Feeding Goats

Goats are good browsers and can selectively utilize a wide variety of shrubs, woody plants, weeds, and briars. On Texas ranges, goats spend 53% of their grazing time eating leaves and shoots to trees and bushes compared with 10% for sheep and 8% for cattle. If you allow the goats to roam the woods, be sure that there is no wild cherry, hemlock, azaleas, or species of laurel family nearby because these and other plants are poisonous. Adult goats in a weed or scrub control program should not be expected to receive supplementary feeding other than a free choice mix of equal parts TM Salt and dicalcium phosphate. Meat and fiber producing goats, dry does, yearlings, and even low dairy producers may get enough nutrients from browsing to satisfy their minimal needs. Normal stocking rate management should be such that the goats enter the winter in good condition and with maximum fiber production. About two weeks before breeding in September or October, flush does to be bred by moving them onto fresh pasture if possible with 1/3 pound of grain supplement containing vitamins A, D and E.

Seventy percent of the weight of the goat fetus develops during the last 6 weeks of pregnancy. A scant diet of poor hay may not meet the need for protein, calcium, and phosphorus of the rapidly growing unborn kids. A good quality hay (12% crude protein), will maintain a doe at this time, with only mineral supplementation of a mixture of equal parts TM salt and dicalcium phosphate, as well as clean water. If the doe is under weight, 1 to 2 pounds of a 16% crude protein (CP) concentrate should be fed daily. Kid mortality in the first 10 days is highest among kids born underweight either due to a premature parturition or poor doe nutrition. Pregnant does should receive plenty of exercise and an overly fat doe should also be avoided. When fed in a winter or summer dry lots, providing free access to water located away from the manger, will encourage exercise. A few days before freshening, cut the grain feeding in half and replace it with wheat bran. This is a good source of protein and phosphorus and the laxative effect of the bran will help clean out the digestive tract.

Dairy herd kids are usually removed from the does at birth, and fed at least three colostrum feedings per day during the first two days of life (2 pints/day). Colostrum can also be fed to non-dairy kids during the first 15 minutes after kidding to ensure that they absorb the antibody protection against diseases to which the doe has immunity. Freeze colostrum from a goat dairy herd and thaw when your doe shows signs of kidding. Do not feed unpasteurized colostrum from a goat herd with Caprine Arthritic Encephalitis (CAE).

If goat milk is in demand, kids can be fed cow’s milk or milk replacer, making the change gradually over several days. Twice-a-day feeding of milk is adequate and no more than 3 pounds/day, heated to about 100 degrees F. Kids should be consuming pasture or fine hay by two weeks of age and a high protein calf starter within four weeks, encouraged by putting some in the milk. As kids approach 2 to 3 months, gradually add warm water to their milk. Fixed weaning ages are less desirable than weight goals such as 2 to 2.5 times birth weight and is eating hay (free choice) and grain (up to 1 lb/day).

In feeding young animals, the object is to provide enough nourishment for body maintenance and growth. Too much feed causes animals to fatten which could lead to difficulties in breeding. For the heavier dairy breeds, the goal should be a 110 lb doe freshening at 12 months of age. If a doe is weaned at 8 weeks, weighing 20 lbs, then she must gain about 1/3 lb per day for 10 months. Train a dairy goat to eat a “domesticated” ration of hay, pasture, and grain from the early days of life. If treated to woods and weeds from birth, dairy herd replacements will not break such habits easily. Intake of pasture and forbs by weaned kids younger than 4 months of age may be limited by the water content, and should be supplemented with high quality hay and 2 pounds of a commercial grain mix. After 4 to 6 months, good pasture or high quality hay should lead to ample growth if supplemented with 0.5 lb/day of a grain mix for feeding a 12-18% crude protein total ration.

Practice rotational grazing, using electric temporary fences to divide into at least 4 plots - grazed a maximum of 7 days, and rested for at least 21 days. Three wires 10 inches, 20 inches, and 40 inches from the ground, are usually adequate. A permanent goat-proof fence should be placed around the boundaries. An electrified wire on the top and the bottom may discourage predators.

People who raise the kids of meat or fiber breeds, let them nurse as long as 6 months and then let them graze or browse. Male kids gain weight faster than females or males that are castrated early, and they have a higher muscle to fat ratio. They become sexually active at about 9 months, at which time they stop gaining body weight, and may have carcasses
tainted with a distinctive odor and unacceptable. Carcasses of goats castrated at 7.5 months are not tainted. The exact age at which the taint first appears is not clear. Intensive grain feeding of meat goats is not the norm and likely may not be an economical goal. The goat weighing 100 pounds at slaughter has about a 50% of liveweight carcass, with 34% of liveweight yielding retail boneless chevon meat.

Although all goats enjoy browsing, dairy type does cannot produce much milk without hay or pasture plus grain. To meet the lactating needs of high production animals, it is necessary to feed the best quality forage available. The nutrient composition of forages can be determined by analysis in a forage testing laboratory. Contact your Cooperative Extension Center for test kits. The date of harvest is the most important single factor affecting feed quality and consumption. As the stage of maturity changes, there is a marked effect on the protein and the fiber content. The digestible energy values not only decline but the crop is less palatable so that animals consume less.

The forage may have to be limited to 3 pounds of dry matter to encourage the consumption of 0.5 pounds of grain for every 1 pound of milk produced with ration changes made gradually. The doe will draw upon her body reserves to balance the nutrients required for her genetically determined milk output. Proper feeding of the doe is crucial during these first few months of lactation. In later lactation, this ratio can be widened to 0.5 pounds for every 3 pounds of milk. Grass hay will usually require 16-18% protein grain, while 12-14% protein would be enough for top-quality legume hay or rotational pasture. Premium-quality dairy cow concentrates can usually be fed to dairy goats satisfactorily. Occasionally cow feeds contain by-product ingredients that are not palatable to goats, but this is rarely a problem.

Goats are quite fond of root crops and garden products. Carrots, beets, turnips, and cabbage are especially relished by goats. Several of these feeds, such as turnips, can create off-flavors in milk, if fed within three hours of milking time. It is better to offer these feeds after milking. Hay is fed during the winter free choice, with minerals and water available at all times. Angora goats respond to supplements with heavier fleece weights.

Water is the least expensive feed ingredient, yet a deficiency will affect health and production more quickly than any other nutrient. Goats with water constantly available produce over 10% more milk than those watered only once per day.

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Reference: