

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Joys of Raising Goats

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Finding out about the many benefits of raising goats
  - ▶ Getting to know these lovable animals
  - ▶ Deciding whether goatkeeping is for you
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**I**'ve been raising goats since 1998, and I'm still not tired of them. In fact, I can't imagine my life without them. Talk to any other serious goatkeepers and you hear that after they get "in your blood" you have to have at least a couple.

When you get a sense of goats' many uses and get to know their unique qualities, goats will get in your blood, too. Goats are more than livestock, they're friends and helpmates, and they're entertaining as heck.

Goats have been called the poor man's cow but a better name for them would be the "green" cow. They take up less space, cost less to feed, and even contribute less to global warming because they don't emit as much methane gas. On top of all that, they're smart, friendly, and easy to manage with the proper set-up. This chapter introduces you to the benefits of raising goats and lets you know what you can expect from the experience.

## *Finding Goat Basics*

Goats are intelligent and friendly animals. They come in all sizes (but only one shape) and can help you in numerous ways. After you decide what you want to accomplish with them, you have a lot of breeds to choose from. (All goat owners have their favorite, which they can talk about endlessly.) Check out Chapter 3 for a rundown of goat breeds.

## Thank goats for coffee

According to legend, goats in the charge of an Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi failed to return one evening. When he found them the next morning, they were excited and dancing next to a shrub covered in red berries. He investigated, trying the berries, and discovered that they were responsible for the goats' excitement. The goats had discovered coffee.

When the goatherd took the berries to the town monastery, the abbot disapproved and

threw them into the fire. When he smelled the pleasant odor they gave out as they roasted, he raked them out of the fire, ground them up, and mixed them with water. Coffee's use as a stimulant drink gradually spread around the world.

Goats still enjoy coffee, and some goat owners use it to stimulate labor and give energy to a doe that is kidding.

Goats are unique animals within the ruminant classification. *Ruminants* are also known as “cud-chewing” animals, or as having four stomachs. You can find out more about their digestive systems in Chapter 2, as well as how to tell them from sheep, what makes a healthy goat, and how goats communicate with you and each other.

Being responsible for goats is a serious undertaking. I say “goats” because goats need a herd to be happy, so you shouldn't get just one goat. You can read more about why you need at least two goats and other ways to keep them happy in Part II.

These critters can live for seven years or more, so getting goats is like getting a dog — you may be taking care of them for quite a while. Chapter 2 tells you about their life expectancy.

## *Glimpsing the Benefits of Owning Goats*

Goats are fantastic animals that have been domesticated for more than 10,000 years. You get a lot from a relatively small animal — you can milk them or eat their meat, use their fiber and their skin for making clothing, and even use their dung for fuel (if you are so inclined). In the past, goat hide was made into bags for carrying water and wine and parchment for writing on; it is still used to make drums in some countries.

You may want to raise goats for a variety of reasons. Whatever brings you to goats, you're guaranteed to find additional benefits to owning these critters after you start working with them.

## *Becoming more self-sufficient*

Goats are not only a great way to become more self-sufficient — they can give you milk to drink and food to eat, and even help you carry your belongings when backpacking — but they teach you in a very direct way where your food comes from and give you an opportunity to affect its quality. If prices go up (and don't they always?) you are less affected if you're supplying some of your own food.

And imagine not ever having to cut down blackberries or kudzu again. You can get your friendly goat to do it for you, while growing fiber for hats and sweaters and providing you with milk, meat, and even more goats.

In this section I talk about the many ways goats can contribute and move you toward self-sufficiency.

### *Cutting your dairy bill*

Imagine never having to buy milk or cheese again. If you raise dairy goats you can achieve that goal. Your goats need to have kids to give you milk, and then you can milk them throughout the year for up to three years without re-breeding, if you want. Or you can stagger the kidding each year so that you have a milk supply year-round. (They need a break from milking during the last two months of their pregnancy to put their energy into growing kids.)

You need only a few goats to keep a small family in milk and other dairy products. Just one standard-size dairy goat can give you an average of 6 to 8 pounds (3 to 4 quarts) of milk each day. And, depending on the butterfat content of the milk, you can get up to a pound of cheese for every gallon of milk.

With your own milk supply, you won't need to worry about additives to the milk you drink or the cheese or yogurt you eat. Goat milk is easier to digest than cow milk, and so it is prized by people who can't drink cow milk. Depending on the state you live in, you can sell milk to supplement your income or offset the goats' feed costs.

You find out about raising goats for milk in Chapter 14.

### *Raising your own meat*

Goat meat has always been popular in the developing world, because goats are much more affordable and use fewer resources than animals such as cows. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the demand for goat meat is expected to continue growing.

## Drinking milk on the farm may help you breathe easier

A number of studies have shown a positive correlation between living on a farm and *not* having allergies or asthma. One study goes even further, showing a likely benefit of raising goats for their milk.

A 2006 study of nearly 5,000 rural children aged 5 through 13 from various European

countries found that those who drank milk on the farm were less likely to have asthma, hay fever, or other allergies than those who didn't. At least half of the children were known to drink raw milk, but the researchers didn't have enough information to determine whether the protective effect was related to raw milk or just on-farm dairy products in general.

People who moved to the United States from Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa brought their custom of eating goat meat as a regular part of their diet and still want it. And more people who hadn't eaten goat meat before are willing to try a new, lean source of protein that doesn't have the taint of confined animal farming operations (CAFOs). Animals raised in CAFOs often never see the light of day and are unable to exercise or eat grass because they are packed into small areas.

Goat meat is easily digestible, tasty, and low in fat. If you're in charge of your own source of meat, you know how it was raised and what feed or medications went into it.

Meat goat farming provides a great opportunity to start a business or supplement your income. You can raise goats that are bred for meat, or you can use your excess dairy wethers or bucks as an alternative to buying meat or to provide income to support your herd. Before you jump into a meat-goat enterprise thinking that you're going to get rich, you need to investigate a few things:

- ✓ Check out the market for goat meat in the area of the country where you live.

You can contact your extension office for assistance, go to the local livestock auction to see how well and for what price meat goats are selling, and read the local agriculture newspaper or other publications to see what they have to say about raising and marketing meat goats.

- ✓ Learn about *stocking* (the number of animals you can support without overcrowding or overgrazing), how many goats you can stock on your property, and how that might break down in terms of income.
- ✓ Determine what kind of meat goats are available and for what price.

- ✓ Consider slaughter options. Would you slaughter goats yourself, sell them at auction, have a mobile slaughter provider come out, or transport your goats to a slaughterhouse? Do you have a vehicle to transport goats? Is there a USDA-certified slaughter facility nearby that handles goats? Factors affecting this decision include laws governing slaughter as well as the local market, your capabilities, and financial considerations.

I talk in much more detail about raising goats for meat in Chapter 15.

### *Growing your own fiber*

Some of the finest fiber comes from goats: Angora and Pygora goats produce mohair, cashmere goats produce cashmere, and crosses between the two breeds produce a fiber called cashgora. An adult angora goat can produce an average of 8 to 16 pounds of mohair each year, and a kid can produce 3 to 5 pounds. Cashmere and cashgora-producing goats produce less fiber, but it is also more highly valued.

If you raise fiber goats, you can spin your own yarn and make hats, blankets, sweaters or other products. You can also sell the fiber to spinners or to companies that make these products, while having the benefit of these friendly creatures.

Check out Chapter 16 to find out about harvesting and using goat fiber.

### *Harnessing goats' power as living weed whackers*

Goats are well-known for their ability to wipe out weeds. In fact, some people have made businesses out of renting out their goat herds to cities and other municipalities to clean up areas that are overgrown with weeds or blackberry bushes. These leased goats decrease the need to use herbicides, improve the soil's fertility, decrease the risk of fire, increase the diversity of plants in the area, and control weeds in hard-to-reach areas, such as steep hills.



Because goats are browsers, they can share a pasture with sheep or cattle, which prefer different plants. Goats eat brush, leaves, and rough plants. They can improve pasture by removing noxious weeds, clear areas to be replanted with trees, and control leafy spurge, knapweed, Himalayan blackberry, giant ragweed, sunflowers, and other weeds.

Not every plant is a great snack for a goat. I tell you about plants you need to keep away from your goats in Chapter 4.

Whether your goats are pets, milk producers, or meat animals, they provide the side benefit of acting as living weed whackers. With some portable fencing or a guardian animal for protection, they range far and wide each day to keep your property free of noxious weeds.

## Cashmere goats

No specific breed of goat is named *cashmere*. The term refers to the undercoat or down that is harvested from a variety of goats. Cashmere is harvested and processed mainly in central Asia, especially China. The fiber produced by up to four of these Asian feral goats in a whole year is required to make just one cashmere sweater — which explains why they are so expensive.

Feral goats in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States produce down fiber that meets the cashmere specifications, but production from most of these goats is low. Breeders have produced more productive cashmere goats by selectively breeding good producers from the feral population, including the Spanish goat in the United States. Cashmeres have the added benefit of being good meat goats.

Don't expect to put them on a lawn and have them mow down the grass, though. "Lawnmower" is the job of sheep, not goats. Goats prefer to eat your rosebushes or lilacs.

