

Meat goat growers can't meet demand



GOAT POWER: The Boer goat, which originated in South Africa, is the most popular breed in terms of meat production and consumption. According to the American Boer Goat Association, Boer goat is a premier breed because it offers a large size, high carcass yield grades and uniform visual appearance.

By JENNIFER VINCENT

TEN years ago Heather Schroeder left one morning to buy a goat as a companion for her horse. She returned with two Boer goats and her interest piqued.

Today, Heather and husband Glenn are among a growing number of small-scale farmers who have found a niche in growing meat goats — a market underserved by Michigan growers.

However, the Schroeders are quick to caution that even with the right goats, facilities and knowledge, raising goats is not a get-rich-quick venture. "You have to establish your reputation and your markets. I've known growers that have gotten too big, too fast, and burned out," says Heather, who is now the president of the Michigan Boer Goat Association and the assistant goat superintendent at the Michigan State Fair.

Terri Fryman, who was the founder, past president and current treasurer of the MBGA, strongly echoes that sentiment. She got into the meat goat business after her son, Jason, earned \$1,800 from the sale of his champion and re-

serve champion market wethers at the county fair. "It was his idea to take that money and go to Texas to buy Boer goats because there were none in Michigan — even though there was a lot of demand for quality meat goats," Fryman says. "We came home with six Boer goats that were all suppose to be disease-free. We found out later that only one was. As a beginner, it's easy to get discouraged."

Heather says mentoring under someone who has been successful in the business would be helpful. "I wish I would have done that in the beginning."

Be selective

Heather and Glenn made a common early mistake and weren't selective enough with their breeding stock. "We essentially had to start over by culling out the genetics that weren't desirable. You can buy Boer goats at auction, on Craig's List or other Internet sites, but don't base your decisions solely on price because that's where a lot of people dump their junk," Heather says. "Ask a lot of questions and look for quality animals with good body composition, rate of gain and mothering traits."



PROFIT MAKERS: Besides full-time jobs off the farm, the Schroeders have profited from their goat business, allowing them to invest in the farm, purchase equipment and travel to shows.

Even if you have an excellent animal, if you can't raise it and supply it under the circumstances the market dictates, you'll probably find yourself selling at auction (at a reduced price) rather than having buyers come to you, Heather cautions. "I breed year-round because there is a steady market, but there are times centered around the Muslim Ramadan in the fall and other religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, where there is an added demand. I also breed extra for 4-H in the spring," she notes.

Fryman says establishing a market is on the list of "to-dos" before bringing goats on your farm. "Breed according to their schedule and pay special attention to the needs for slaughter and handling of the meat goat of different ethnic and religious groups," she says.

Muslim dietary laws call for goat meat to be halal, or "holy," and must be slaughtered by a Muslim butcher.

Other religious requirements can require animals to be non-castrated, non-medicated, untagged, horned, and a certain weight and age.

"The summer is the slowest time, but we do have some Hispanic people that like goat meat for barbecues and for new baby celebrations," Heather says.

Fryman and the Schroeders both sell mostly off the farm. "I sell them a live animal," Heather says. "If the buyer wants, I will transport it to a local butcher, who then communicates with the buyer. I am not licensed to sell goat meat off the farm, but I do allow buyers to slaughter on the farm, which is re-



TRIPLETS: Does are bred at about 18 months and gestation is about 5½ months, producing one to three kids. Babies are nursed for about three months, and supplemented with grain and hay. Most markets call for a 40- to 60-pound kid at about three to four months.



VISIT FARMS: Terri Fryman, who founded the Michigan Boer Goat Association, encourages those wanting to raise goats to tour other farms first.

quired by some religious practices."

Fryman doesn't allow on-farm slaughter, except for the three goats that she puts in her own freezer. However, she's looking into the requirements for getting a butcher, slaughtering on site and selling meat off the farm.

Dive into books

Dive into a couple of goat books before you make any decisions, advises Fryman. "One of the first questions you'll want to ask yourself is: What type of herd do I want to raise? Do you want to strictly breed for meat animals, or for 4-H youths, breeding stock and show? That will determine goat maintenance — whether or not you need to be tagging, registering, castrating, dehorning and such," she says.

Keeping disease at bay is an ongoing process with goats, Heather adds. "Goats can be relatively low-maintenance at times, but when there is a problem, like pneumonia, you need to be vigilant," she says. "Our biggest headache is worms. Don't let the size of the goat fool you. Because goats have such a high metabolism, they require almost three times the medicine you'd give a horse."

In addition to having on-demand access to minerals, Fryman also supplements with selenium for stronger bones and reproductive health.

"You need a good medicine cabinet. And, don't be afraid to ask for [blood] tests before buying anything and bringing it into your herd," Fryman advises.

More information available

HEATHER and Glenn Schroeder and Terri Fryman are members of the Michigan Boer Goat Association, which is dedicated to educating and providing support for new and existing Boer goat growers. The association was founded eight years ago by Fryman with about a dozen members and now has close to 50. It hosts educational programs, breeding stock sales and a goat roast.

For more information, contact Fryman at T&J's Boer Goats, by calling 231-598-2263 or e-mailing terrifryman@localink.net. For more information about the Schroeders at Double-Trouble Ranch, call 517-651-9384, e-mail hezzylou@cablespeed.com or visit www.double-troubleranch.com. For information about the Michigan Boer Goat Association, visit www.michiganboergoat.org.

Both Fryman and the Schroeders welcome tours on their farms.

Potential processors of goat meat can be found through the USDA Packers and Stockyards Office Web site at www.gipsa.usda.gov/GIPSA.