So You Own a Cow... Now What?

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People living in the suburbs and owning a small acreage often select dairy cattle or dairy goats as a means of harvesting and utilizing their forage. Goats, especially, will help control brush and weeds and keep the area from becoming unsightly, and through milk production goats can reduce the family grocery bill.

Selection of the animal

There is a tremendous variation in the ability of individual dairy cows and goats to produce milk. Buy animals from a producer who keeps production records. Select an animal with the desired level of production, or a calf or kid from a dam (female parent) with an acceptable production record. In most cases, a long milk production period is more important for family use than very high production. An animal with poor lactation qualities that milks for only a short period after calving often will cost more to keep than the value of the milk produced.

Next, in selecting your animal, select one of the proper size. A big cow, such as a Holstein, will eat much more forage than a small cow like a Jersey; and, of course, a goat needs less forage than any cow. To estimate needs, a milking animal will eat about 3 percent of her body weight in air-dry feed (hay) every day. (Example: A 1,000-pound cow will need 30 pounds of hay or pasture dry matter per day.) Select the right animal to meet family needs, using the pasture supply you have available. In addition to this, a cow may need supplemental grain or purchased feed daily.

Breeding

Cows or goats should be bred to a sire (or kid) at approximately 12-month intervals. You may breed them to your own or a neighbor's males, or you can be more sure of top quality by using an insemination service. Semen and insemination service are available through several businesses. The use of their service insures superior, disease-free semen, and eliminates the necessity of owning a male. Your county Extension agent can provide addresses of the services in your area.

Use of the milk produced

One problem in keeping a family cow or goat is that often the milk produced is more than can be used by the family. Some would like to sell this surplus. There are provisions to allow the owners of not more than two producing cows or three producing goats to sell their surplus milk. Before planning to sell however, you should apply to the:

Dairy & Consumers Services Division
Oregon Department of Agriculture
635 Capitol Street, N.E.
Salem, Oregon 97310

In order to sell fluid milk, the producer must be licensed, and requirements for the milking area and milk room must be met in order to insure high quality, safe milk. Unless you can meet these requirements, you will have to find other ways to use surplus milk. A few suggestions follow:

Fluid milk

Fluid milk is the most obvious way to use surplus milk. All milk, even from your own cow, should be pasteurized. Though your cows or goats are tested and known to be free of brucellosis or tuberculosis, milk can be a medium for the transfer of other diseases and even transfer between people, such as from the milker to the consumer. Typhoid fever, septic sore throat, paratyphoid fever, scarlet fever, and gastroenteritis can be transferred in milk. These organisms are destroyed by pasteurization, so all responsible people will recommend it.
There are small, commercial pasteurizers available, or milk can be pasteurized in a double boiler by heating to 165° F, stirring the milk while heating. When the milk reaches 165° F, put the top of the double boiler in cold water and cool as quickly as possible. Store milk in a refrigerator until used. Do not store or process milk in direct sunlight, as this may cause an off-flavor.

Cleanliness in all phases of milking and milk handling is important. Churns, separators, and all milk-handling equipment should be washed thoroughly and sanitized with chlorine (bleach) or iodophor (tamed iodine) solution. These are available from most farm or dairy supply stores or mail-order firms. Follow instructions on the container. As with most household and farm chemicals, store out of reach of children.

Making butter at home

You can make high quality butter from pasteurized sweet or slightly sour cream. Butter made from cream that is too sour has a strong flavor and does not keep well. You probably will want to save the cream skimmings for three or four days before churning. Churning uses mechanical means to agitate the cream to force the minute globules of butterfat in the cream stick together and form butter granules.

The most common churn for making small quantities of butter is a 1-gallon glass churn equipped with wooden paddles. Fill the churn only one-third to one-half full. Churning uses mechanical means to agitate the cream, causing it to increase in volume. After 30 to 40 minutes of churning, butter granules should form.

Butter granules form best when the cream is at a temperature of 85° to 88° F in summer and 55 to 64° F in winter. Stop churning when the butter granules are about the size of corn kernels. Remove the granules of butter from the buttermilk and wash them with water about the temperature of the buttermilk or a little cooler. Drain the water off, and salt at the rate of 1 teaspoon to each pound of butter; then work the butter with a paddle until the salt is evenly distributed and the buttermilk is extracted.

A more satisfactory yogurt culture can be maintained if a special % cup container is prepared and reserved for inoculating the next batch of yogurt. This minimizes the introduction of some unwanted or undesirable micro-organism.

Cheese

A number of different types of cheese can be made at home. Instructions can be obtained through your local Extension office.

Animal feed

Excess milk can be used for animal feed. A few suggestions are:

Calves or kids. Milk, of course, is the natural food for calves or kids. It should be limited to 8 percent of the body weight of young calves or kids, to avoid digestive disturbances.

Pigs. Skimmed milk, buttermilk, or whey are excellent feed.

Chickens. Milk is an excellent feed supplement for chicks. It is somewhat laxative and may cause wet litter when birds are confined.

Miscellaneous. Milk can be fed to a variety of young animals such as puppies, lambs, foals, or kittens.