### *Breeding and selling*

Unless your goats are just pets or brush eaters, you probably want to breed them. If you have dairy goats, you need to breed them to keep a good supply of milk flowing. And you need to replace any goats you sell or slaughter.

As a dairy goat owner, I supplement my income from selling milk by selling kids and providing buck service. *Buck service* means leasing a buck for breeding purposes to another goat owner. Buck service is valuable to goat owners who don't have the space or don't want the hassle of keeping a buck or who want to get certain genetics into their herd. I tell you more about buck service, and about breeding in general, in Chapter 12.

## *Using goats for companions or helpers*

Goats make great companions, something that more people discover every day. Miniature goats such as the Nigerian Dwarf, Pygmy, and mini dairy breeds are growing in popularity as pets, in both the city and the country. (Check out Chapter 3 to find out more about these and other breeds.)

Goats are intelligent and funny, and they're also a great way to meet people. I had a little goat named Malakai, who was a *dwarf* Nigerian Dwarf, because of health issues. His petite size made him all the more adorable. He was house- and car-broken, and so I took him with me wherever I went. He was the little Mystic Acres farm emissary and never failed to attract people. Besides

helping me meet people, Malakai gave me the opportunity to educate people about goats and clarify their inevitable misunderstandings. (Get into goats, and you'll find that misconceptions abound. I brace you to take on the most common of them in Chapter 19.)

### ***Keeping goats as pets***



Normally considered livestock, goats can make good pets, but you will be much more satisfied using them for this purpose if you remember that they are outdoor animals and that's where they do best. Goats are herd animals and need another goat for a friend, so get at least two of them. I tell you more about choosing your goats in Chapter 5.

You can leash train goats and take them on walks throughout the neighborhood or around your property, which provides exercise for all of you. (Chapter 8 shows you how to get started leash-training.) I can tell you from experience that just sitting and watching goats has a calming effect. Studies of other pets have shown that they can lower your heart rate and improve your health — and I'm sure that the same is true for goats as pets.

### ***Finding a helping hoof: Using your goat for packing***

Goats are social animals and, after you establish a relationship with them, they love to spend time with you. They enjoy going for hikes and can go almost anywhere you can. Not only that, but they can carry your belongings, they find plenty to eat right there in the wilderness, and they make great companions.

So why not take your goat packing? Ideally, you select a large wether for packing and then take the time to train him to obey commands and to carry your gear. Goats are surefooted, excellent pack animals and can help you work, whether it be gathering wood in the forest or just carrying your belongings on a holiday hike. Chapter 8 tells you about training your goat as a pack animal.

### ***Sharing your goat with others***

Another way you can use a companion or pet goat is as a therapy animal or a visitor to children, seniors, or other groups who don't usually see goats. After you train your goats, you can approach teachers, administrators, or activity directors to plan a goat day (or hour). You get to spend time with your goats, and other people get to learn about their unique personalities.

Some people use goats to help children with autism improve their sensory abilities and social skills — there's nothing like a cute pet to get people talking to you — and to improve morale and entertain residents of nursing homes. (I talk more about these benefits in Chapter 16.)

## *Raising goats as a 4-H project*

Getting children involved in raising goats is a good way to teach responsibility. Keeping goats requires twice-a-day chores. Children quickly learn that the goats depend on them. They also find out about the cycle of birth and death and get outdoors to get regular exercise.



Learning about and caring for goats as a 4-H project provides a structure that makes caring for goats fun and easy by giving the project a bigger purpose. Contact your county extension office for help on finding a 4-H group. If the 4-H group in your area is not set up so your kids can raise goats for a project, consider getting trained and starting your own goat 4-H group. Doing so not only gives your kids the opportunity for such a project, but it teaches responsibility, helps promote goats, and educates other children.

Some of the things that children can do in a goat 4-H project include the following:

- ✓ Developing a budget for goat care
- ✓ Writing a report on and giving a speech about goats
- ✓ Demonstrating hoof-trimming or other routine care (Chapter 9)
- ✓ Watching a goat show
- ✓ Exhibiting the goat at the county or state fair (Chapter 16)
- ✓ Milking the goat and making cheese or yogurt (Chapter 14)
- ✓ Training the goat to walk on a lead (Chapter 8)
- ✓ Writing or drawing for a goat newsletter or magazine

## *Determining Whether Goats Are for You*

You may love goats and the idea of raising them, but how do you know whether raising goats is right for you?

