. They have a tendency to turn to face a threat rather than fleeing as a group. This makes it easy to get into a standoff with a goat, and means they are not as easily herded as sheep.

Possibly the most versatile agricultural animal, goats around the world produce milk, meat, yarn, leather, and dung; carry packs; work in harness; and clear overgrown land. In the UK, the main breeds of goats are: Angora and Cashmere for fibre, Boer for meat, and Saanen, Toggenburgh, Golden Guernsey, Alpine & Anglo Nubian for milk.

what are the benefits?

The versatility of the goat means that it can be the ideal smallholding animal. Goats can produce milk (and cheese, soap, ice cream etc), meat and fibre, or, with the right breed or hybrid, a combination of these. Goats also produce dung, useful as a soil improver or as a fuel, and are excellent at clearing land choked by dense woody weeds such as brambles; sometimes they are hired out to do so. Its size means that it's easier and less expensive to manage than a cow and requires less land. Goats will thrive on steep rocky scrub land unsuitable for grazing animals, and if you have limited space, pygmy goats, usually kept as pets, can be used as meat and dairy animals.

Goats are intelligent, curious, and agile, and so easy to train. Castrated male goats (wethers) make good harness animals.

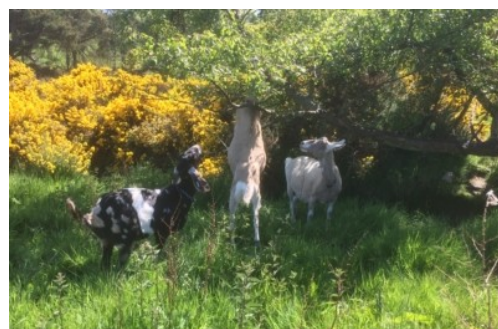
what can I do?

Getting started: get in touch with a local goat keeper to learn how to handle goats. Find them through smallholder forums and associations, WWOOF, or local goat keeping societies (via the British Goat Society). Get advice from experienced keepers. Volunteer with goats, through WWOOF for example, or attend a course. Goats are social animals, so you'll need at least two. Local / national goat societies are good links to quality goats for sale. If buying goats at market or through private ads, take an experienced person with you.

Housing: unlike sheep, goats hate cold, wet weather and need shelter at night and access to a field shelter while outdoors. Goats like to sleep together; if penned individually at night, give them stalls that allow physical contact with neighbours. Goats like to spend most of each day outdoors, with a large area to roam, play and browse. If keeping goats in a small paddock, help them express their natural behaviour by hanging tree branches from the fences and providing them with structures they can scramble about on.

Feeding: goats are browsers and their foraging habitat is a mix of grassland, scrubland and woodland. Goats will graze (some breeds more than others) but cropped grass can worsen parasite problems. Woodland / scrubland is goat heaven, but be aware that they'll destroy your trees! Solutions include rotating browsing areas, protecting young trees with guards, or fencing 'islands' for goats to forage around the edge of.

Give all goats extra roughage at night and in winter - hay and haylage, but ideally 'tree hay' - material cut from trees and fed fresh in the spring and summer or hung to dry for feeding in winter. Goats producing milk, in late pregnancy or still growing need concentrated feed. Buy ready-mixed goat feed or, with a bit of research, you can buy 'straight' feeds such as wheat, oats, peas etc. and mix your own. Then you can avoid ingredients like soya, and reduce food miles.



Natural goat foraging habitat - goat heaven!



The Boer goat is the breed most commonly raised for meat production.

Vitamins and minerals are essential for goat health and all goats should have access to a mineral lick. Please note that some goat mineral licks can be toxic to sheep.

Keeping goats with other animals: goats and poultry works well – they don't compete for food, and poultry reduce parasites. Goats can be kept with sheep, but you'd need to consider separate feeding areas, prevent sheep accessing goat mineral licks, and keep only dehorned goats. Goats are more susceptible to parasites they share with sheep; sharing a pasture may lead to an increase in the need to medicate your goats. Grazing goats with cows is less common but theoretically less problematic; goats are not susceptible to cow parasites and cows are not as vulnerable to goat horns.

Milk: a dairy goat produces 2–9 litres of milk in summer, about half that in winter. Milk them twice a day, every day. Most does need to have a kid at least every other year to continue to produce milk. If producing milk for yourself, there's little regulation, but take hygiene precautions. You'll need a milking platform with shelter and a water supply nearby, plus a kitchen to filter and cool milk and sterilise equipment. To sell milk, you'll need a room for milking and a room for processing, away from where goats are housed. These need to meet hygiene regulations, and will be inspected regularly. You have to pay to have your milk tested. In Scotland you can't sell unpasteurised milk; in England and Wales you can subject to certain restrictions. Contact the Food Standards Agency for further information.

Fibre: Angora goats produce mohair – fine, hard-wearing, with a silky texture. It takes dye easily, so often comes in vibrant colours. It's often blended with other fibres, such as wool, to give more structure and make it easier to spin.

Cashmere is a fine, soft, insulating fibre made from the soft undercoat. Goats are shorn in early spring, then kept indoors until the weather warms, or fleece is collected when the goats moult.

Meat & slaughter: you can dispatch animals yourself with a rifle and a licence, or a captive bolt gun (no licence). Slaughtering on farm saves the stress of a journey to the slaughterhouse.

To sell meat you need to send your goats to a slaughterhouse. You can do the butchery yourself or pay the slaughterhouse to do it. If you do it yourself, you need to follow hygiene regulations and have your premises inspected by Environmental Health on a regular basis. Contact the Food Standards Agency for info.

Health: regularly trim your goats' feet - learn with the help of an experienced person. You'll probably need to treat your goats for intestinal parasites; how frequently will depend on the area they have to roam in, your pasture rotation system, and whether your goats have access to browse. Don't treat for worms too often as it can lead to resistance to medications. Research pasture rotation for parasite control, and consider regular fecal egg counts to monitor for parasite. Check for lice, ensure they have the necessary vaccinations, and look out for infectious disease.

Paperwork: register the land with the relevant agency for your area. Inform the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHRA), who will allocate you a flock number. There are regulations on identifying and tagging, and for movements on and off your holding. See DEFRA guidelines for more info.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/goats for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Janice Spaulding, *Goat School*
- Katie Thear, *Starting with Goats*
- Sue Weaver, *the Backyard Goat*
- britishgoatsociety.com - British Goat Society
- outlands.tripod.com/farm/national_goat_handbook.pdf – US, huge resource on goats
- goatbiology.com – the biology of the goat

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