

3 Tips for Raising Goats Sustainably

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A lot of people think that raising goats naturally just means substituting herbal remedies for pharmaceuticals. But that's like assuming that an organic garden just substitutes natural pesticides for chemical ones. It's reactive rather than proactive. If you do things like that, it might work, but you might also spend all your times trying to solve problems. Is that really sustainable?

Sustainable means that something can go on and sustain itself. A wise old holistic vet once said to me that he'd seen a lot of people go broke successfully treating sick animals. Choosing the right remedy,

whether chemical or herbal, is not the sustainable answer. Because animals are naturally hardy in their natural environment, we have to do our best to provide a natural environment for them. For most of us in the US, that's harder than it sounds.

Goats in the wild live in the deserts and mountains, not on the plains and prairies, which cover most of the US. That means that we don't naturally have what they need to stay healthy. In the wild, they find mineral deposits in rocks, and they eat bushes, evergreens, and other perennials. They are naturally browsers, but in most parts of the US, we're trying to turn them into grazers. In addition to consuming different nutrients from grazing than from browsing, it also means that goats will be subjected to much greater parasites loads because worm larvae are on grass, not up in the bushes.

In nature, goats drink rain water from creeks and streams. On most farms, we are pumping water up from below the ground, and it may have high levels of sulfur, iron, or calcium. Although those minerals are all vital to life, it's about balance. If animals consume too much of those minerals, it can lead to copper deficiency.



Pasture Rotation

One of the most important things we can do to imitate nature for our goats is to rotate pastures. In nature, even if they do eat grass, they are not eating from the place where they pooped yesterday. It's no secret that goats seem to be less resistant to parasites than sheep and cows, and it's probably because throughout the ages, goats have not eaten off the ground, so their bodies have not needed the ability to thrive with a moderate parasite load.

Because parasite larvae do not have legs, they can't crawl up on grass. However, they can float up a couple of inches if the

grass is wet from morning dew or rain. By not letting your goats graze grass shorter than four inches, you are reducing their exposure to parasites. That means you need to move them to a new pasture before

the grass gets shorter than four inches. For more on pasture rotation, you can check out this post on rotational grazing.

Planting Beneficial Pasture

When I was just getting started 15 years ago, I met a couple online who had an organic dairy. They had an herb garden for their goats, and if a goat had any sort of issue, they'd put her in there and let her eat whatever she wanted. This idea had always intrigued me, and current research is proving that this is an idea worth pursuing because goats are capable of self-medicating to reduce their worm load. This makes sense when you consider that we keep baking soda available free choice for the purpose of self-medicating for digestive disturbances.

Research has also shown that goats and sheep that eat sericea lespedeza pastures daily have lower parasite loads than goats that do not. Because it is a legume, it has earned the nickname "smart person's alfalfa." You can even make hay with it for feeding during the winter.



Selective Breeding

In every herd, there will be some goats that are more parasite resistant than others. If it's important to you to raise your goats naturally, culling will have to play a role. That doesn't mean you have to kill the goats that don't meet your parasite resistant standards. Culling just means they're eliminated from your herd - or at least from breeding. By breeding only our most parasite resistant goats, we can select for animals that will thrive naturally in our environment. You will especially see the benefits of this after two or three generations on your farm.

I will also stop breeding a goat if she needs assistance with kidding a second time. I want goats that can give birth naturally without assistance. This does not mean that I ignore them when they're in labor. But I don't want to have to be straightening out malpresentations and pulling kids regularly. The one time I broke my two strikes rule, I paid for it with a c-section and two dead kids because that doe just had a really bad habit of growing kids bigger than she could easily birth. That doe is now enjoying her retirement on our farm.

Imitating Nature

Although a lot of people say they want to raise their goats naturally, they are usually talking about natural remedies rather than natural management. But by imitating nature as much as possible, the need for any type of remedy is greatly reduced.