The first order of business is finding out everything you can about goats. You get a good start by reading this book. I also recommend that you spend time around goats. Ask goat people you've met whether you can go to their farms and observe or even help with their goats. Firsthand experience gives you an idea of what goats need and how you like working with them.



Goats can live 15 years, or even longer. Unless you buy goats to be eaten, and especially if you plan to keep them as pets, remember that you're taking on a long-term commitment just like you do when you get a dog or a cat.



The upcoming sections tell you more about considerations you need to mull over before you become a goat owner.

## *Devoting time and effort*

Expect to spend at least a half hour each morning and a half hour each evening on routine goat care. If you get a lot of goats or use them for a specialty such as milk, meat, or fiber, you need to budget more time. (Part IV tells you about each of these situations.)

Goats need a supply of hay and/or *browse* (grasses and other plants they can find in a pasture) and clean water at all times. (Chapter 6 gives you the details on what goats eat.) The routine twice-daily care you need to plan for includes feeding, changing water, cleaning buckets, observing your goats to make sure they are healthy and acting normal, making sure they're safe and secure each night, and letting them out in the morning. Of course, you probably want to spend more time just being with them after you discover how fascinating they are.

Plan also to spend an hour or more each month on regular grooming and goat care such as hoof trimming, injections or other treatment, and cleaning their living area. (Chapter 8 runs through the routine care that goats need.) If you breed, show, shear, or slaughter your goats, you spend many more hours with your goats intermittently. And if one of your goats gets sick, you need time to provide care or coordinate with a vet. (Chapter 11 addresses common illnesses.)



If you work and don't have a reliable helper, you need to have some flexibility to deal with problems. If you work outside your home and have long or erratic hours, a helper is essential.

## *Deciding which goats are right for your situation*

You want to get the type of goat that's right for your goals. If you want goats for milk, get dairy goats; for meat, get meat goats; for fiber, get fiber goats. If you have mixed goals, find out which animal will best suit all of them. For example, a Spanish goat can produce cashmere, kids for meat, and milk. The milk won't be of the volume or quality you get with a dairy goat, but nevertheless, it's milk. You can read more about the different breeds in Chapter 3.



If you want pet goats, choose goats that are

- ✓ **Tame and friendly:** These goats are much easier to work with, and you won't have to spend time trying to get them to trust you.
- ✓ **Horn-free:** Goats without horns are the safest, especially around children. (I tell you more about the horns, including how to remove them before they grow, in Chapter 8.)
- ✓ **Wethers:** A *wether* is a buck that has been castrated. (See Chapter 2 for more about goat terminology.) Don't ever accept or buy a buck goat for a pet. You will regret it as soon as he matures and starts to stink during breeding season. (Chapter 12 tells you about the weird and exciting world of breeding.) Does can make okay pets, but wethers are the best. They don't go into heat, and they cost less to feed because they don't need anything but minerals and good grass hay. They also are the sweetest.

If you live in a city, get miniature goats, not full-sized ones. They won't take up as much room and then you can have more, if you want. By the same token, if you have a physical disability, miniature goats are better because they are easier to handle. You can read more about miniature goat breeds in Chapter 3.

## *Finding out about local ordinances*

Check out ordinances in your area regarding keeping livestock. These govern whether you can keep livestock and restrict the types you can keep. You need to be aware of the ordinances governing your area, or you risk losing the goats that you dreamed of getting just because of a technicality.

For example, you may need to buy a license for a goat, just like you do for a dog. In some cities, you can't keep backyard goats, so if you want to raise them you need to work with the powers that be to get the law revised, like other urban farmers are doing in cities around the United States.

In some cases where goats are prohibited by a city or other municipality, people with special needs or medical issues have been able to obtain variances to the zoning so that a goat could serve as a service or therapy animal.

Another kind of ordinance that you need to be aware of governs noise. In rural areas animals are expected (as are guns), so neighbors can't do much legally about a crying goat (or target-shooting). But in an urban area, even if goats are allowed, your neighbors may complain, much like they do with a barking dog. Be aware of what your local noise ordinance covers.

## *Knowing your neighbors*

Even more important is to know your neighbors. Do they have any vicious or out-of-control dogs that may be a threat to your goats? Can you keep these dogs away from your goats?

Do you already have bad blood with neighbors? Will they bitterly complain, undermine you, or otherwise make your life miserable if they hear goat cries? If you live in an area where you'll need a livestock guardian dog, will neighbors have a problem with nighttime barking? Try to work things out first, but if you can't, think about whether you want to invest a lot of time, money, and heart in a project where a nearby neighbor will make your life difficult.



After you get goats, share some of your goat products with your neighbors, consider involving them or their children in your project, and work with them to make sure your goats aren't causing a problem.

